

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

## TAME SEASON IN NEW YORK

THE season of new music has so far been a paltry one—at any rate from the point of view of quality; in bulk it ranks with other seasons. Most of the output has been easy to listen to, competent, plainly placeable, just as plainly mediocre; in general, the expected work of known men. One is becoming by now impatient to discover a new important composer, to sense the germ of new greatness in a work. It is already a commonplace to say that the sound of new compositions no longer startles or shocks. More important, the main types of direction the music is taking have become familiar as they have become more definite and fewer in number. There is still a deal of straining for originality among the countless lesser lights, resulting in a mixture of styles; but even in such mixtures the ingredients are analyzable, so fixed are the styles themselves. In general, the outstanding composers have forsaken the idiosyncratic note, although not by any means the individual one. It is a new individuality who is awaited; one who will startle, not by a set of mannerisms, but by the projection of an authentic music. He need take no new path, although he may still have to clear away a lot of entangled rubbish. He will not have to “assert” himself or be “original” except by his own greatness; all that is asked of him is a masterpiece. . .

### ORCHESTRA WORKS

Of the several novelties introduced by Kleiber, the only one which stood out was Alban Berg's *Lyrische Suite*. (The Reznicek and Krenek works were trivial or worse; I did not get to hear Riegger's *Passacaglia*.) Three excerpts from the Berg piece, originally for string quartet and now set for an orchestra

of strings, showed his characteristic, refined and hypersensitive writing. Berg's music bears a distinct affinity to *Tristan*; mood, almost moodiness is always present, and a current of emotional heave and flow that carries the carefully-planned notes along. But it is less ripe and more hysterical music than Wagner. One is reminded of a child-prodigy, with its brilliant cerebrality, physical sickliness, and strained nerves. The *Misterioso* is the best written of the three excerpts; so handsomely written, indeed, as to put a premium on the manner of the writing, turning it into a tour-de-force. This grandiose music is emphatically for "interpreters," a hangover from the late nineteenth century; it does not belong to that class of masterworks which are interpretation-proof, demanding simply complete obedience.

But if Kleiber's selection of new works was disappointing, what is to be said of the ghastly music performed by Toscanini? This otherwise wonderful conductor has either the most execrable taste in contemporary music, or else a wanton and cynical attitude on the subject which makes one wonder if his artistic conscience is limited to music before 1900. It is not as though he avoids all contact with present-day productions; that would be pig-headed, but understandable. As it is, one is forced to one of two premises; either his taste is at fault, which gives a questionable color to his complete repertoire (since in the music of the past he has only masterpieces to choose from); or, having found nothing in the modern field worthy of his admiration, he chooses what will be most "effective." For in the several seasons Mr. Toscanini has been with us, he has provided an array of gaudy tinsel and facile junk topped by Ravel's *Bolero* and Respighi's *Pini di Roma*. Most of the new works are by Toscanini's fellow-Italians, which gives him less excuse rather than more. This year there were three gum-drops: Pizzetti's *Concerto dell'Estate*, Graener's *Die Flöte von Sans Souci*, and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Overture to the Taming of the Shrew*; all three works of an utter un-importance worthy of only the most cursory examination. The Pizzetti work is a long, overloaded monstrosity, full of a theatrical splendor and hollowness. It is not even well done orchestrally; one example, a totally unheard piano tremolando in the midst of a long FF *tutti* passage, will suffice. And

Pizzetti is rated the "severest" of the Italians! The level of taste in virtuoso writing gets lower and lower with the years, apparently—Lizst, Berlioz, Rimsky, Strauss, and the Pizzetti-Tomasini-Respighis. The Graener music is cute and flossy, a *suite antique*, with the flutist running back stage to produce mild and mannered melancholy from the corridor. The Castelnuovo overture is more cleanly written than the others, but suffers from banal, almost silly material, and a not quite thorough "popular style." . . . It is about time also that someone punctured the myth that Toscanini makes this cheapjack music sound better than it is. He doesn't, he simply makes it sound more expensive. Here again one wonders. Is his offensive "dressing-up" of such scores, this torrential climax-making, this over-mellow suavity, to be interpreted as due to the man's nature—does he like the stuff—or to his unscrupulousness?

