

All Together Now: The Prague Manifesto (1948) and the *Association française des musiciens progressistes*

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From 20 to 29 May 1948 the Second International Congress of Composers and Music Critics was convened in Prague. Organized by the Union of Czech Composers, the Congress brought together composers, musicologists and music critics from the Eastern bloc states, and those Western countries with strong and active Communist parties, most notably France. It addressed what the French Stalinist weekly *Les lettres françaises* described as the “profound crisis engulfing music and musical life during our epoch.”¹ The negative assessment was politically motivated, in that the crisis was seen largely as a Western phenomenon, one symptomatic of what was in the Soviet view the ideological bankruptcy of the West.

The resolutions offered by the Prague Congress, which were tabled in the form of a manifesto, were consistent with socialist realist requirement that composers serve the interests of the State. In keeping with the bellicose and often belligerent decrees issued by Stalin’s cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov and his successor Tikhon Khrennikov, socialist realism demanded that musicians create music that was accessible, uplifting and unambiguous in its support of communist, specifically Stalinist, orthodoxy. The Prague Manifesto was a direct response to a resolution handed down three months earlier (10 February 1948) by the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. The Soviet resolution was damning of the musical modernism practiced by virtually every prominent composer at the time, whether Western or those Soviet composers viewed with suspicion by the Politburo, most

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¹ “La crise de la musique: Le manifeste de Prague—Les réactions des musiciens français,” *Les lettres françaises* 228 (7 October 1948), 6.

notably Dmitri Shostakovich. “The characteristic features of this music,” the resolution declared:

are the negation of basic principles of classical music; the preachment of atonality, dissonances and disharmony... the rejection of such all important concepts as melody, and the infatuation with the confused, neuropathological combinations which transform music into cacophony.... This music [reflects] the dissolution of bourgeois culture, a complete negation of musical art, its impasse.²

In essence, the Soviet position was, to borrow from the notorious totalitarian maxim, “if I can’t whistle to it then it must be bad for the State.”

The positive and extensive publicity given to the Prague Manifesto in the pages of *Les lettres françaises* attests to the extent of support for Soviet communism, in general, and socialist realism, at least in theory, among the upper echelon of French musicians. By the same token, those same musicians had trouble balancing the obligations of socialist realism with the Gallic predilection for *l’art pour l’art*. Although he remained skeptical of music’s ability to engage directly with the ideological struggle between East and West, Jean-Paul Sartre captured well the quandary facing French musicians when he declared, “the absurd Prague Manifesto... is the stupid and extreme consequence of a perfectly defensible theory of art and one that does not necessarily imply an aesthetic authoritarianism.”³ Sartre’s view was that socialist realism was “perfectly defensible” because it called upon artists to shoulder a responsibility for righting the wrongs of the world. That its egalitarian and humanist aspirations were perverted by Stalin and his henchmen into an “aesthetic authoritarianism” caused a good deal of discomfort for those artists who wished to make a genuine contribution to the socialist cause. The current paper considers the impact of the Prague Manifesto on French musicians from the Left, who struggled vainly to strike a balance between creativity and ideological fidelity during Europe’s inexorable descent into Cold War.⁴

The heavy hand of Zhdanov was palpable in the articles of the Prague Manifesto, which proposed that the “crisis” facing music could be overcome:

1. If composers... manage to dispense with extreme subjective tendencies in their music and instead express the higher progressive ideals of the popular masses.
2. If composers in their works pay closer attention to the national culture of their country and defend it against cosmopolitanism, because true internationalism in music stems from the development of diverse national characteristics.
3. If composers turn their attention to musical forms which permit a grasp of these points (above all, vocal music, oratorios, cantatas, choirs, etc.).

² As translated by Nicolas Slonimsky, in “Soviet Musical Policy, 1948,” *Music Since 1900*, 4th ed. (New York, 1971), 1359-60.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Artist and His Conscience,” in *Situations*, tr. Benita Eisler (London, 1965), 219.

⁴ This and other ideological challenges are dealt with more broadly in the author’s *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge, 2003).

