

BOOK REVIEW appearing in the Australian Magazine "MOVEMENT" dated June 1948

**"THE NEW LANGUAGE OF MUSIC"**

Interesting Pianist-Composer  
by Thea Stanley Hughes.

A world authority on the history of music, Kathleen Schlesinger, has written a book that is used as a reference authority by Greek Professors and by musical archaeologists. It is called "The Greek Aulos" and goes too deeply into the subject of the development of musical instruments and of music itself, and is much too technical to be readable by people like me, but for those who can read it, it is not only a history and one that has confounded many text books written before it, but it is also a herald of a new language of music. For in it Kathleen Schlesinger has revealed how her study of the old Greek aulos (the ancient reed pipe), and her general research work, that covers many centuries, have brought to light the musical system that was given out by the great initiate Pythagoras, who lived 600 years before Christ..

This ancient esoteric system of modes was called the Harmoniai and is written of by some of the early Greek writers including Plato and Aristotle. It is known now as "The Greek Modes" simply because the Greeks tabulated what developed out of this original source, but even by the time the Tables of Alypius were written the modes were not in their original purity as modifications had already been made by Aristoxenus and others who thought they could improve on the original esoteric scales of Pythagoras.

At one time there was a universal language of music based upon a series of natural tones or harmonics, and it is still to be found in folk music, in the songs sung in the Hebrides, to music played on reed pipes and on flutes in Sicily, Peru and the wilds of Africa, and it is supposed, in all the corners of the world where the people have not succumbed to the influence of what we are pleased to call civilization.

Musical instruments and scripts have been sent to Kathleen Schlesinger from many of these parts of the world and she has written two other books called the History of Ancient Instruments and The History of Modern Instruments, and she has also contributed to the Encyclopaedia Britannica and to the Oxford History of Music.

Professor Mountford writes the introduction to the "Greek Aulos" and in it he says: "Though this book upsets many of our previous notions of the intervals of the Greek scales and especially of the way they were related to one another, there can be no doubt that all further study of Greek music will be indebted to Miss Schlesinger's pioneer work. It is, I venture to think, the most original and illuminating contribution yet made to a difficult and fascinating subject".

The Greek modes are described by her as being founded on the natural series of overtones or harmonics inherent in every musical tone, and it is very unlikely that they will be taken and used generally for a good long time as the basis for musical composition, as we seem to have to go to the limits in all directions away from Nature before we shall be willing to through away the cherished conventions of a pseudo-culture.

The secrets of the Harmoniai have been lost for centuries, lost as only something can be that is very gradually subjected to the process of having other ideas superimposed upon it in the interests of variety, so that they were, over a long period, modified to suit the tastes of an increasing majority who demand more and more in the way of effect, till, as in music of the present day, atonality has to be resorted to in up-to-date concert hall programmes.

The ancient modes can be played on modern instruments. Kathleen Schlesinger says in her books:-

"Contrary to expectations the production of those somewhat strange intervals on modern instruments embodying an entirely different scale does not - with a few exceptions - entail difficulties that cannot be overcome by expert musicianship and a good will.

It will not be generally recognised by musicians, for instance how small is the margin of difference between most of the ratios and intervals of the Harmoniai, nor how easily the executant himself can bring about the necessary modifications on his instrument. In fact, most of the instruments of the orchestra can reproduce the intonation of the Greek modes by slight manipulations, such as cross fingering on certain

wind instruments. This, of course, is merely a counsel of expediency, for use until instruments are constructed specially for the new language of music . . . But as soon as structural changes in the instruments are compatible with economic exigencies, there will be a definite gain in beauty of tone".

Many well-known musicians have shown great interest in the "modes" but have been prevented from going further into the subject by the fact that it would be a very expensive venture and one that would entail the sacrificing of a career along the well-marked path.