The *Tryptique* for string orchestra, by Alexandre Tansman, introduced by Golschman, lacks potency. More, it lacks lightness, and that is its chief crime, since it is evidently designed as an example of grace. It is enlivened, especially in the first movement, by an easy-to-get syncopation; and the writing has at moments a smoothness which might pass for finish. But this is not elegance, only foppery. The line of the work is often broken by uncertainty, the fear of boring (sudden pizzicato thumps in the bass, for instance, to secure "relief"); elfinness is the guise. Poise is never regained.

Harold Morris' *Piano Concerto* (Koussevitsky concert, November 21st) is a sober and sincerely musical piece, displaying a nice sensibility. Its defects at one hearing appear largely technical. They are easily enumerated. The relation of the solo instrument to the orchestra is not always consistent; the piano seems often, through a miscalculation of the instrumental or harmonic web, to lack a bass. A single line is at times allotted to it in the scheme of voices, and as a result it doubles in octaves for too long stretches. The climaxes of repeated chords in the first movement seem out of place, lugged in for effect. The use of percussion instruments is clumsy; they sound like an afterthought; at one moment they seemed an isolated unit carrying on noisily by itself. The second movement of Morris' work, which

consists of variations on the *Negro Pilgrim Song*, brings to the fore the problem of folk-music. Surely it is clear by now that folk-music is literary music, whether it be the tourist-going-slumming folk music of *Petrouchka* and Poulenc's boulevards, or the wish-to-join-up folk music of Bartok, the *Sacre*, and these variations. In both cases the material (quoted or imitated) acts as a literary comment which dictates the final effect. This is not to say that the use of folk-music is good or bad; a very good case might be drawn up for either contention. It is merely to point out that when someone pleads for a "national" music ("we must have an American music") or for getting "back to the soil," he is making an appeal not really for a music but for a program for music. The Morris variations belong then to this category; and while I am temperamentally against their nostalgic sweetness and "Southernness," I find them well-knit and adroitly arranged. The third movement seems the most uncertain as to form; although the finale has the right feel of being the end of a large work, and not simply of one section of it.

Stokowski's program of January 5th contained a number of "firsts." There were two *Cuban Dances* of Caturla, short, breathless, noisy pieces, both utilizing the same thematic material, which was not worthy of being used once. Then came a symphonic poem by Efrem Zimbalist, who remains at this date an excellent violinist. *Daphnis and Chloe* is the work's name, and it is a conglomerate incarnation of Debussy's *Faun*, Stravinsky's *Bird*, and Tchaikovsky's *Nut*, with modulations by César Franck. At no point does the music sound even remotely like itself, or, in fact, like any single thing. Milhaud's *Concerto for Instruments of Percussion*, and Mossolow's *Iron Foundry* impressed me as two expert works. The Milhaud is a misnomer, since the percussion instruments (why weren't we granted the fun of seeing them handled by one solo-player, as originally written?) never do anything more than accompany and italicize an extremely witty piece of writing. The kettle-drums do at one point sound out a theme; aside from this exception, Lizst's triangle still holds the booby prize. Mossolow's machine music is amusing; it is very well done, and perhaps not worth the doing. I find it better than Honegger's *Pacific*, although it contains the

same error of introducing an irrelevant tune.

I do not like Stravinsky's new *Violin Concerto*—I think there is a fundamental discrepancy between the large dimensions of the instrumental means and the small suite form, and a lack of consistency in the mixture of a concert-music with what seems plainly a Delibes-Tschaikovsky ballet manner. Half of what is written never gets heard—particularly in the first movement, which looks the best on paper, and sounds practically not at all. Stravinsky himself talks of avoiding "repetitions"—yet this movement boasts a forty-measure repeat, almost a quarter of the section's entire length. He speaks of "an enormous condensation of thought;" yet in the second Aria (a simple *Lied* broken incongruously by a recurrent bombastic measure) he hangs on to a phrase—the second extended one—with doleful and sentimental persistence; and it is a phrase which Mozart, with whom he contrasts himself, would have stated (often has, indeed) and left forthwith. This is certainly one of Stravinsky's least successful pieces; it does maintain, however, his singular cleanness and economy, and his neo-classic stylistic approach.