4. If composers and musicologists work practically and actively towards the liquidation of musical alphabetism [intellectualism] and for the musical education of the masses.⁵

To that end the Prague conference called for the formation of an international association of “progressive” musicians dedicated to restoring art music to its former “lofty and noble position in society.” *Les lettres françaises* reported that in response to the call a committee had been assembled in France that would form part of a soon to be established Association internationale des musiciens progressistes. The French wing of the so-called *progressistes*, the Association française des musiciens progressistes (AFMP), comprised established and emerging composers and critics, including George Auric, Roger Désormière, Elsa Barraine, Charles Bruck, Louis Durey, Pierre Kaldor, Charles Koechlin, Jean-Louis Martinet, Serge Nigg, Louis Saguer and Jean Wiener.

The Leftist credentials of Charles Koechlin, who was elected the first president of the AFMP, were beyond reproach. Koechlin, Durey and Désormière belonged the Fédération musicale populaire (FMP), the pre-eminent Leftist musical organization in France prior to and immediately after the Second World War. During the 1930s the FMP acted as the musical branch of the Front populaire. Koechlin had in 1937 succeeded Albert Roussel as the president of the FMP and during the same period also served as the president of the commission for music of the Association France-URSS (USSR). Durey served as the secretary-general of the FMP before and after the War and in 1948 assumed the same position in the newly formed AFMP. In 1935 both men had joined with Désormière (and others, including Roussel, Auric and Darius Milhaud) in forming what was in effect the Parisian performance arm of the FMP, the Chorale populaire de Paris.

The nuances in Koechlin’s cultural ideology highlight how the aspirations, if not the obligations, of socialist realism came to be well received among the *progressistes*. Koechlin outlined his views on a number of occasions, and in most instances he extolled the virtue of high art by invoking the image of an ivory tower which was, in his words, “nevertheless social, for it does represent *art for art’s sake* and symbolises a freedom of inspiration.”⁶ For Koechlin, the higher the work of art ascended the ivory tower, the greater its assertion of personal freedom in the face of those who sought to deny that freedom. Koechlin’s equanimity was clouded by a value judgement not dissimilar to that held by Soviet *apparatchiks*, in that he believed that only works of “beauty” were capable of sustaining political commitment. For Koechlin, only those on the Left were capable of creating beautiful music, although he was willing to extend to anti-communists the benefit of the doubt, but with one proviso:

The anti-communist who is sincere in his conviction and not (like the majority) looking out for his own interests might also be moved to beauty. But not the uncharitable and narrow-minded bourgeois—the Spanish Republican and the *Franquiste* did not write the same funeral march—except if the *Franquiste* rose to the virtue of the Republican.... And do

⁵ “La crise de la musique: Le manifeste de Prague,” 6.

⁶ Charles Koechlin, “Étude sur Charles Koechlin par lui-même,” tr. Robert Orledge, in Robert Orledge, *Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): His Life and Works* (Chur, 1989), 301.

you believe that a Pétainist collaborator ever mustered the power equal to an Elsa Barraine, for example...?⁷

Bearing in mind Koechlin's involvement with the Front populaire, and the obviously fresh memories of the war, his strident anti-Fascism is understandable. But Koechlin was so strong in his view that only the politically correct were capable of creating aesthetically pleasing works that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he also subscribed to the reverse; that less beautiful, and by extension inferior works, were the product of, at best, the politically indifferent, at worst, the politically suspect.

Value judgements of this sort were destined to cause trouble for France's young avant-gardists, Serge Nigg among them, whose music was anathema to Koechlin's generation. Nigg (who was on the founding committee of the AFMP) was, together with Pierre Boulez, a student of René Leibowitz. Leibowitz was a passionate advocate of Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone method of composition, which calls for the composer to adhere to a preordained sequence, or series, of notes derived from the chromatic scale. The net effect is that any sense of a tonal centre, or key, is undermined to the extent that the familiarity through repetition and the tension and release that underpin traditional western music (whether "classical" or pop) are absent. This so-called serial technique was simultaneously lionised by the Young Turks of the avant-garde, pilloried by conservatives on the Western side of the political divide, and denounced as an intellectualist subversion by the Soviet bloc. It was serial music and its advocacy that the Soviet Politburo had in mind when, in its February 1948 resolution, it castigated "the preachment of atonality, dissonances and disharmony." The Prague Manifesto's call for the "liquidation of musical alphabetism" was likewise aimed directly at serial music. Koechlin had made his rather jaundiced view of serial music apparent in his symphonic poem *Les bandar-log* (Scherzo of the Monkeys, 1939-40), in which he represented the antics of the monkeys with a theme generated by serial technique. In a program note for the scherzo written just weeks before the Prague conference, Koechlin used the monkeys as a metaphor for those musical adventurers who embraced serial techniques: "These monkeys, the vainest and most insignificant of animals, believe themselves to be creative geniuses; but they are nothing but vulgar imitators whose aim is to be fashionable and up to date."⁸ A view such as this, coming as it did from the soon-to-be-appointed president of the AFMP, did not augur well for Nigg.

