

RECENT BOOKS

ON MODERN MUSIC, BUT FOR WHOM?

IT is difficult to imagine what segment of the public is meant to profit from John Tasker Howard's newest book, *This Modern Music* (Crowell). The child-minded may take delight in the preliminary anecdotes and look forward to the chapter headed "Dissonances—the salt and pepper of music" where dissonance is justified through the example of "the man who said the most wonderful sensation in the world is a good itch—if you can scratch it." But they will certainly push the book aside when they reach the serious stuff. On the other hand, a responsible, though musically uninformed reader, if he has not taken offence at the condescending tone directed at him, will welcome the promise of an exposé of specific problems. But then he will wonder how one arrives at Strauss' public successes in an abstract discussion of dissonance, and why he should be burdened with irrelevancies about counterpoint, merely because it in some way subsumes dissonance. He may even suspect that the book's loose organization is matched by loose exposition. And in that he will be justified.

To throw light on "atonality," the twelve-tone technic is introduced by the chord C-F-B-E-A-D, with the implication that Schönberg favors "the construction of chords in fourths, rather than thirds." Now, aside from F-B, the tones of Howard's chord are disposed in perfect fourths, which strongly assert the closest harmonic affinity of tones as part of a diatonic community. That is why the chord falls into C major, which is a

ridiculous thing to evoke in a discussion of a composer who tries so arduously to avoid the traditional modes. Obviously, a musician who wants to maintain the independence of each of twelve tones will not favor perfect fourths, and one has only to pick up any Schönberg page to see that thirds are not noticeably outnumbered by fourths.

In another instance, observe Howard's indolence in his choice of Schönbergian illustration for crab and inversion. It is hard to recognize these devices combined before one has noticed them separately. And even the initiated is taxed by the present citation which offers a clean-cut case of neither device. Howard then offers *polytonal* measures of Gerald Strang to illustrate simple mirror inversion, apologizing that these are "not strictly atonal." The discussion clearly called for a simple Schönberg mirror example which could have been found with just a little effort (e.g., measures 16 and 19 of the *Gigue* of Opus 25).

Howard's illustration of trends by the chronology of men who are supposed to represent them, is as annoying as his technical exposition. Composers are not only forced into one category when they embrace several, but their careers are reported under chapter headings which do not characterize their paramount efforts. It is distressing to find Milhaud dismissed with the label "polytonal" and Copland with "workaday music," as if the former had not long ceased to confine himself to polytonality and as if the latter had not written the *Variations*, the

Sextet, and the *Piano Sonata*. As for Stravinsky, his fate is to be lumped, *Le Sacre* and all, into the chapter, "neo-classicism;" and all the wonderful music since *Pulcinella* is acknowledged by the listing of a few titles.

Far too much is made of the hackneyed notion, "the dissonances of yesterday become the consonances of today." Enlightened theory adopts the saner view of dissonance as tension. Analysis should concern itself with the relations of tones, i.e., their moreness and lessness. Whether we talk of yesterday or today, the dissonances in a given work were and are *more* dissonant, or tense, than the consonances.

III

But Howard's is only one of many recent books by people obviously out of touch with genuine contemporary currents who nevertheless assume authority with regard to them. Along with *This Modern Music* there comes from Knopf, a pretentious volume of 560 pages, *The Book of Modern Composers*, edited by David Ewen whose successes in getting books published have run somewhat parallel to Mr. Howard's. Sixty-six writers contribute to a treatment of twenty-nine composers. Among the contributors are most of the composers themselves, who have either stated their artistic aims expressly for this book, or, as in most cases, have allowed previous statements to be reprinted. In addition to a critic's version of each subject, the composer is, with few exceptions, written up in a "personal note" and represented by good photography. The material is extensive and its quality varied. As it happens, many contributors have either already expressed their views in MODERN MUSIC or appear in the book through previously published matter reviewed here. I shall

therefore limit myself to a few stray observations and to the editor's role.

