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## STRAVINSKY AND THE 'NRF' (1910-20)

## By David Bancroft

In 1910, one year after the founding of the Nouvelle Revue Française. Stravinsky, collaborating with Diaghilev, had his first personal contact as a composer with Paris, and the success of 'Firebird' with the composers, writers and public of the capital was immediate. In 1929, the year of Diaghilev's death, Lifar's new version of 'Le Renard' marked the close of Stravinsky's association with the Ballet Russe, and saw the publication of Boris de Schloezer's book on Stravinsky and Gabriel Marcel's review of that book in the NRF. Between 1910 and 1929 there appeared in the NRF more than 20 articles and reviews devoted to Stravinsky's music, some of them of considerable length, and with the exception of Marcel's article and another short outrageously naïve review by Yvonne Rihouet in 1920 of 'Pulcinella', all the studies were written by one of three men: Henri Ghéon, Jacques Rivière or Boris de Schloezer. Ghéon clearly established the predominant tone of enthusiasm for Stravinsky in the earlier volumes of the NRF; Jacques Rivière brought a profound understanding and appreciation of Stravinsky's musical achievement within the whole context of artistic attitude and preoccupation during the first twenty years of the century. Once Rivière himself had assumed the directorship of the NRF in 1919, the articles on Stravinsky were soon to be written for the first time by a professional music critic, de Schloezer. But given the important role played by the NRF in the literary and cultural life in Paris generally during the second decade of this century, it is perhaps not without significance that we should review in the first instance Stravinsky's status as it was felt to be by two prominent men of letters, Ghéon and Rivière, writing for the NRF, and their assessment of Stravinsky's dominating contribution to the art of their time.

Stravinsky first came to the fore in the NRF in a rapturous article on 'Firebird' written by Henri Ghéon, which reflected the popular effect of the spectacle: "Ballet d'art, féerie d'art, le rêve de Mallarmé, notre rêve se réalise—et non par nous" (iv, p. 199).¹ In this article Ghéon deliberately attempted to communicate what he saw as the great contribution of this Diaghilev ballet, namely the sense of unity: "L'Oiseau de feu, œuvre d'une collaboration intime entre le choréographe, le musicien et le peintre nous propose le prodige d'équilibre le plus exquis que nous ayons jamais rêvé entre les sons, les mouvements et les formes" (iv, p. 210). Of course these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> All page references preceded by a volume number are to the complete edition of the Nouvelle Revue Française.

lines were a deliberate echo of Baudelaire, but the words were surely chosen to suggest the synthesis in the ballet of the primary forces of creative expression: sound, movement, form. Ghéon went on to say that he found one quality especially in common between the work of the musician, scene-designer, choreographer and dancers: it was what he called "l'effacement", as a result of which the impression was given that "je ne vois plus qu'un seul auteur" (iv, p. 211). Colour, movement, design, painting, music—all these elements were so closely interrelated that no single one was in excess of the other. Referring specifically to Stravinsky, Ghéon claimed that the composer's "symphonie dansée" would immediately herald a new type of ballet, in which music and dance complemented each other, unlike other ballets that had been hitherto primarily musical, the dance merely illustrating the 'programme symphony'.

Nevertheless, Ghéon was not as objective as he might have been had there been any existing standards by which to assess the ballet. For 'Firebird' had its weaknesses: it was not especially dramatic; at most it was a tale based on Russian folklore with considerable fantasy; above all, perhaps, it was primarily a musical ballet. Although he made no reference to the actual techniques of musical composition, Ghéon was immensely fascinated by the quality and timbre of the orchestral sound: "Dans l'orchestre, c'est vraiment l'enchanteur qui crie, les sorciers et les gnomes qui grouillent, se démènent" (vi, p. 211). Further on he talks of the "pépiement des timbres, vivace caresse de la mélodie" (iv, p. 211). Înevitably the man of the theatre in Ghéon conditioned his reaction to 'Firebird', and it was above all to the perfection of the theatrical spectacle that he drew most attention, assessing it, interestingly enough, as both Russian and French in spirit: "Quelle fantaisie dans la mesure, quelle simple gravité, quel goût" (iv, p. 211). He felt that Stravinsky would lead the way in a new conception of ballet music, that he represented a "sève nouvelle" in the musical field, but he was nevertheless content to conclude that Stravinsky was "un délicieux musicien" (iv, p. 212).