In the edition of *Les lettres françaises* that immediately followed the publication of the Prague Manifesto, Nigg discussed the implications of the Manifesto with Pierre Kaldor, who also was on the founding committee of the AFMP. The exchange crystallizes the quandary in which the young *progressistes* found themselves, in that while Nigg defended the modernist spirit of enquiry behind serialism he was forced to lament its failure to further the communist cause.⁹ Kaldor argued that the serial composer could not promote the cause using a method that was incomprehensible and therefore of little propaganda value. Most people could only respond to everyday concerns on the basis of the music presented to them, and they

⁷ Charles Koechlin, "Art & liberté (pour la tour d'ivoire)," *Contrepoints* 6 (December 1949), 114.

⁸ Charles Koechlin. Programme note for the Paris première of *Le livre de la jungle* (15 April 1948), in Orledge, *Charles Koechlin*, 191-92.

⁹ Serge Nigg with Pierre Kaldor, "Entretien sur la crise de la musique," *Les lettres françaises* 229 (17 October 1948), 6.

were, according to Kaldor, particularly inspired by texted music: “songs of love, songs of struggle and suffering, and songs of hope.” Nigg agreed that *progressiste* composers needed to reach as wide a public as possible, to which Kaldor responded, somewhat predictably, that serial music was ill suited to the task. Nigg’s rather timid reply was that he should be free to explore all possibilities, but if they resulted in “an abstraction devoid of emotional content” he would seek other alternatives. This provoked an indignant retort from Kaldor to the effect that Nigg was fiddling while Rome burned. “Have you the right,” he asserted, “have you the luxury to spend so much time on these experiments?” Nigg was forced to concede that he was endeavoring in his own way to “realize in a practical manner” the Prague Manifesto by undertaking to compose a work for orchestra, chorus and reciters based upon a text by the young communist poet François Monod. “In this work,” Nigg intoned, “I want to express the current struggle being undertaken by good people for a better world.”

The work to which Nigg referred is the oratorio *Le fusillé inconnu*, which the composer completed in 1949. *Le fusillé inconnu* exemplified Nigg’s desire to reconcile his Muse with the accessibility demanded of committed musicians by the Prague Manifesto, in that by all accounts it combined serial techniques with a politically charged text. It is reasonable to assume that the composer considered his attempt unsuccessful as *Le fusillé inconnu* is listed as “destroyed” in the composer’s detailed chronology (up to 1965).¹⁰ Possibly in light of this realization, what Jean Roy described as Nigg’s “final rupture” with serial technique came about in *Pour un poète captif* (1950).¹¹ The musically conventional, that is, tonal work was Nigg’s contribution to a campaign launched by the poet Louis Aragon, which was given wide and ongoing publicity in the pages of *Les lettres françaises*. The campaign sought and won the release of the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, whose communist activism had seen him imprisoned in Turkey in 1938.