There is a composer who has done this, "the only composer" Kathleen Schlesinger writes in the book published in 1939, "who has the courage and one might add the freedom to grapple with the intonation of the new scales". If this composer were a man with a long foreign name - just arrived from Europe on the last liner in - we might be rushing to learn all about this subject - all out of its right time. But as these compositions are the work of a woman born and brought up in South Australia the music written in the *Harmoniai* will probably be quietly preserved, as far as Australia is concerned, till more people are born who have the ear for it and the impatience to hear again and again what has been described by somebody who has heard it after being brought back from almost certain death as the music of the spheres.

Elsie Hamilton was in the midst of a brilliant career, giving solo concerts in London, Paris and Berlin as a pianist, and having just composed a Symphony and a Symphonic Poem that were shortly to have been performed on her return to Paris, when she heard that six lectures on the subject of the Pythagorean modes of ancient Greece were to be given at a conference in England. She is herself a born pioneer, and she was already looking for something new in music. After three years in Germany where she studied and gave performances she had returned to Australia, and after giving concerts for charities in her native city of Adelaide, she went to New Zealand for a holiday. While she was there she devised a new technique for piano playing and wrote a book about it. Then she went to Paris to live, in order to study composition and orchestration with André Geldalge. One day when she was talking about these years she said that one of the most awful experiences you can have is to be in the middle of a composition, trying to catch the sounds and get them written down, and to be interrupted by somebody playing in another key. Such work must be quite a different experience from the effort to make things up – just using your brains – which is something anybody can do who is a bit intellectual and has had enough training. But so much of this sort of thing goes by the name of art these days.

During these five years of intensive study and composition Miss Hamilton was interested to find out why the natural series of overtones given forth by trumpets and other wind instruments were not used instead of the instruments being accommodated to our well tempered system. She also noticed in the whirr of aeroplanes flying over her atelier in Paris the same shower of overtones not corresponding to the sounds of our modern musical system.

All such experiences as these made her see in those six lectures which were given by Kathleen Schlesinger, whom she met then for the first time, a beacon of light to show her which direction she had to take. So she moved from France to England, crossed the Channel in the middle of the first world war in 1916. Submarines were no bar to her progress and though she thought she was going for a fortnight she stayed for two years. She had shared an atelier with Bessie Davidson, another Australian who had made a name for herself as an artist. Bessie Davidson had been awarded the highest honour a painter can get – the *Chef de la Legion D'Honneur* – and she is still living in that same spot – and her work, so highly thought of on the continent, is also little known to Australians.

Elsie Hamilton collaborated then with Kathleen Schlesinger and at ones composed in the modes for a lecture to be given in London. She wrote this composition for flute, specially made, violin and psaltery, and in this trio she played the psaltery herself. When somebody exclaimed at the idea of her playing the psaltery when she had never played it a fortnight before, she said: "Well I had to. There was no one else to do it." That was the simplest answer to why she played the psaltery, but as she combines the pioneer contempt for obstacles with the most unassuming objective sort of attitude to herself imaginable, it might be the answer to why she took on the whole colossal task of giving voice in the 20th century to music that is new and yet akin, in its simplicity and purity, to that which was given out in the days when certain schools that were inspired by Pythagoras understood what an intimate relationship there is between sound and the planets and human life.

In the esoteric school of Pythagoras the seven planets of the solar system, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury and Moon were each represented by a planetary mode appropriate to the particular planetary deity. The Dorian mode was the principal mode of these times and it was the centre of the Greek musical system, just as the Sun is the centre of the solar system. I understand that to play the same melody in different modes provides quite different experiences, as the ethos or psychological character of each mode brings in the influence of the corresponding planet and that the experiences are quite different from anything coming to us as a result of listening to music written on the basis of the modern scale. The first modern composer in these modes is quoted by Kathleen Schlesinger as saying:-

“In fact the two systems, the modern and the modal, represent two distinct musical worlds, each quite complete in itself, and which only prove inimical one to the other if one tries to compare them by holding both in the mind at the same time instead of allowing each to work upon one through its own inner logicity.”

Even now when these modern compositions have been acknowledged as something authentic by men and women whose opinions we must respect, the composer does not expect that the modes will become popular with the general public. She has carried this task through to a point where she feels it no longer needs her personal collaboration.