In his two subsequent contributions to the NRF concerning the Ballet Russe, Ghéon did not sustain his initial fervour towards the company, claiming with reference to 'Narcisse' in 1911, for example, "que les Russes aient perdu de vue leur but premier" (vi, p. 250). In a brief reference to 'Petrushka' Ghéon answered what he felt might be certain objections from some of his contemporaries by stating simply: "J'ignore ce que les juges compétents pensent de la musique; pour moi rien ne m'y choque" (vi, p. 251). In his final article he made a passing reference to the 'Rite of Spring': "J'admire trop le Sacre du Printemps" (x, p. 306), drawing particular attention to the "musique intarissablement neuve et directe" (x, p. 306). In fact, his delight in the Ballet Russe had not really diminished, as his reviews of 'Spectre de la Rose' and 'Daphnis et Chloé' reveal, but

he concentrated upon stage effect and choreography rather than on strictly musical comment. His apparent lack of attention to Stravinsky's 'Petrushka' and the 'Rite of Spring' is very easily explained by the fact that it had fallen to Jacques Rivière to contribute the major articles on both these works. Yet Ghéon's early articles were instrumental in establishing the tone adopted by the NRF towards the Ballet Russe in general and to Stravinsky in particular; and his first article did anticipate Rivière's own attitude in subsequent volumes. Ghéon considered the works as a man of the theatre, not as a musicologist, but his reactions reveal that the NRF immediately and officially recognized Stravinsky as a major artistic force in Paris, and was eager to follow the new paths of musical experience that they intuitively felt Stravinsky was to strike out.

Rivière was immediately convinced that 'Petrushka' was a masterpiece both from the theatrical and the musical points of view. His own attitude to Stravinsky is resumed in his first reference to the composer: "Ce nom . . . nous ne l'oublierons plus" (p. 10).2 He wrote of the music enthusiastically and understandingly though not technically. No references to bitonal harmonic developments. exciting rhythmic contrasts, bold instrumental combinations although he did detail the outstanding musical effects achieved by the solo drum (opening the third scene) and a solo cornet (for the Ballerina). It is perhaps strange that he made no reference at all to Stravinsky's use of the piano in the score. But Rivière did not think of music in these terms. Bitonal techniques and other effects were described simply as "mille grossièretés délectables" (p. 10). Rivière found the orchestral effect as a whole most admirable for its lack of complication and ornamentation. It was a work of significant 'simplifications'—which explains in part why it commended itself to the French artistic mind. It is to this aspect of the composition that he referred in almost every sentence, remarking that "il ne cherche pas comme d'autres à se compliquer" (p. 10), and using such expressions as "il supprime, il éclaircit", "des touches sommaires et franches", "il sait sous-entendre". The strength of the music lay in the power of the composer to choose the most effective means with the minimum of elaboration: "Sa vigeur est faite de tout ce dont il apprend à se passer". (p. 10). Obviously this was a reference to the contemporary mismanagement (to the French mind, at any rate) of the vast modern symphony orchestra, but more especially it reveals to what extent Rivière was able to relate Stravinsky's musical ideals as he interpreted them, to those of the literary renaissance being advocated by the NRF and as had been debated by Schlumberger in his opening article in the first edition.3

The NRF represented a conscious attempt to accommodate

<sup>All page references to Rivière's writings are to the collected writings of Rivière in the NRF: J. Rivière, 'Nouvelles Études' (Paris, 1947).
See J. Schlumberger, 'Considérations' (NRF, i, 1909), pp. 5-11.</sup> 

once again literary expression to the essential nature of the French temperament in its love of order and restraint. The French literary consciousness of that period was being conditioned by an acute awareness of the essence of the highest ideals of French art: sobriety and control in expression and the deification of art for its own sake. What had been conceived originally in the NRF as a literary attitude became, through Rivière's integration of Stravinsky's musical attitude, a much broader æsthetic attitude. That this was partly Rivière's concern in writing about Stravinsky and the Ballet Russe is also revealed in his assessment of Fokine's choreography and Nijinsky's dancing. The dancer "frappe le sol du pied. C'est assez pour ma joie" (p. 10). In writing of the impact of the ballet as a whole, Rivière really summed up the debt of the French artistic genius to the Russians' achievement: "La danse est l'art où l'on crée avec soi-même, avec les matériaux les plus immédiats et les plus naturels dont on puisse disposer. Nous devrons à la Russie de l'avoir reprise" (p. 11). It is this Russian art that showed to the French the way towards a re-discovered art of spontaneity and simplicity ("un emploi naïf") which had to be retrieved from all the confusion, aimlessness and elaborateness in French art at the turn of the century ("de tant de richesses dont nous ne savons que faire") (p. 11).