Nigg was not alone among the *progressistes* in his recourse to texts with which to express his solidarity with Stalinist ideology. Article Three of the Prague Manifesto—that composers focus on texted music—had indeed fallen on fertile ground in Paris. Louis Saguer in an article entitled “Scènes de la vie musicale” described how the struggle by the French proletariat to improve their material situation and their political rights rested in part on divorcing themselves from bourgeois musical life, with all its modernist indulgences. “The first attempts in this direction have been made,” Saguer declared, “worker musicians, supported by some professional musicians (composers and performers) who are conscious of their responsibilities towards music and towards the people, have formed popular choirs. They know that the path is long and difficult, but they will persevere.”¹² As Kaldor made apparent to Nigg, those responsibilities included eschewing avant-garde tendencies and embracing accessible musical forms, preferably scored for massed choirs. The choral model to which Saguer refers is the Chorale populaire de Paris. Writing in 1951 on the occasion of the Chorale’s fifteenth anniversary, Désormière reported that the Chorale was devoted to “beautiful music” of the sort championed by Koechlin.¹³ As was noted earlier, the close ties between the Paris Chorale and the less

¹⁰ Claude Chamfray, “Fiches Techniques—Serge Nigg,” *Le courrier musical de France* 13 (1966), 57.

¹¹ Jean Roy, *Présences contemporaines: Musique française* (Paris, 1962), 430.

¹² Saguer, “Scènes de la vie musicale,” 6.

¹³ Roger Désormière, “La chorale populaire de Paris fetera son 15e anniversaire le 17 Mars 1951,” *Les lettres françaises* 353 (8 March 1951), 7.

politically doctrinaire FMP saw the participation in both of Désormière, Koechlin, Darius Milhaud, and Durey—all of whom, with the exception of Milhaud, were also founding members of the AFMP. In July 1950 it was reported that the FMP was merging with the increasingly hard-line AFMP. The merger was enacted after the Third Congress of the FMP, the first to be held since the war. In a notification of the impending meeting Durey, the secretary-general of the FMP, reminded present and prospective members that despite the “suffering endured during the somber period of Occupation, the disappearance of some of its organizers, the destruction of its archives, and the dispersal of its effects [the federation] has never been broken, never dissolved.”¹⁴ The decision to merge was based equally on logistical considerations and the realization that both organizations were fighting a common enemy—Fascism and war—in the name of peace. The result was that what Jean Gandrey-Rety described tellingly as the reservations held by (unnamed) members of the FMP regarding “the issue of musical choice” were put aside in order to “fight truly for peace, without which all civilization and all musical activity is likely to disappear.”¹⁵ The fifteenth anniversary program for the Chorale gives a powerful indication of the extent to which the *progressistes* held sway in the Chorale. According to Désormière the program included:

Louis Durey, *Paix aux hommes par millions* (text by Mayaskovsky)
 Serge Nigg, *Chant pour les mineurs* (poem by François Monod)
 Louis Saguer, *Paix, paix, liberté!*
 Daniel Chabrun, *Nous ferons la paix* (poem by Jean Marcenac)
 “Fremiot”, *Henri Martin-Raymonde Diane* (poem by Henri Bassis)
 Darius Milhaud, *Main tendue à tous* (poem by Charles Vildrac)

The direct and indirect references to peace and liberty in the titles confirm their pro-Soviet bias, as is also the case with other choral works by Nigg and Durey during the period 1948-1952:

Serge Nigg, *Batailles pour l'humanité* (1949)
 Louis Durey, *Chant des combattants de la liberté* (1948)
 -----, *La guerre et la paix* (1949)
 -----, *La longue marche* (1949, text by Mao Tse-Tung)
 -----, *L'étoile de la paix* (1950)
 -----, *Deux poèmes du Président Ho Chi Minh* (1951)

That these works seem to have disappeared without trace suggests that they were artistically less than successful. Certainly, the respected French musicologist Claude Rostand at the time dismissed the output of the AFMP as mediocre. The *progressistes*, he sniffed, had produced “more noise than works.”¹⁶ They were “noise” to Rostand because his modernist leanings would not accommodate such orthodox compositional approaches.

¹⁴ Louis Durey, “La fédération musicale populaire,” *Les lettres françaises* 318 (29 June 1950), 7.

¹⁵ Jean Gandrey-Rety, “Musique pour la paix: Ou Stockholm à Saint Denis,” *Les lettres françaises* 319 (6 July 1950), 8.

¹⁶ Claude Rostand, *La musique française contemporaine* [1955], tr. by Henry Marx as *French Music Today* (New York, 1973), 120-121.

