

## RECENT BOOKS

### THE REDISCOVERY OF CONSONANCE

THE *Rise of Music in the Ancient World, East and West*, by Curt Sachs (Norton) presents, in a rather discursive fashion, many isolated facts about rhythm, instruments, occasional early polyphony, melody and a peculiar Oriental morphology. One of the more general principles which seems to emerge (though it is not rigorously followed through) relates to a trend of early scales to make, in words quoted from Herbert A. Popley, "a bold plunge for the nearest consonant note."

If there is even partial truth in this claim, it offers a serious challenge to those who glibly justify the experimental scales of our century by their affinity to Oriental practices. For even though our pitch division into tempered whole and half tones departs radically, as everyone knows, from the subtle gradations of Oriental scale steps, European tendencies would be solidly indorsed by proof that the essential nucleus common to both systems is precisely the consonant principle ultimately potentialized in our own. Greek theory, as a link with Oriental concepts, gives us some idea of this common element. The Greek treatises, I am aware, are sometimes held to invalidate one another by their contradictions, but these often spring from differences in period or philosophic outlook. Each discourse has logic within its own boundaries — especially the *Harmonics* of Aristoxenus, which is certainly among the best expositions of first principles ever written. It is fortunately available to us in the Macran translation

with the fine notes which Dr. Sachs has ignored. From this remarkable "harmony" manual it becomes apparent that although our modern experimental composers defend their quarter-tones on the basis of present survivals of ancient practices, the ancients themselves, even where quarter-tones were involved, recognized the primacy of the perfect consonances which our musicians discount, thereby altering the whole implication of the relationships in which the diminutive steps are included.

The examples offered by Dr. Sachs as evidence of the decisive role of consonance in early music are unfortunately not very extensive. (It is scarcely to be supposed that a comparative musicologist of such reputedly wide learning, should be ignorant of recent findings; but of course, I am not qualified to say so with authority.) In any case, it is gratifying that Dr. Sachs' assumption seems to be based on more than the Chinese *lüs* which still lead certain musicographers erroneously to infer an incredibly early recognition of the circle of fifths. Moreover, while he advances the common theory of the conscious or unconscious derivation of the Oriental pentatonic from a series of fourths or fifths, his mention of the *shades*, or small fractional pitch deviations, elsewhere in the book, would seem to qualify this notion (i.e., the subtle intervals often exceed or fall below the magnitude of perfect consonances).

The limitation of present knowledge may very well be the chief factor con-

tributing to the tenuousness of Dr. Sachs' argument. But then, if we know so little about ancient music, can the experimental composers maintain their position any more confidently than the traditionalists? It may also be pertinent to add that even after arguments have

been presented for both sides, neither of them may have much validity, since the formal methods of a music subservient to ritual may indeed be properly distinct from those of our own music which is self-subsistent.

*Arthur Berger*

### ONE MORE FOR THE RECORD

IN 1930 Robert Goffin, famous criminal lawyer of Brussels and a man of varied interests (surrealist poet, authority on rats and eels, amateur cook, amateur trumpet-player, author of a volume tracing the Belgian ancestry of the Roosevelts) wrote the first critical book on jazz, *Aux Frontières du Jazz*. Panassié soon followed with *Le Jazz Hot*, and a school of flossy criticism was thus founded, in the best Continental manner. In America the sensitive but rhapsodic appraisals of Panassié had a profound influence on the forming of younger tastes. But today criticism, more often than not, turns into a sort of jam-session; and an American lad can find in some rather rickety piano solos by Johnson "poignant blues exquisite with fingered intervals and rich passing harmonies."

Goffin's new book, *Jazz, from the Congo to the Metropolitan* (Doubleday Doran), is ecstatic and anecdotal. It is also a bit stale. The usual survey, from New Orleans to the present, hits most of the accepted high-spots. But a new book on jazz is nothing without a new angle, and so Goffin now turns to the forgotten white bands, (there is "miraculous polyphony" in the Original Dixieland Band, which "reached the summit of all beauty"), thereby taking the ball away from Panassié, who recently shifted all *his* emphasis to the Negro.

Goffin's romantic overemphasis is the penalty for his emotional approach. Real jazz cometh from the heart, is unrehearsed and moveth to tears; all else is swing. Of Armstrong's playing in London he writes: "Young chaps sank to their knees; young girls wept." On another occasion "I opened my eyes, and there was Ysaye (Jr.) standing on his chair, shouting, stamping, weeping." The theme modulates. The highest lyrical peaks have been scaled by only the frenzied poets. There can be no jazz without frenzy. Trance, natural or dope-induced, is the very base for all jazz. Jazz is the world of the unconscious; it is up-to-date, surrealist.

A sharper appreciation of the kinesthetics of jazz would have spared us much of Goffin's literature. But for him its functional role is discounted; it becomes (God help us) a sort of chamber music. The dance-hall of today may rock to a more urgent rhythmic impulse, but it is Mr. Goffin's jazz that is "the great art of democracy, on its way to conquering the world."

On the credit side is a six-page bibliography that ranges from African Origins to Hot Jazz. There is also a plea that a library be founded for recorded jazz. Considering the sadly depleted catalogues of today I should say the sooner this were done the better.

*Colin McPhee*