

FORECAST AND REVIEW

TALK - MUSIC - DANCE; New York, 1933

TALK

HECTIC beginnings. The new season in music is marked by feverish activity, little "recovery" flurries, and excited teeterings on and off the gold standard—much like the new season elsewhere. We are promised two great imported teachers, one of music, one of dancing. Among performances, we are to have the moderns who are not so modern, the moderns who are modern but respectable, the moderns who are not yet respectable but very modern. Some of the promises are already fulfilled. To counteract the importations, and in line with other Nationalist policies, American music is stressed. The Sunday music pages already glow with unwonted interest in the domestic scene; have our composers, our festivals, our music possibly become news?

The most striking forecast is the advent of Arnold Schönberg in Boston and New York as teacher of musical composition. His merits as composer and mentor are well known. The Wellesz book, of course, (quoted extensively by Downes) Schönberg repudiates entirely; it was the cause of his breakup with Wellesz. From other sources—reports of pupils, his own *Harmonielehre* and other writings, the lecture in Paris, above all from the performance of his works here, some idea of him has come through. He is an extremely good thing for America. In particular his almost fanatical academicism is an unfamiliar and needed quality among us. We are very used to a dry musty brand of academicism; but I can think of perhaps only one other teacher here, Scalero, whose intellectual passion and size make intensely vital in a course of training, what would be ordinarily lifeless for purposes of composition. The pretentious notion that training and composition are the same thing, and

should proceed identically, is happily dead, along with a lot of other romantic notions. It was responsible chiefly for the technically bad American music of past decades; for the "self-taught," untaught composers. That Schönberg should ardently advocate a rigid, inflexible course of study (strict counterpoint, exhaustive analyses of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart) may strike the superficial observer as strange. It is not strange, nor is it worth while any longer to reiterate the fact that his music (its "madness") is produced with a dogmatic adherence to method and minutiae. . . . It will be interesting to note the effect Schönberg will have upon his pupils (and through them upon the music of the country at large). A danger for them lies in his insistence on genius, on perfection, in his ruthlessness with the near-perfect: the danger of paralysis and despair. Most of Schönberg's Berlin and Vienna pupils have given up composing; convinced the master is right, composing is too hard, it is hopeless, one can never reach the goal, and so on. A good thing, perhaps: the world will be cluttered up with less bad music; and a bad thing: since a cultural epoch is made up not only of the perfect work of geniuses, but also of the combined efforts of lesser talents, a whole geological formation of them. With them wiped out, the genius exists without subsoil, becomes isolated, ingrown, "eccentric."

Georges Balanchine comes to organize a school of American ballet at the Morgan Museum in Hartford. Balanchine is a prize. Fokine of course has been here for some time, Mordkin too; Massine was here a couple of years ago; yet it is quite likely that Balanchine is the inevitably right man to create a ballet out of our rich disorganized stuff. His choreography is very personal. He has a flair for the soundly spectacular. He has effected an individual and satisfying solution of classical ballet and new theatre, and has not fallen into the modern pitfall of becoming a mere pantomime *régisseur*. He has great tenderness and purity (*Apollon*), graceful malice and wit (*La Chatte*), he knows his low-comedy vaudeville (*Le Bal*) and can be dramatic and violent with exhaustless line and verve (*Le Fils Prodigue*). The situation is ripe for him here. We have almost got to the point where we are staking our whole hope of the

theatre on the dance; and there is less likelihood now than some years ago that the best pupils of the school will be speedily pumped into the machines of the commercial revues.

MUSIC

The performance by Bruno Walter and the Philharmonic men of Leos Janacek's rhapsody *Taras Bulba* (Oct. 21) had the air of the exhuming of an ancient work—careful, solicitous. Yet the piece was written in 1918. Nothing apparently ages so rapidly as a Post-Straussian work past its prime. The audience was treated to a reverent act of face-lifting; but crow's feet triumphed over maquillage. There came in regular parade the succession of climaxes, not so much building-up as balloon-blowing; the strategic orchestral preparations in order that a singularly trivial tune might be stated with pomp and setting; the "problem" pauses, followed by a dawn that kept emerging so often, one wondered how many movie days were involved; the blithe unintelligent overuse of triangle, chimes, cymbals; the galumphing *scherzo*, "caractéristique" till it hurt. One good moment; an effective use of the organ in a quiet passage in the first movement.