It is interesting that so many of the composers rise to the defence of melody. Having expected little of the personal notes, I was also surprised to find in addition to the self-advancing, great-men-I-have-seen-and-known portraits, some really illuminating ones like those by Janet Flanner, Israel Citkowitz, and Paul Pisk. While there is much valuable information in the critical articles, too few envisage their material with respect to broad, meaningful issues as Paul Rosenfeld does in his Hindemith essay. I do not relish dubious ideologies such as Krenek's "Mediterranean blue" in its effect on Milhaud and historical thought. And I recoil from the free association which leads from Mediterranean blue to "blues." But Krenek makes better reading than chronology unsupported by a stimulating pattern.

Ewen has seriously lapsed from responsibility in accepting Paul Swan's article which vehemently discredits Stravinsky while praise is squandered through all the other pages of the book. This extraordinary musician is represented as beneath the contempt of many composers he so obviously dwarfs. It is no less serious that there is only one such lapse, for if there were others they might collectively indicate a policy which could be dealt with accordingly. But the isolated instance stands out as an obvious slip, and a grave one. It is Ewen's responsibility, too, that he has chosen so many writers who seem ignorant of music produced since 1930 or earlier. Finally, in the selection of composers, why should Erik Satie be overlooked? And certainly Walter Piston and Roger Sessions could have been more properly included than Ildebrando Pizzetti and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

Mention should be made of a deeply-felt tribute to Frederick Delius by Bernard van Dieren, a sensitive chapter on Bohuslav Martinu by Paul Nettle, and Nicolas Slonimsky's introduction in

which there is the type of fresh information noticeably lacking in other articles and in which the "isms" would be more pedantic were it not for a certain charm in their handling.

Arthur Berger

ROUND THE WORLD WITH RADIO

DIRECT from Geneva, graveyard of so many international hopes, there now arrives a surprising world survey of broadcasting, called *Radio Today*. Appropriately the author is a refugee from the Third Reich, Dr. Arno Huth (well known to the readers of MODERN MUSIC as its European correspondent); the publisher is the Graduate Institute of International Studies; the "angel" rescuing the Geneva Studies from their otherwise inevitable doom is the ubiquitous Rockefeller Foundation. No brilliant piece of research or profound revelation of cause and effect, the book is, however, an excellent pocket Almanac of Radio, the most concise and best arranged now available. Even in war-time the compilation of such global material seems to require the detachment of a European study center.

In the world today there are, Dr. Huth tells us, at least 2836 stations — long, medium and short-wave. They address about 400,000,000 people, some of them for fifteen or more hours out of every twenty-four. What ravenous appetite do they feed? Well, for more than half the time the air is filled with music, the mainstay of radio diet. During their recent war with the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, the broadcasters attempted to exploit what was set forth as a decline in the ratio of music to other features on their programs. This line of argument will lead to no profitable conclusion, as a study of Huth's figures indicates. In Japan for

instance where state control of radio is total, and private ownership and operation are unknown, music makes up only one-tenth of the programs ("lectures and talks" about one-fourth). But in Latin America, where United States broadcasters have invested much money and effort in the hope of big future business, music is on the air more than 78 percent of the time.

There are eye-openers in the barest statistical tables of this book. The United States leads of course in the number of stations — 902. (Of these, incidentally, at least a third are owned by newspapers, a fact not to be overlooked in the current struggle between the American Musicians' Union and the National Association of Broadcasters). Americans also own nearly 30,000,000 radio sets — about twice as many as the German and three times the number of Russian receivers. But in the distribution of those sets, that is, measuring the density per 1000 inhabitants, Sweden is tops, Denmark comes next, the U.S.A. third, Britain fifth, Germany seventh, Russia twenty-first. Uruguay, a small but culturally advanced nation ranks ahead of Russia and not much after France; Brazil for all its vastness makes no grade at all. Africa and Asia, despite initial French, British and Japanese infiltration are still largely undeveloped radio hinterlands.

As to short-wave broadcasting one learns that Russia, not Germany or Italy, was the pioneer with international propaganda, and that even after 1935 the