

FORECAST AND REVIEW

ONCE AGAIN, THE ONE-MAN SHOW, 1943

THE one-man show, which has been revived as a device for contemporary music in Princeton and New York, has worked out surprisingly well this year. In two of the three shows (those sponsored by the Town Hall Forum) the happy plan was conceived of having curtain-raisers by Bach and Purcell. Moreover, unlike the Composers' Laboratory of several seasons ago with its fanatic emphasis on inclusiveness and catholicity, the current exhibits are restricted to a few worthy figures. Perhaps the "worthiness" is my own interpretation, for it is not too certain that this was the guiding principle of the sponsors. While the motive was made clear enough in the Roger Sessions evening at Princeton University, the apologetic tone which the forum discussion brought to the music of Aaron Copland and William Schuman at Town Hall, placed in relief a query as to the seriousness of their efforts. The forced attempt of Chairman Kenneth Klein to bait a hypothetical violent mass dissension may have reflected a good-natured desire to stir up spirited debate; but it was as embarrassing as ineffectual, and helped engender a rather curious atmosphere in which the so-called "modernistic" appeared as a deformed monster, with the chairman as keeper to hold off the animal where it could be safely ridiculed.

The Town Hall Forum differs from the Forum-Laboratory in several outward features: more competent performance, a larger hall, an oral criticism by a representative of the press, and a chairman who, as I have already implied, does not maintain the phenomenal poker-face of Ashley Pettis of the Laboratory. But the questions, though inhibited by a more formal setting, are astonishingly similar and innocuous. From time to time, Virgil Thomson, the speaker representing the musical press, went brilliantly to the point, as when he indicated the "interrupted nature of (Schuman's) development and rhythmic continuity" and Copland's "immobility which lends itself to a certain insistence."

I rather regretted Thomson's dispassionate attitude toward a work so obviously important as the Copland *Piano Sonata*. On the other hand, the critical autopsy performed on Schuman at the first concert eases my own task as reviewer. Thomson suggested the word "obstreperous." In the sense of "noisy," I suppose, it is a pejorative. But I think an ambiguity was implied, for it may also refer to that irresponsible emotional drive which lands some people in good and bad situations alike; or to an adventurous brazenness which is undeterred by obstacles and involves one in serious traps as often as it leads to conquest. It is accountable for the grandiose *Prelude for Voices* and the trivial *Holiday Song*, as well as for the buoyancy of the opening of the *Piano Concerto* (where a more fruitful direction is indicated). Other young men may be capable and even envious of Schuman's drive, but the self-criticism of our age makes them properly unwilling to admit the gaudy sentiments or the formal crudities which are its inevitable byproducts. Schuman, for example, seems unperturbed by the connection between one musical event and the next, as in the *Concerto* when the vigorous opening falls apart (like the *Allegro* in Tchaikovsky's *Sixth*) to admit a static second theme which gives the illusion of an andante movement before we have arrived very far in the first movement.

One of Schuman's chief talents is his ability to maneuver large orchestral forces, and this may be why he did not show up too well with the limited resources of the Forum concert. Copland was more fortunate, since his *Sonata* would lend weight to any program. This work consolidates devices which have been admired separately in the *Variations, As it fell upon a day*, and the music for the New England scenes of *Our Town* and the opening of *The City*. Their present synthesis not only affords greater variety than its composer has ever achieved, but results in a heightening effect of the elements on one another.

There are still too few ramifications between the very sustained, gloomy, rhetorical moods and the toccata-like sections. The main impression is created by the former, since they obviously fill up more time; and while the deserted outlook of these measures is superbly expressed, the elimination of so many adornments (which is a means of obtaining the atmosphere) creates, after a certain amount of it, the sense of a lack of absorbing elements to seize upon. It is highly indicative that the few brief instances where arpeggios and scales are effectively introduced in the way of an aside, stand out in startling contrast. I differ with those who think these ornaments are out of place, for, while I have inferred that a wider dialectic play

of contradictory elements would make for a more interesting unity, everything which *is* given is no less pertinent to a unity that pervades all three movements and renders them as one intense experience.