Werner Josten's *Concerto Sacro*, Part I of which was played by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski (Oct. 24) is a successful work. That is, the composer's intention is seen clearly through its pages, and one feels it is realized to a large degree. The difficulty in wholeheartedly admiring such a work lies perhaps in questioning the intention itself. The music (inspired by Grünewald's Colmar triptych) is deliberately medieval, and aims at a stylization of religious passion somewhat analogous to a fourteenth century woodcut; or better, to Grünewald's art. The trouble is that this conception seems rather to have been *viewed* by the composer than *felt* by him; and the work is thus a detached, framed, facsimile of an experience, instead of the experience itself. Another way of saying this would be to call it a costume-piece. There is a wilful influence of early plain-chant and discant (Hucbaldian *fauxbourdon* is used with tact). Now, if one were persuaded that Josten is at heart a contemporary of Hucbald, that he was born in the wrong century; or if, as in the not dissimilar music *en*

travesti of Debussy, the greatness of the personality overshadowed a questionable attitude—then I suppose there would be a profound justification for the work. I am trying to avoid labelling the *Concerto Sacro* an epigonic piece, in which archaism is exploited for its charm; a certain unmistakable forthrightness and the clean workmanship seem to make it worthy of more serious consideration. There is for instance a very astute manipulation of a monotonous line, which does not become tedious. I find the instrumentation adept, the handling of piano and strings (a perilous combination, tending to become trite or unpleasant) sensitive and unusually sonorous. I disliked only perfunctorily the exhibitions of *Kleinmalerei*; I think the resolution of German and Italian schools is not always happy. It is impossible, I am afraid, to dismiss the intrinsic artificiality of the composer's relation to his subject. This is not a religious work, but a piece of program-music, with religion as program. As such, it is an uncommonly beautiful example.

There is no point in discussing Randall Thompson's *Symphony No. 2* (Philharmonic, Nov. 3) as though it were a serious or profound essay. The wish was to write a lightweight, untroubling work. Considered as such, it is banal, poor music, more or less well-dressed, unentertaining in its stale sequences, flatted sevenths, canned yearnings. The material lacks taste, fervor, thought, or original touch. . . It is too bad. He is much better than this tawdry music implies. His works for chorus, (*Rosemary, Odes of Horace, Americana*) are finely written and more.

The care expended on a *Taras Bulba* or Thompson's symphony was disappointingly absent at the program of young composers given by the American Chamber Orchestra at the New School (Oct. 16). General confusion on the part of conductors and soloists, and indifference from the ensemble-players, contributed to what can only be called a disservice to new music. Even lack of funds can not excuse the humorous conversation held by two members of the orchestra during the performance of a movement in which they happened to be idle; nor the positively hair-raising stupidity of a musician who (even after the composer's post-rehearsal appeal) played through an entire

work in the wrong key. Two works, well presented, emerged from the chaos. Henry Brant's *Four Choral Preludes for Two Pianos* started very well, but collapsed into formula after the second one. The first prelude has an attractive simplicity and genuineness of mood, the second a brightness and pretty vivacity. A very good device of "dissonanced" octaves is used with little fuss and real success. The two-piano medium is treated more economically and precisely than in Brant's earlier work; perhaps at times with too much precision and leanness, making one question the necessity for more than one instrument. The other conspicuous work on the program was Jerome Moross' *Ballet* for ensemble, easy and grateful to play and hear. This is an expert dance-score (the composer is quoted as saying it isn't meant to be danced; it had better be, just the same), with lots of vitality, personal touches of instrumentation, and a fine air of flinging the music at you, which really comes off. None of it is allowed to matter very much; the forms are rudimentary; gusto and excitement get over, and they suffice. Of the rest of the program, these impressions: Lahn Adohmyan, writing a satire which he hopes is Communist propaganda, disclosed music very like the early Prokofieff (say, *Chout*), not very competently scored or formed. Mr. Adohmyan may be more at home in his choruses, which I have not heard. In Bernard Herrmann's *Prelude to Anathema*, every few measures was about something else. Elie Siegmeister's *May Day* seemed like illustrative movie music, too long, and wooden at crucial moments where it should have been galvanizing. Lehman Engel's two works, whether through poor performances or their own lacks, stopped for me the moment they finished, and left no trace.