One can grasp a sense of the style and idea behind these and other paeans to Stalinism by looking briefly at one of the more enduring socialist realist works to have emerged from the period, Shostakovich's *Song of the Forests*, Op. 81, based on texts by Evgeny Dolmatovsky. The editor of *Les lettres françaises* and later Picasso biographer Pierre Daix brought the work to the attention of the *progressistes*. Daix's account of his visit to the Soviet Union confirms the sheer naiveté of French Stalinists. Travelling to a Soviet "village de création," Daix conducted an interview with Zhdanov's successor, Tikhon Khrennikov, for an article entitled "Current problems of Soviet music."¹⁷ What today would seem to be the sinister ulterior motive behind housing artists in an immense park on the outskirts of Moscow was justified by Khrennikov (and accepted without question by Daix) on the basis that many had lost everything during the Nazi invasion. In the village, Daix gasped, "composers, singers, virtuosi and critics live and work together."¹⁸ Khrennikov made much of the fact that Shostakovich had come to the village to finish *Song of the Forests*, which was, according to Khrennikov, dedicated to Stalin's "great" reforestation plan. Dolmatovsky's text of the first of the songs, "When the War Was Over," is an excellent example of socialist realist subject matter:

The war came to an end with victory, the country gave a sigh of joy.
 A joyous spring began.
 A fireworks celebration bloomed over the Motherland,
 a salute bloomed over the Motherland.
 In the Kremlin morning flashed with dawn.
 The Great Leader, sunk in wise thought, went up to the huge map.
 On it, from the Volga to the Bug, and from the North to South,
 where the victorious regiments had passed by, there stood red flags.
 Dear native steppes and fields, unfortunate land...
 Our beloved Leader fell into deep thought
 about the glorious and heroic feat, about the invincible Motherland,
 about the happiness of the people.
 And with the firm hand which had led the regiments to the heroic feat
 he removes from the map the red flags.
 He removes the red flags, scorched by war,
 and places new flags, green as the colour of forests.
 From river to river, from the Volga to the Bug,
 a forest strip will stretch from north to south.¹⁹

The representation of Stalin as a wise and benevolent leader is delivered by solo bass alternating with a vast choir, and set to a lush, post-Romantic orchestral setting. Not surprisingly, the work earned for its composer the 1949 Stalin Prize.

Shostakovich's oratorio was given its French première in Paris on 4 November 1950 at the first of a series of regular concerts staged on the first and third Saturday

¹⁷ Pierre Daix, "Les problèmes actuels de la musique soviétique," *Les lettres françaises* 331 (5 October 1950), 7.

¹⁸ Pierre Daix, "Les problèmes actuels de la musique soviétique," 7.

¹⁹ Dmitri Shostakovich, *Song of the Forests*, Op. 81, text by Evgeny Dolmatovsky (G. Schirmer), tr. Colin Johnson. In notes to "On Guard for Peace: Music of the Totalitarian Regime." Conductor Yuri Temirkanov, St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra CD (BMG 09026-68877-2).

each month by the AFMP. The concerts were staged in order to compensate for what *Les lettres françaises* characterized as “le lock-out” inflicted upon Soviet music by the West.²⁰ If Renaud de Jouvenel’s review is any indication, *Song of the Forests* was a source of inspiration to the audience, who “showed their great joy in discovering in this music “their” music, which expresses their aspirations and touches their hearts.”²¹