It may be said for the slow sections, that while some of those in *Music for the Theatre*, in which they similarly stand out, seemed as tiresome (in its Town Hall rendition) as its fast sections were fresh and vibrant, those in the *Sonata* became increasingly impressive in the course of three recent performances (by John Kirkpatrick, Leonard Bernstein, and James Sykes). The interest is largely in the harmonies, which suggest "bell-clanging" to Thomson. This suggestion, and the occasional imputation of a religious quality to the music, may have something to do with its affinity to the New England hymnody of the movie scores – an affinity curiously pointed up when the *Music for Movies* (Suite Number 1), with its opening movement from *The City*, followed the *Sonata*. The excerpts from the movie scores make an extremely pleasant piece.

If the Copland program had its center of gravity in the newest music composed, the Sessions program may be said to have had quite the opposite effect. This is not to imply that the new *Duo for Violin and Piano*, or the *Pages from a Diary* have inadequately fulfilled the aims set for themselves. Rather, the *Violin Concerto*, performed from a violin and piano reduction, is on such a grand scale that it has a unique place not only in Sessions' output, but in all of American music. It is a work which indicates a real apprehension and absorption of the inner structural principles of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. It is significant that it not only embraces the wonderful attributes of the "Last Quartets," but some of their defects – defects which arise out of a noble, and not at all pretentious desire to achieve what is somewhat beyond human potencies. There is a symbolic parallel between the over-reaching of the *Concerto's* final movement, and the *Grosse Fuge* which Beethoven originally intended for the close of Opus 131. (The parallel is purely formal, and does not refer to content.) Thus, not only does the most difficult music come when our attention has been sufficiently taxed by what has preceded, but a striving towards an ever receding goal and the constant poising near the bridge of the violin, are a strain on the most favorably disposed listener. Like Beethoven, however, Sessions ultimately resolves the excitement in a most strategic simplicity; and in both composers sometimes this simplicity comes precisely at the right moment (as in the magnificent coda of the second movement) while at other times (as in the last movement) it comes too late.

The newer works of Sessions follow the direction of the *String Quartet* where the somewhat twelve-tone elements of the last movement of the *Concerto* are extended. Although they reflect the devices of atonal composers, a remarkable aspect is the absorption of tense harmonic elements into a fairly tonal fabric. My own prejudices make it difficult for me to follow Sessions all the way in his new style, but the *Duo* may mean more to me when it becomes familiar.

MID-WINTER, JANUARY-FEBRUARY

Some of the finest new music of this mid-winter period was heard at concerts of Bartlett and Robertson, in *The Second Joyful Mystery* by Theodore Chanler and the *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos* by David Diamond. The first of these is full of humility and embodies the wonderfully gentle personal strain and the solicitous regard for detail and consistency of texture which always characterize Chanler's music. It does not venture very far from its initial idea, but this is not inappropriate to the essentially small pattern of the chorale-prelude style. Diamond's *Concerto* is a work of much larger proportions. In the first movement, figuration is strikingly employed to bridge one idea to the next and to join everything in a streamlined continuity. Its melodic lines have beauty and breadth. The second movement eminently succeeds in its simple and reflective mood, but the emphasis on a trivial theme in the last one is a bit unfortunate.

The degree in which Diamond has advanced in this work towards a controlled and vital idiom became very apparent at a concert of the National Orchestral Association when a naive *Sinfonietta: Reflecting the Spirit of American Life*, written at nineteen, was performed. Other works on the same program were Morton Gould's *Jazz Chorale and Fugue*, written at eighteen, and André Mathieu's *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra*, written at twelve. None of these efforts of boy prodigies approached the suavity and address of the *Interlude* and *Allegro Concertante* by the young Lukas Foss, presented by the New York Little Symphony.