It was inevitably the 'Rite of Spring' which assured Stravinsky a place in the NRF as a dominant artistic force to be acknowledged. understood and followed. Rivière first wrote of the ballet in the August (1913) issue but delayed his detailed study of the work until the November issue. He was overwhelmed by the work and uncompromising in his assessment of its significance: "Elle marque une date, non pas seulement dans l'histoire de la danse et de la musique, mais dans celle de tous les arts" (p. 72). He realized at once that Stravinsky's work was one "qui change tout, qui modifie la source même de tous nos jugements esthétiques, et qu'il faut tout de suite compter parmi les plus grandes" (p. 60). He was convinced from the première that it would be a major conditioning force on the arts of his time, but although his enthusiasm was the equal of Ghéon's towards 'Firebird', he appreciated the necessity for a full and more objective study of the work than was possible so close to its première. This led him to produce the second article, entitled 'Le Sacre du Printemps', the longest single study of Stravinsky's work in the NRF, running to 25 pages.

In this second article, Rivière assessed the ballet as "une œuvre absolument pure" (p. 73). Here was the masterpiece that at last signalled the complete collapse of Debussy's impressionism in music; he was overwhelmed by the positive, almost concrete, quality of the music. Drawing attention to the acrobatic nature of Stravinsky's technique, Rivière dismissed all accusations of exoticism or picturesqueness. He also praised the choreography, seeing in it a parallel renunciation of gratuitous decoration and ornamentation.

His analysis of the ballet was the most comprehensive contemporary account in France of that first production. In the work he found more positive artistic qualities than most of the other commentators; and one is tempted to say that just as 'Le Sacre' was affirmed by many critics to be fifteen years ahead of its time, so Rivière might have been one of the few contemporary critics who could quickly assimilate the obvious novelties it had to offer, and so react more sanely to it as a work of art.

Without any personal antagonism towards Debussy's music, Rivière believed that Stravinsky's first major contribution was to return to a music that was "brute" and "limpide". Stravinsky had removed the "auréole" that surrounded a Debussy composition, the "frémissement vaporeux", the "flottement de mille incertaines harmoniques". He had eliminated all "vibration, indécision, tremblement". The music was, as it were, naked, and offered a new sound: "un son mat et défini", which Rivière believed was apparent to the discerning ear from the very first bars—although he naturally made no technical reference to the bassoon, for example, playing in its (then) rarely-used upper register. He did however draw attention to Stravinsky's own stated preference for the woodwind ("plus secs, plus nets") rather than for the strings ("trop évocatrices et représentatives de la voix humaine"). With almost no reference to technical detail, he offered an important consideration of the orchestral sound. He resumed the impact of the music thus:

Dès les premières mesures on les ressent; aucun rayonnement, aucune fuite; la mélodie chemine étroitement; elle se développe, elle dure sans la moindre effusion; nous sommes saisis d'un étouffement tout-puissant; les sons meurent sans avoir débordé l'espace qu'ils emplissaient en naissant; rien ne s'échappe, rien ne s'envole; tout nous ramène et nous accable. Jamais on n'entendit musique aussi magnifiquement bornée (p. 75).

Not that Rivière believed that Stravinsky was offering "une nouveauté négative". He specifically claimed that the most important contributions in the score were the elimination of all that could be regarded as effusive, expressive and warm, and the concentration upon instruments "qui ne frémissent pas" and the use of instrumental sounds almost as if they were abstract words, all of which he explained thus: "C'est parce qu'il veut tout énoncer directement, expressément, nommément" (p. 75). In another statement he claimed that "dans le sujet qu'il se propose, il veut qu'il n'y ait aucun détail qui soit atteint par la seule diffusion des ondes sonores" (p. 75). Although this is perhaps not strictly the vocabulary of a musician, one can immediately grasp the significance of words and expressions such as these which permeate the article: aigre et dure, rien d'estompé, aucune trace d'atmosphère, brute, cru, franc, intact, limpide, dépouillée de toute vibration, renoncement à la 'sauce', plus d'écho, sec, net, brièveté.