#### CHORAL MUSIC

*The Sabbath Evening Service* by Frederick Jacobi, performed finely by Saminsky's chorus at the Temple Emanu-El, seems somehow extremely short. There is not enough music to make for a satisfying balance with the liturgy; the set pieces are very short, and the monologues in result seem too long. I like the recitative passages given the solo baritone; they were chaste, quite different from the usual cantor's bellowing and roulades, yet were oriental in character. The choruses were however of quite another era; archaic Christian music of a Pre-Bach aroma.

Of Randall Thompson's program with the Dessoff Choirs, the old music was enchanting, the new music much less so. I like the two Petyrek choruses, and Thompson's own *Rosemary* which at a second hearing gives fresh evidence of being inventively fashioned, although the music itself wears easily. Franz Philipp's *Cycle* on the Virgin was sanctimonious music in a modernized Mendelssohn style, displaying, among other tritenesses, runs in

thirds in the upper voices sustained by pedals in the lower. The Peter Warlock numbers I thought deary and tedious—very arty “art-songs.”

The children of the Henry Street Settlement did a superb job with Hindemith's *Wir Bauen eine Stadt*. It is a “children's cantata;” simple and fresh music using the voices *unisoni* throughout, and departing welcomely from the sing-song type of game with which we are accustomed to regale the juvenile ear.

#### CHAMBER MUSIC

May I pass over most of the inconsequential tinkling and to-do which characterized the Russian concert presented by Slonimsky at the New School, and alight on the single item of the program which had value for me? The *Serenade* for violin, clarinet, and bassoon by Igor Markevich is, so far as I know, the first work of this nineteen-year-old composer to be performed in America. He is enjoying at the moment a considerable vogue in Paris, although that is beside the point; his music can quite obviously stand on its own. It is above all purposeful music derived in part from a Hindemithian attitude of impersonality; rather dry in sound, methodically contrapuntal, diligent, it abounds in melodic talent, and lacks chiefly a grasp of apposite form. Most flagrantly bad in this work is the climax in the first and last sections, when the violin sounds out an inelastic and lifeless phrase in five repetitions, until the other instruments and a developing intensity have caught up with it. Markevich is a perfect illustration of one of the two best kinds of students—he is consistent, modest, earnest and full of stuff, a great deal of which is almost squeamishly suppressed; and he turns out music which is a little touching and highly to be respected. In short, a very “good boy.”

Henry Brant is the other type of “good boy” a promising student can be. Brant has no reticences or repressions, his *Sonata for Two Pianos* (League of Composers, January 10th) is heaped with all kinds of music, good, bad, and indifferent. I personally prefer other works of Brant's to this one; still, it is typical of his ebullience, eagerness, and lyrical gift. The ebullience is not entirely free of effusiveness; the eagerness savors at times of an

amusing and (as yet) harmless exhibitionism; and the lyricism goes rather wishy-washy after the manner of a salon nocturne. The material has too many unrelated ideas, the form has too many ups and downs; it is all still pretty much in the raw, and still directionless. But at its best his vigorous music is of sturdy fibre, and his quiet mood has fine sensitiveness, if not much discrimination; his fugue shows excellent training, and he has handled the two-piano medium with alertness to effect. . . On the League's program, besides the Brant piece only an *Etude* for violin and bassoon by Vladimir Dukelsky was enjoyable. It is a fashionable, well-laundered little work. Dukelsky appears to be forsaking his more diatonic, limpid, eighteenth-century manner, which I find a pity; he has real elegance, and his early style seemed the suitable vehicle for it. I look forward to what will come of his present swing to the left.

Marc Blitzstein

## STRAVINSKY AND HINDEMITH PREMIERES

THE only rival New York has as the principal center of interest in world musical affairs is Berlin. The fall season began auspiciously in that city—it carried off the two most important premieres given anywhere. One was Stravinsky's *Violin Concerto* which, after its performance by the Berlin Radio Corporation for whom it was especially written, was immediately snatched up by London, Paris, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, etc. The other was Hindemith's latest opus and first essay in the field of oratorio, *Das Unaufhörliche*, which has not yet been heard outside Germany.

Not so long ago the opinion was current that Stravinsky adopted a new style with each new work. This was a myth that had only one basis in fact, the change of manner (it was really a change of manner rather than of style) which took place in 1920 with the composition of the *Octuor*. Since that time Stravinsky has strictly adhered to his so-called neo-classic manner, of which this *Violin Concerto* is the latest manifestation. It is far from being the most important development of that manner. After the creative effort needed for the production of large works