The question remains unresolved as to whether Shostakovich was at heart a socialist realist or whether he was forced into being one by Stalin.²² Understandably, the latter option was not even entertained at *Les lettres françaises*, where socialist realism’s not-so-fine lines between expectation, obligation and coercion were glossed over. The blinkered view of the orthodox *progressiste* was captured up by Kaldor, who stressed that “the first rule” of socialist realism in the Soviet Union was to re-establish contact between music and the Soviet people.²³ The element of obligation in this was justified by Kaldor with the telling observation that: “Every art creates its own rules: within the limits of these rules, the genius finds liberty. The Soviet Communist Party re-invokes these principles; and for them it is a rule of art that the work of art is made for the gratification of the public.” Taken at face value, the notion that the genius finds liberty through the imposition of rules was a rather clever way to shift the onus back to composers—it was up to them to face up to their responsibilities and become foot soldiers in the ideological struggle between East and West. The role of the *progressistes* was simple: suppress their Muse and compose catchy, uncomplicated music that celebrated the glories of socialism. Serial music had no place in *progressiste* ideology for two reasons. First, it was for the most part aurally inaccessible to the general populace and therefore incapable of sustaining affirmative proletarian values. Second, the technique itself simply did not fit within Stalin’s dialectical worldview. Aleksandr Fadeyev, in a defense of socialist realism in *Les lettres françaises*, began by reminding readers that the central tenet of Stalin’s material dialectic was that the advancement of the inferior to the superior is not a passive act but a struggle between opposing historical tendencies.²⁴ According to Fadeyev, the problem facing the avant-garde was that in its pursuit of innovation it undermined the fundamental opposition between these two tendencies, between evolution and revolution, and in doing so it ensured its own obsolescence. In disrupting the natural progression of the inferior to the superior, such art had no validity beyond itself and was therefore “formalist.” When transposed into the humanitarian sphere, the failure of avant-garde art to preserve the progression, and so to lead by example, resulted in the charge of “obscurantism.” Pursuing Stalin’s dialectic to its obvious, if sinister, conclusion, avant-gardists were anti-humanitarian and had to be excluded from the inexorable march of the proletariat towards victory.

²⁰ “Fremiot,” “Où entendre la musique des compositeurs soviétiques?,” *Les lettres françaises* 332 (12 October 1950), 8.

²¹ Renaud de Jouvenel, “Un événement musical: La Cantate des forêts de Chostakovich,” *Les lettres françaises* 341 (14 December 1950), 6.

²² The controversy is crystallised in the revisionist/anti-revisionist debate which currently rages in musical circles. See << www.siu.edu/~aho/musov/deb/begin.html >> for details.

²³ Pierre Kaldor, “En marge des discussions musicales en Union soviétique: Formalisme et inspiration,” *Les lettres françaises* 199 (11 March 1948), 4.

²⁴ Aleksandr Fadeyev, “Le réalisme socialiste et les critiques,” *Les lettres françaises* 298 (9 February 1950), 1.

This was all very well but, as Koechlin was at pains to point out, was it the place of *governments* to decide at what point a work becomes formalist or obscurantist?²⁵ The humanitarian values that underpinned the commitment displayed by Koechlin, Désormière, Durey and others of the pre-War Popular Front generation were incompatible with the idea that the artist should answer to a higher political authority. The artist's conscience alone was and should remain the highest guarantee of commitment. Perhaps mindful of the intractable problems that the Prague Manifesto presented for the Gallic preference for *l'art pour l'art*, an enquiry into socialist realism mounted by *Les lettres françaises* found that the ultimate purpose of socialist realism was to ensure the education of the masses and so to aid in their empowerment.²⁶ In May 1951, the year after Koechlin's death, *Les lettres françaises* carried a notice advising of yet another inquiry, in which Désormière and Durey participated.²⁷ The findings of the debate were not disclosed, and the following year Désormière was incapacitated by a massive stroke.

The inquiry may well have come to the realization that when all was said and done the politically unambiguous approach adopted by the *progressistes* had generated its own set of problems. Not least of these was that their stance, already transparent through their choice of texts, was so biased towards the policies of the Soviet Union as to have limited appeal beyond their own political faction. The *progressistes* were effectively preaching to the converted. But perhaps more troubling, and ultimately fatal for the AFMP, was the issue of choice. Despite their comfortable distance from the nearest Soviet gulag, those in France who were sympathetic to the communist cause could not continue indefinitely to separate the egalitarian aspirations of socialist realism from its corrupted practical application. The *progressistes* had tried valiantly to sing a song—"All Hail the Prague Manifesto"—that ultimately was out of tune with the humanist values they held so dear.

²⁵ Charles Koechlin, "Art & liberté: Pour la tour d'ivoire," 103.

²⁶ René Petit, "Le réalisme socialiste: porte-t-il le visage de son père?... je crois maintenant à sa puissance éducative," *Les lettres françaises* 317 (22 June 1950), 8.

²⁷ "Nouveau débat sur le réalisme en musique," *Les lettres françaises* 361 (3 May 1951), 8.