It is almost incredible that somebody who is so frail and ethereal-looking and so extravagant with her energies when she devotes them to a cause she loves, could have started off on such a course knowing what it involved – composing supervising the tuning of the instruments to give the exact intonation, travelling from place to place, lecturing in various languages and forming and training orchestras in different cities and conduction. For that is what had to be done – and there was nobody else to do it.

After this trio was given in London she was asked to write the music for an old Egyptian drama, by Mabel Collins, called *Sensa*. There was an orchestra of harps, kitharas, oboe and cor anglais, there were chorus and dancers, singers and actors and she had to direct the lot of them. Other tasks of composing music for drama followed, including two mimes called *Agave* and *The Scorpions of Ysyt*, which she also conducted.

There was chamber music to be written and rehearsals for a concert to be given at the Steinway Hall in which Queens Hall players performed, and the composer had it brought home to her that she would have to do all the conduction for the same reason she had had to learn to play the psaltery in a hurry. After that concert one critic said it sounded so agreeable that you wouldn't think it was the modes!! Another said that her path would be strewn with thorns – as indeed it was.

On one occasion a Finnish family asked Miss Hamilton to go to their home, which was a whole island in the Gulf of Finland, to lecture on natural intonation. Seven nationalities gathered there, Finnish, Swedish, English, Dutch, German, Swiss and Russian. The only language they could all speak was German. So the lectures were given in German, and no sooner were the lectures given than they had to have a concert. So the lecturer had to turn composer again and compose something on the spot. It was written for Kantele, a Finnish instrument like the kithara, and for singers and then they all decided that they couldn't let it all stop at this, and they all wanted a centre established for the study of the modes. As many of the people there were studying in Stuttgart that was decided on as a centre, so again Miss Hamilton had to pack up and leave London and work in Stuttgart where she stayed for three years. She left there in 1937 and was in Paris again in 1938 giving a series of lectures on the modes, this time in French. She stayed there three months to do this then returned to her flat in London. She had spent thirty years in Europe and only returned to Australia via America in 1940, travelling the seas again in war conditions, this time with a convoy of thirty ships, one of which was sunk by bombs. Some time before she left London one of the articles she had written on music attracted the attention of two Dutch women, Wilhelmina Roelvink and Mary Wilbers, who sought an opportunity to meet her. They became her helpers and have since devoted themselves to making this music known in England and America.

We live in wonderful times when much of the beauty that is truth is being brought down to us, though we may not hear much about it in our newspapers, and here in Australia we have somebody with us who holds in her own experience a secret that has been lost to the world at large for centuries, a secret which, now that it has been reinterpreted by her after being re-established by Kathleen Schlesinger, is waiting to be revealed further and to have its origins delved into by future composers and artists.

Miss Hamilton is one of those who will joyfully sacrifice what others would consider great prizes in order to do a job that arouses her deepest interests, but once it is done it is finished. When I was complaining one day on behalf of those who are very anxious to hear her play again, and said: "From all accounts you must have been a wonderful pianist," she said: "It's no good saying I wasn't a good pianist but I've been showing off on the piano since I was four, and I think I've had enough." And she said again that she wouldn't play the piano any more now. I think you'd seldom meet anybody who is so gloriously unwedded to her own past accomplishments, which is rather annoying for those of use who are anxious to hear an orchestra under her baton without more delay. I can't help hoping that Australia will in time bring her a new challenge and be a new field for this work. On the other hand she may be persuaded to go to California where her Dutch friends who have the instruments and her compositions want to continue the work.

In the meantime, she is absorbed in other studies, and I suppose that all artists must long to go beyond the particular art to gain knowledge of what lies behind their inspirations. The little spring would consider itself unimportant compared with the source of all the waters. But those of us who are as yet further away from the source would be glad to hear the little spring.

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*Book reviewed is "The Greek Aulos" by Kathleen Schlesinger.  
published by Methuen & Co., Essex Street, Strand £2. 2s (English)*