

## RECENT BOOKS

### THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS

**I**N the preface to Gerald Abraham's *A Hundred Years of Music* (Alfred Knopf, 1938), his point of departure is given in a statement that the subtitle might read "The Triumph, Decline, and Fall of Musical Romanticism." Any attempt at esthetic evaluation is disclaimed; the approach is that of "the historian of musical style" rather than of the esthetic critic. For the most part he has been content "to leave the throwing of brickbats and bouquets to others better qualified . . . to distribute them." Occasional brickbats and bouquets are necessary, however, to his generally excellent critical judgment and clear summing up of periods, styles, individuals, and music.

The hundred years begin with the death of Beethoven. There follows a panorama of composers, works, and musical conditions, all viewed from the present day. The past is related to the present and vice versa. Based on careful research and individual study, his opinions are sound and fearless (brickbats and bouquets notwithstanding); one can respect them as the observations of a clear thinker. There is no overloading of personal prejudices and cynicisms. His pros and cons present the modern situation fairly, impersonally, and as the inevitable outgrowth of the past.

The vast amount of space devoted to Wagner is justified by detailed analysis of the composer's insidious influence on contemporaries and followers in all nations. Liszt is credited with influencing music even unto the third and fourth generation via Strauss, Debussy, and Ravel. "One of the most curious symptoms of musical nationalist movements" says Mr. Abraham, "is their lack of enduring vitality." But occasionally composers, "completely impregnated with national characteristics," yet too individual to be classed as mere epigones appear, such as Janacek, Stravinsky, Bartok, Kodaly, Sibelius, Falla, Mahler, Bloch (a Jewish nationalist). These artists, the author finds are symptoms of the second great outbreak of musical nationalism. The first owed much to Liszt, the second is "dimly connected with Debussy and the decline and fall of romanticism."

England has again found her "true musical accent" through the discovery of English folk-music by Cecil Sharp, and in Percy Grainger, Vaughan Williams, Holst and others. America also "has felt the stirrings of artistic nationalism," but the majority of American composers "have been eclectic in the worst sense, colorless imitators of European masters." MacDowell, charming and individual tone-poet, is an exception. Abraham recognizes, however, many conscious efforts to achieve genuine American music—"music expressing 'the modern American spirit' or music based on Negro or American Indian folk-music." Converse's *Flivver Ten Million* is offered as typical of the attempted expressions of industrial America. America's most important contribution to date has been "the new idiom of popular music (about 1912) and jazz (about 1918)." (He places both dates too late.) Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Gruenberg's *Daniel Jazz* are described as serious music resulting from the popular. This is all Mr. Abraham has to say about American music except for a mention of Roger Sessions (with Constant Lambert and Shostakovitch) as an example of a healthy eclecticism.

There is also much detailed analysis of Schönberg's methods. To Hauer he gives credit for inventing the system worked out by Schönberg and his pupils, von Webern and Berg. "Webern is an extremist. . . . But Berg is a very much more important figure than Webern . . . Much more moderate in his tendencies, much more lyrical and spontaneous than either his master or his fellow-pupil." Mr. Abraham sees Berg, in spite of the scholastic devices and twelve-tone system, as essentially a romanticist.

"Hindemith's neo-classicism was only a passing phase." The author sums up the situation thus "In Hindemith then, as in Berg, Walton, Malipiero and other representative musicians of the present day, a distinct swing back from the arid neo-classicism of the nineteen-twenties is perceptible; a swing-back not, of course, to full-blooded romanticism but to a saner balance between the tendencies we call classical and romantic."

The book ends with the observation that the turn to conservatism begun by Central European composers "is being sharply accelerated by the jackboot of authority in the so-called totalitarian states."

Marion Bauer