At a subsequent concert of the National Orchestral Association, Leon Barzin continued his laudable pioneering for contemporary music. Robert Russell Bennett's *Hollywood* began with a grandiose, dull introduction, continued with brilliant fast passages superbly orchestrated, and collapsed later in crude burlesque. There was more substance in A. W. Binder's *Concertante for String Orchestra* than in his pieces and choruses heard elsewhere, but a tendency to strive for effect resulted in too frequent and

unmotivated climaxes which thwarted possibilities of some fairly good sounds. Bohuslav Martinu, apparently the "composer of the year" (as it would appear from his record of performances) brought relief to an otherwise dreary program. I prefer his recent style as exemplified in a *Fantaisie et Rondo* (premiere by the pianist, Rudolf Firkusny). But the *String Quartet and Orchestra* has in common with his later music many evidences of a deeply ingrained musical sense.

The major orchestral programs included little of note beyond the scores of Béla Bartók and Virgil Thomson, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Darius Milhaud's *Cortège funèbre*, heard on a French program of the Boston Symphony, is very tender in feeling; but the fall of France, the occasion for its composition, may have been responsible for a justifiable distraction which is unfortunately reflected in the results. The Philharmonic-Symphony Society offered Stanley Bate's *Concertante for Piano and String Orchestra*, Ernest Toch's "Big Ben" *Variation-Fantasy*, and John Ireland's *Epic March*. The first of these was the most sensitive.

Hope and John Kirkpatrick gave us a pleasant program which listed familiar songs of Charles Ives, desultory though nicely sonorous *Evocations* of Carl Ruggles, moderately interesting songs of Roy Harris, and Copland's *Sonata*. The last work re-appeared on an evening of twentieth century music presented by James Sykes. The one novelty on this program, *Theme and Variation* by John Verrall, commanded attention only in fast parts, where the devices, however, soon became mannerisms.

The concert directed by Lazare Saminsky for the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the third Festival of Jewish Arts presented by Jacob Weinberg provided appropriate occasions for the performance of religious and semi-religious short conventional choruses and folksong arrangements by Joseph Achron, A. W. Binder, Andrés Sas, Randall Thompson, and Weinberg; familiar or familiar-sounding instrumental pieces by Ernest Bloch, Marcel Grandjany, and Weinberg; Saminsky's *The Lord reigneth*, and Frederick Jacobi's *Three Excerpts from the Prophet Nehemiah*. There was more originality in the one premiere, an excerpt from from Normand Lockwood's *Seven Last Words*, than in any of the other other music of both programs; but if it has any significance, it must lie in a relation to other movements of the work from which it was extracted.

A sign of possible progress in recital planning is an adventuresomeness on the part of violinists, reputedly the dullest of program-makers. Even if the *Second Violin Concerto* of Karol Szymanowski seemed rather unimag-

