THE MUSIC OF TIBET

By T. HOWARD SOMERVELL

The Mount Everest Expedition of 1921 brought back many fine photographs and important observations, but with regard to the music of the country, in response to inquiries, all we could learn was the fact that 'The Tibetans had quite jolly little tunes, and made a deuce of a row with trumpets and things.' When, in 1922, I found myself about to start for that mysterious land, I was (being a keen listener, though an ignorant student of music) naturally eager to find out something concerning these 'jolly little tunes' and (more especially perhaps as an ardent lover of Stravinsky) the 'deuce of a row.' I was a bit apprehensive of the quarter-tones and things which are traditionally associated with the music of the East, but I managed before entering Tibet to invent a rough notation for the recording of these mysterious intervals. Imagine my relief and delight at finding that the tunes of Tibet were in the pentatonic scale, and those of Nepal in the diatonic. But more of the tunes anon. Let us first talk about the instruments on which they are played. These are not very many in number, but comprise wood-wind, brass, percussion, and strings.

The principal item in the Tibetan orchestra is the percussion. There are drums of all sizes, from the small one made of the top of a human skull to drums several feet in diameter. In addition there are cymbals and gongs of various sorts. The Tibetans employ two wind instruments—a long straight trumpet, some 10-ft. in length, and a kind of cor anglais, played with a double-reed and provided with seven holes, which are equidistant, and comprise an octave, therefore sounding in the scale of whole-tones. The foregoing instruments are employed in the temples, and with them the lamas accompany the Devil Dances which are so important a feature in their worship.

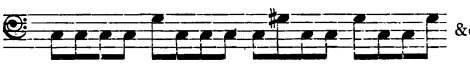
Mendicants and private individuals use two stringed instruments. The Tibetan violin, the more elaborate of the two, has four strings, tuned a fifth apart, Nos. 1 and 3 sounding A, Nos. 2 and 4 sounding the D below. The bow has two hanks of Yak-hair, threaded between strings 1 and 2, and between 3 and 4 respectively. Thus, when pressed against No. 1 string, it sounds No. 3 also, and when pressed in the opposite direction it plays on Nos. 2 and 4.

The fingering is done on all the strings at once, which necessitates their being close together at the nut, the pressing of the bow alone determining which pair of strings shall sound. In addition to this violin there is a one-stringed banjo-like instrument on which tunes are sometimes played, but which is more often twanged to one of the characteristic rhythms mentioned below.

Our coolies, collected almost entirely from the tribes of Nepal, beguiled the hours by singing native songs, which had a curious appeal by reason of their lilt and by the fact that they were almost invariably in the diatonic major scale. Some of these airs are arranged as a short Overture to the film of the Expedition's work now being shown at Philharmonic Hall. But across the border of Tibet a different type of tune is found, nearly always in the pentatonic scale. At one or two temples where the *cor Tibetanglais*, if I may so call it, is used, the tunes are naturally in the scale of whole-tones. But men working in the fields in the same places sing pentatonic tunes, and these must be considered as the national mode. I have heard Tibetans whistling *arpeggios* of common chords, and, strangely enough, of diminished sevenths; but never a semitone, which they do not seem to appreciate as an interval. They may strike E and E flat in this way, but never in succession.

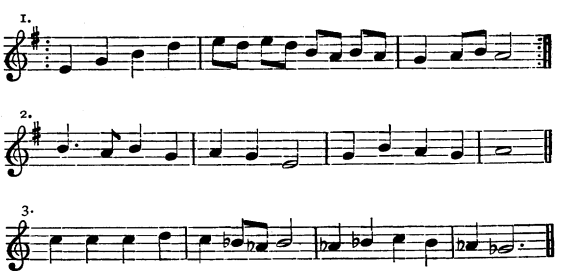
The Tibetan music that we heard divides itself into three sections. First, the airs sung by the people and played by mendicant fiddlers (these are in the pentatonic scale); second, the chanting of the lamas; and, third, the more orchestral music of the temples. The folk-tunes are simple, usually repeated many times, and almost always in the pentatonic scale. They suggest the negro 'Spirituals.' The music played in the interval at the Everest film, and orchestrated by myself (very amateurishly, I fear), consists of a number of these airs. The mendicant fiddlers play delightful little tunes suggestive of the Scottish Highlands, in the pentatonic scale, or, more rarely, in the scale of whole-tones.

The chanting of the lamas is usually of the form quoted here :



an occasional rise of a fifth or an augmented fifth being characteristic. Sometimes, especially if an air is sung, the supertonic is held by a second deeper voice as a kind of ground-bass. It is interesting to notice that when such a note is held as an accompaniment it is always the supertonic, which the Tibetans apparently consider as the root of their scale. Thus in the pentatonic scale, C D E G A, D is the note so employed.

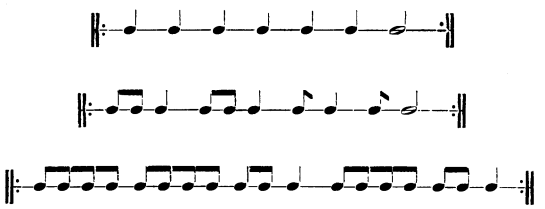
Sir Henry Walford Davies, who was very interested in the Tibetan music played at Philharmonic Hall, considers the supertonic to be the natural root of this scale, for, starting from D with the two perfect intervals—fourth and fifth—we arrive at G and A; starting from G and A we arrive at C, D, and E, and in this way, from two successions of perfect fourths and fifths, the whole pentatonic scale is built up from the root. Sir Henry told me that he believed that if the world came to an end to-morrow and were reinhabited, music would start in this fashion and the pentatonic scale be therefore the first mode or scale to appear. Be this as it may, it is remarkable that so many primitive or isolated peoples, such as the Highland Scotsman or the Tibetan lama, use the pentatonic scale. Appended are three typical Tibetan tunes—the first originally heard on the violin, the second sung in the fields, and the third on the cor anglais :



So much for the airs themselves. The Tibetan Orchestra, which plays more organized music at the larger temples during religious festivals, was intensely interesting to listen to, although a trifle monotonous after a few hours.