It was in the light of this novel quality of the sound that Rivière

believed Stravinsky was making an important contribution to the arts in general and to literature in particular. Vagueness, diffuseness, effusiveness were qualities inherent in much contemporary artistic expression: Stravinsky upheld clarity, simplicity, precision, and above all he sought the elimination of all superfluous and gratuitous elements in his expression. "Il ne laisse rien en dehors . . . . Son mouvement n'est point d'appeler, ni de faire un signe vers les régions extérieures, mais de prendre, et de tenir, et de fixer" (p. 75). It is in respect of these attributes that Rivière drew attention to the parallel, implicit in his comments on 'Petrushka', between Stravinsky and the new literary attitude, claiming in one of his most significant comments that Stravinsky's music would have a positive influence on literature: "Par là, Stravinsky opère en musique, avec un éclat et une perfection inégalables, la même révolution qui est en train de s'accomplir, plus humblement et plus péniblement, en littérature" (p. 75). Later in the same article, when commenting upon the choreographic elements of the ballet, Rivière drew similar parallels between 'Le Sacre' and the æsthetics of the new Cubist painters—once again upholding the superior achievement of the ballet. But it is interesting that such a man of letters should write of Stravinsky's superiority in the realm of what he saw as a common æsthetic between music and literature at the end of what was undoubtedly the most cataclysmic year for major literary production since the founding of the NRF.

In terms of the contemporary literary scene one of the most notable results of Stravinsky's influence on French writers was the extraordinary change brought about by 'Le Sacre' on Jean Cocteau. "Le Sacre du Printemps me bouleversa de fond en comble", wrote Cocteau in 1956,4 when commenting upon the astonishing volte-face both in his literary and his æsthetic attitude in 1913. Although one may discern certain traces of a developing awareness on the part of Cocteau towards an æsthetic re-awakening as early as 1908, it is nevertheless true that as late as 1912 he was still composing literally scores of neatly-constructed, charmingly-imitative poems of little merit:

Le célèbre parfum sort de la noble rose, Et se déroule autour, Et tourne dans le soir où le jardin repose, Après les jeux du jour.<sup>5</sup>

A few months later, overwhelmed by Stravinsky's shattering harmonic and instrumental experimentation, his virtuoso rhythmic dislocations and his absolute dedication to his art, Cocteau was literally born again to art, "dans un salon de campagne où, chaque jour, on me jouait ta musique" (addressing this to Stravinsky). The rhythmic impact of 'Le Sacre', which made the most profound

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> J. Cocteau, 'Le Discours d'Oxford' (Paris, 1956), p. 32. <sup>5</sup> J. Cocteau, 'La Danse de Sophocle' (Mercure de France, 1912), p. 192.

impression on Cocteau, was immediately reflected in his new verse style, as in these lines referring to the work:

On entendait le choc sourd des talons contre la terre une promenade de mammouth une cour de ferme un camp.

Parfois, une romance na ïve arrivant du fond des âges.

From this moment in 1913 Cocteau never lost sight of his newly discovered criteria for artistic creation—criteria involving experimentation (especially with rhythm both in verbal and in graphic or visual art), historical sense (for which he was also considerably indebted to 'Pulcinella'), and a complete self-dedication to his personal beliefs in art without respect for public taste. Throughout his career, and in many different works, he repeatedly stressed that 'Le Sacre' was absolutely instrumental in revealing to him the truly vital elements in what were to be henceforth his own genuine, and

valuable, æsthetic beliefs.