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A TREE ON THE PLAINS

Music by ERNST BACON

Book and Décor by PAUL HORGAN

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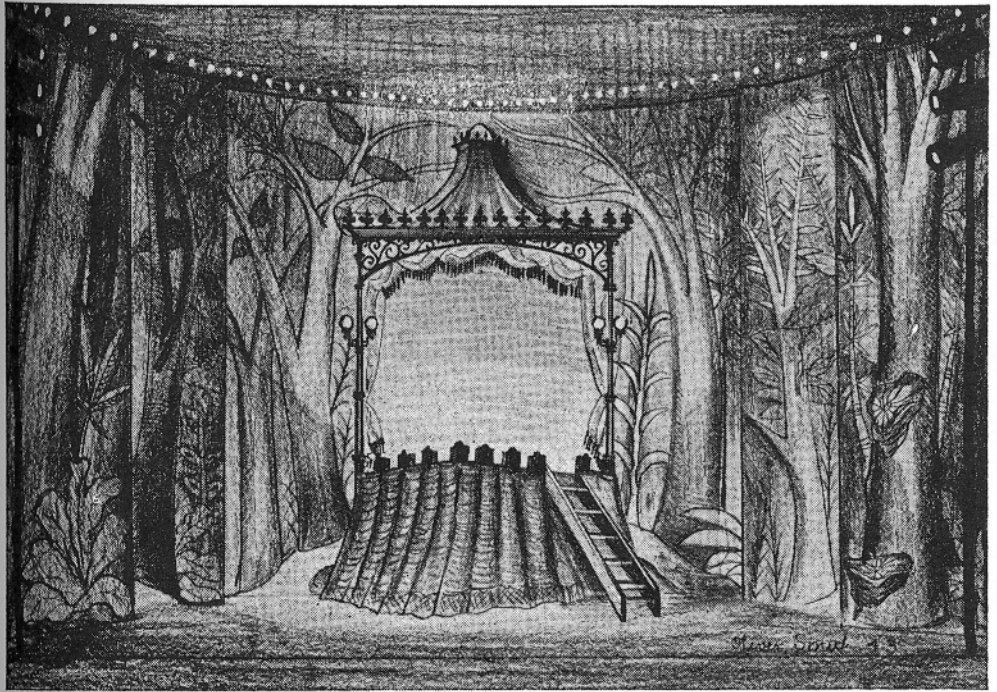
SOLOMON AND BALKIS

Music by RANDALL THOMPSON

Décor by FREDERICK KIESLER

Libretto from the story by RUDYARD KIPLING
Presented February 9-12 at the Juilliard Institute

*Two Works Commissioned
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THE WIND REMAINS

Music by **PAUL BOWLES**

Text by **FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA**

Décor by **OLIVER SMITH**

Presented March 30th in the Serenade Series
at the Museum of Modern Art

inative on a first hearing with piano accompaniment, Isaac Stern deserves our gratitude for the premiere of a work which some foreign critics regard as a culmination point in the Polish composer's career. As for Samuel Dushkin, his pre-occupation with contemporary music is, of course, nothing new. The *Two Dance Pieces* by Silvestre Revueltas might effectively replace the degrading show-pieces which normally close evenings of violin music.

Arthur Berger

MORE ON THE NEW YORK SEASON

APTNESS for evoking atmosphere and underlining dramatic significance is strikingly displayed by Virgil Thomson in his two suites from documentary film scores, *The Plow that broke the Plains* (Philadelphia Orchestra) and *The River* (Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra). One feels little of the fragmentary and subservient quality that much incidental music has when removed from its source of stimulation. Possibly the very typical style and feel of the music, so suitable for its purpose, irresistibly calls to mind the other characteristic elements of the documentary film with which it was integrated, and thus achieves completeness of expression by inference and suggestion. Yet I think the clarity of the emotional intention, especially if a little of the "argument" is known, guarantees its power to stand alone. And though the suites can be enjoyed simply as expert examples of building larger works on the basis of folk art and its straightforward feelings of the common man, this understanding of what is being depicted, especially in *The Plow*, makes for real pointedness.

Here a simple, uninterrupted progression toward destruction provides a strong unifying factor. From the opening movement with its mournful, broad sweep, prophetic of waste, there is a gradual build-up to the final *Devastation*. This movement is very similar to the beginning, yet the careful sequence of events which leads to it results in a quite different feeling of consummated rather than implied loss. On the way there is a subtle stroke in the unhappy, almost querulous gayety of the *Blues*, a fine piece of understatement, of making a slight, apparently dissimilar mood a symbol of something more deeply tragic. Throughout there are excellent balance and proportion, and, in spite of the serious message, no lack of pastoral and earthy charm.

The River seems a hastier distillation. The more complex and varied threads of the film are reflected in the score, and one misses the tightness and drive toward a point of *The Plow*. There is too much music, over-repeated, for its essentially similar nature, yet the free-moving, unrestricted