The music of a Tibetan orchestra consists generally of the following component parts: (1) Rhythm, kept up in the drums and cymbals, and never ceasing even when the other parts are silent; (2) The drone-bass, played on two of the long trumpets, and consisting almost invariably of two notes a minor seventh apart; (3) The air, often monotonously repeated hundreds of times, played on the cor anglais, or rather its Tibetan equivalent.

The rhythm of the percussion instruments is always one of three:



The music played during the Devil Dance film being shown at Philharmonic Hall will give a better idea than any musical score or quotations of the sound of the Tibetan orchestration. The reader may be able to imagine it by considering that the rhythm of the percussion is continuous, and lasts throughout the day (for a concert in Tibet is a whole-day affair). The drone-bass goes on most of the time, with or without the air on the reed instrument. In addition, there is the chanting of the lamas from time to time, sometimes unaccompanied, occasionally in two parts, in which case the lower part, as already mentioned, is a ground-bass of the supertonic. The music and Devil dancing fit in with one another very adequately, and in a crude way seem to me to be a very high form of art; for, after all, sincere art is almost always good, and whatever the primitive nature of both music and dancing, this intensely serious presentation before the awed populace of the sights and sounds they will meet with after death is an attempt at religious instruction of the most sincere and practical kind. We hope that those who see the reproduction of these ceremonies at Philharmonic Hall will thereby obtain a real intellectual treat; we are at any rate safe in saying that neither Tibetan film nor Tibetan music have been produced in London before. This entertainment, with its accompanying films of travel across Tibet and of climbing 27,000-ft. on the world's highest mountain, is to be continued, it is hoped, until the first week in February. The profits from the show are to be used for the equipment of a similar expedition next year. We look to the public to prevent Britain from being forestalled by another nation in this great adventure, as she has been in the conquest of both the Poles.

We have received the 1923 edition of *A Kalendar of Hymns Ancient and Modern and the English Hymnal* (Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 6*d*.). This invaluable guide in the selection of hymns should be on the desk of every parson and choirmaster.

Music in the Foreign Press

BY M.-D. CALVOCORESSI

FRANCK'S UNPUBLISHED WORKS

Nothing could be more welcome and more instructive than Julien Tiersot's contribution to the history of Franck's early evolution, under the title *Unpublished Works by César Franck* (*Revue Musicale*, December). He starts by remarking that very little is known of the first fifty years of Franck's life; the only standard critical biography, Vincent d'Indy's, says very little of the period before 1870. And most of the works which Franck wrote during this period have remained unpublished.

Tiersot divides the manuscripts which he has examined into various groups: firstly the school tasks, consisting of exercises in harmony, counterpoint, and fugue (1883-40); then original compositions written during childhood, during youth, and from 1847 onwards.

The first group comprises the four-part Fugue with three subjects, 'well worthy [Tiersot says] of being transcribed for keyboard and performed,' with which Franck won his prize in 1840. In the second are mentioned 'Variations for pianoforte upon an aria from *Le Pré-aux-Clercs*, by César Franck, age eleven years and a half, Op. 5,' songs and an *O Salutaris*, a Pianoforte Sonata (in the style of Beethoven's early works), a Symphony for full orchestra, Op. 13 (performed, according to a note pencilled on the MS., at Orleans in 1841, but probably written far earlier), and a second Pianoforte Sonata in which the 'cyclic' principle is already applied.

At the beginning of 1848 Franck had completed a tone-poem inspired by Hugo's *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne*, which, judging by Tiersot's description and the examples quoted, should be well worth knowing. (Tiersot's contention that on the strength of this work, Franck is to be considered as having forestalled Liszt in inventing the *genre* of the tone-poem is not altogether admissible: Liszt's *Mazeppa* Étude, for instance, in its final form (1837), might be adduced as proof to the contrary.)

Three important works for chorus and orchestra, *La Tour de Babel* (1865), *La Plainte des Israélites*, and *Cantique du Moïse*, are mentioned further and described as heralding the style and architecture of *Les Béatitudes* and *La Rédemption*.

Tiersot concludes his article by remarking that:

> The case of a composer withholding from publication practically the whole of his output during the first half-century of his life is almost unique; and that although Franck's unpublished works may be less significant than those upon which his fame rests, we should welcome the possibility of studying César Franck's individuality during the first stages of his creative career.

The *Monde Musical* (December) reports an address by Vincent d'Indy to the members of the Société Française de Musicologie upon certain early works of César Franck:

> Between 1837 and 1847, Franck's music reveals, from the melodic point of view, the influences of Monsigny, Méhul, Gluck, and Beethoven; and, as regards writing, those of Liszt, Thalberg, and Alkan. The imitation of Liszt is particularly obvious in a *Chant du Pâtre* for pianoforte, which, however, is quite characteristic of Franck's own individuality. All the early pianoforte pieces are in the same shape—an *Allegro* between two expositions of one theme, with or without an introduction.