Returning to Jacques Rivière's study of 'Le Sacre', it is obvious that the work appealed to him for its harmonic content, for those attributes of clarity, simplicity and precision which had determined Stravinsky's use of the instrumental line, and for the lack of a Debussy-like "flou de parfums". Realizing that the thematic material was treated as a problem of linear development with an almost total disregard for the sound of the actual harmony of each progressive unit, Rivière delighted in the apparent dissonance which came from the complexity of sound created by the parallel lines of thematic development and from the nature of the instrumental treatment of each individual line. It was the acute feeling that each of these lines had a precise role, a deliberate function, a coherently stated and completely autonomous existence within the framework of the whole composition that caused this music to appeal to him as an example of a sense of purpose and clarity in art: "Les différentes parties de sa symphonie . . . ont chacune leur orientation; elles vont et viennent; elles se croisent, se rencontrent, s'accrochent; il y a entre elles de formidables collisions, mais de mélanges ni de fusion jamais" (p. 76). It is not difficult to relate such an attitude to contemporary Cubist æsthetic, for as Rivière made clear in a later article, it was this sense of purpose and definition relating to the individual parts of the work which caused him to claim (perhaps somewhat unjustly) that Stravinsky had solved these common æsthetic problems with much greater success than the painters and writers of the period. The music, according to Rivière, was "un système de mouvements, ce sont des voix distinctes et décidées" (p. 76). If not a criterion to be borrowed directly from Stravinsky's musical example by all the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> J. Cocteau, 'Le Potomak' (Paris, 1947), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> See especially 'Le Rappel à l'ordre', 'La Jeunesse et le scandale', 'D'un ordre considéré comme une anarchie', 'Le Potomak', 'La Difficulté d'être', 'Démarche d'un poète' and 'Le Discours d'Oxford'.

other arts, this certainly reflects the common æsthetic tendencies of musicians, writers and painters in whom Rivière was interested at this time.

It is for the most part in terms of the attributes already discussed that Rivière continued his study of 'Le Sacre du Printemps'. He praised the directness of the melodic treatment, so different from the veiled suggestiveness implied in Debussy's music. Stravinsky's expression was communicated with the utmost clarity: "la chose bien exprimée comme elle doit l'être" (p. 78). And this was precisely what Rivière was advocating to his literary contemporaries: in this way Stravinsky could be their example. Rivière justified the apparent grandeur, extravagance, bizarrerie and the insolite of some of the music, by claiming that it was born directly out of the very concept of the ballet itself. He drew particular attention in this respect to a moment at the end of the first tableau:

Quoi de plus hétéroclite, de plus incompréhensible et de plus parfait qu'à la fin du premier tableau du Sacre de Printemps, pendant la course circulaire des Adolescentes, cette musique où il n'y a plus ni mélodie, ni harmonie, ni jeu de timbres, mais seulement une sorte de bourdonnement du rythme, d'animation toute pure, de tourbillon abstrait, entretenu et prolongé par la monotonie de la terreur? (p. 79).

Such experiences are what he called the *prodiges* of Stravinsky's genius, for it is by means of such moments that the spectator can be in true communion with the work, "pour nous mettre en contact direct, en communication immédiate avec des choses admirables et étonnantes" (p. 79). In the same way he interpreted the secret power of the dynamism of the rhythm in the music, in that they were also means of taking the spectator into the work: the shifting, restless rhythms appealing directly and intimately to the spectator, "pour que nous nous trouvions spontanément marcher à son pas" (p. 80).

It was the vital lesson in 'directness' offered by Stravinsky's score that Rivière felt to be its supreme value. It is what he meant when he assessed Stravinsky's guiding principle thus: "celui de tout exprimer textuellement" (p. 80). There was in the music "aucune espèce de pittoresque", no gratuitous effect, no decorative colouring. At a time of great artistic and æsthetic upheaval in all fields of creative activity Stravinsky's music was taken by Rivière virtually as a yardstick of technical and æsthetic aims. Of a work of such perfection he could exclaim: "Joie de comprendre, joie de recevoir des nouvelles, joie d'être mis au fait" (p. 81); he could not so react to much other contemporary achievement. Concluding his study of the strictly musical aspect of 'Le Sacre', Rivière reiterated the attitude he had previously adopted in the article on 'Petrushka', implying criticism of contemporary French artistic achievement in general and recommending that Stravinsky be fully understood

for what he had achieved, for "c'est encore notre mère la Russie qui nous parle et dépense pour nous les trésors de son innocence immémoriale" (p. 82).

The two remaining articles written by Rivière for the NRF both referred to 'Le Rossignol'. The second, pertaining to the 1920 ballet version, is in some measure an apology for his 1914 review of the opera, which, musically at any rate, he regarded as a regression, indeed a negation, of the prise de position Stravinsky had attained for himself with 'Le Sacre'. The earlier review is an intriguing article; it was based on an absolute faith in Stravinsky's genius and his indisputable position as leader of the contemporary artistic movement, but at the same time Rivière was unable to overcome his very pronounced disappointment at the musical content and structure of the work. He felt that Stravinsky had betrayed both himself and his audience, yet believed him incapable of betrayal. Rivière's first reaction, perhaps not without justification, was that 'Le Rossignol' was more in the nature of an academic exercise than a manifestation of the composer's spontaneous genius. While supporting wholeheartedly the revolution in the arts for which Stravinsky could be held largely responsible, he rebuked the composer for apparently finding it necessary to spell out the processes by which he had been able to arrive at 'Le Sacre'. "Ce que je lui reproche expressément, c'est d'avoir considéré son sujet comme . . . une chaire où nous faire la leçon" (p. 114). Even so, Rivière immediately endeavoured to attenuate his criticism, as he did repeatedly throughout the article: "leçon, bien entendu, la plus subtile, la plus élégante et raffinée qui se puisse imaginer" (p. 114).

In spite of such remarks it is nevertheless apparent that Rivière was upset as much by the lack of dramatic impact in the operatic version of 'Le Rossignol' as by the lighter quality and simpler structure of the music itself after 'Le Sacre'. He believed, as did other commentators, that Stravinsky's genius lay in the fact that he was capable of being both expressive and powerful—two qualities which, in general, are lacking in 'Le Rossignol', although he did admit that "même dans Le Rossignol, on voit de temps en temps émerger de l'orchestre des monstres sonores, entiers, vivants, armés de tous leurs membres" (p. 119). In general, however, he found that the music was "immobile et refuse de nous porter" (p. 113). It is perhaps this grandiose aspect of Stravinsky's musical expression that appealed most particularly to him, for it is to be noted that in the 1920 article he wrote, obviously referring to the small-scale compositions of the post-'Le Sacre' period: "Je ne me sens pas en communication avec certaines des œuvres qu'il a composées pendant la guerre" (p. 161). Indeed he felt obliged to fall back upon both 'Petrushka' and 'Le Sacre' as the two works responsible for sustaining his faith in Stravinsky's genius as a creative leader. Certainly there was a severe (if only apparent) break in Stravinsky's technique after the war, but the composer's own subsequent comments on music and theatre suggest that this was the result of a general æsthetic reaction that had little to do with the actual technical composition of the music.

There can be no doubt that the nature of Stravinsky's musical genius was such as to give the sum total of his work—even at the time of Rivière's death—a sort of monumental coherence, of which from a specifically musical point of view Rivière never seems to have been fully aware. It was most assuredly his early experience of the evocation of primeval forces in 'Le Sacre' for the spectator that lingered vividly in his memory and led him to this general æsthetic statement with reference to Stravinsky's work—and this constitutes the decidedly positive aspect of the two 'Rossignol' articles: "Toute création positive déclenche dans notre âme une certaine émotion immédiate, aveugle, presque automatique. C'est un choc tout pur . . . . Cette émotion-là, plus que personne aujourd'hui Stravinsky est désigné pour nous la faire éprouver; il n'a pas le droit de nous en frustrer" (p. 119). For in spite of his obvious disappointment with 'Le Rossignol' Rivière concluded in 1914, as he repeated in 1920, that Stravinsky was the undisputed leader of the positive revolutionary artistic movements that had been taking place in Paris during those immediately pre-war years. Certainly the NRF never suscribed to the attitude subsequently asserted by some critics, who claimed with Virgil Thomson that Erik Satie was responsible for the only really valuable esthetic to influence the arts in France at the time of the first world war. By 1920 the NRF had for more than a decade asserted the supremacy of Stravinsky over musicians and artists generally, and was to do so for a further decade, for as Rivière declared in his final judgment:

La liberté formidable dont profitent aujourd'hui avec goût, talent et discrétion, nos jeunes musiciens, il ne faut pas oublier que c'est à Stravinsky qu'ils la doivent, à ce frêle Samson qui, d'un geste facile et comme plein de sommeil, a reculé de toutes parts les murailles du temple de la musique (p. 162).