DANCERS

The foreigners are with us. Shan-Kar in Carnegie Hall is by no means Shan-Kar in a theatre. His art, essentially folk-dancing, needs the intimacy and containing walls a small room affords. I am disturbed too by a lack of deep-rooted tradition, and by an adequate but not self-effacing technic. Shan-Kar's orientalism is transplanted, his dance a conception of what Western eyes enjoy thinking authentic in the *Nautch*. The temple gives way to the market-place (and the house is of course

sold out). Of his company, Kanak-Lata and the *Raga-Tilang* music seem real, unprojected ethnological models. Everything else—Simkie, the rouged palms and heels, the wretchedly fancy choreography (whirls with hand saluting head, and dashes to the wings with a flying penultimate leap)—recalls the Left Bank and the Paris Colonial Exposition.

The prize-winning ballet of Kurt Jooss is all disappointment. The thinking is muddy, and there is no dancing. Parody-satire is the sole attack; this becomes whimsy when the subject is agreeable, "bitter" in the man-is-a-Punch-and-Judy-show manner when it is not. Nobody is beautiful, the lighting is execrable, the costumes are all right, vigor is missing, with artificiality or sheer weight taking its place. The *Green Table*, outrageously (it now appears) ballyhooed, has been called an invective against war; instead, it propounds the theme that Death gets everybody in the end. Death is Kurt Jooss in an effective and horrifying makeup, which given half a chance would have knocked the audience cold by itself; Jooss manages to muff all its quality by stock stampings, idiotic wavings and pointings. . . Why do we hear so much about how wonderful and difficult the art of miming a story is? It is the easiest thing in the world. If these people danced their story, stuck to dancing, got the story out through the medium itself—well, we should have something else. But everything with them is dramatization in the bad sense—they dramatize what is only half-thought-through, the shell of ideas (death is awful, the Big City is a kaleidoscope), ideas which demand the uniqueness of a special situation, an originality of turn, to make them compelling. . . Fritz Cohen's piano-music for the *Green Table* (he plays superbly) had a good intention, a sort of line-drawing, sketched punctuation of the stage-action. But aside from the sly tango at the beginning and end, he never settled down to realizing it. His bagful of harmonies should be emptied, cleared of the rubbish (those next-to-hand Post-Romantic slides and accidentals) and reassorted.

Serge Lifar is a thrilling dancer, his body is a thrilling combination of robustness and grace. His technic is superb; what is more, he can dance rings about any performer now appearing. His special quality is youth; he radiates it. It is not a question

of years alone, it is the freshness, the sharpness, the bursting yet shy intensity of a miraculously projected adolescent.

But Lifar has got off to a very poor start in New York (Nov. 5). None of his best ballets appeared on his program. Instead, the audience was made to sit through his own dreadful interpretation of Beethoven's *Prometheus*; he is, unluckily, no choreographer. Everything good and bad in it he learned from Balanchine (there were some dismally inept imitations of Balanchine's telegraphic style, and use of knees and hands). There is nothing, too, so painful or funny as a chorus of bad male dancers; Lifar has picked a bevy of the clumsiest of them, all soubrettes and ingénues. They disported themselves in short drawers which hung and clung, vine-fashion; they ruined the chances of a ballet, already (in idea and general execution) very inferior to the local movie-house product. Only in *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* did one begin to get a sight of the real Lifar. This dance is superimposed on the music, a counterpoint to it; like it, it aims at linelessness, the pinning down of what is evanescent for a moment, yet is angular, gently abrupt and pointed as against the music's undulations. Lifar here resorts to no tricks, no prima donna methods (apparent in the bad manners of *Prometheus* and *Spectre de la Rose*). He is not Pan, he is a faun: an inarticulate kind of dance, with rushing precise gestures, quivering pauses, telling arched movements of fingers and head. *La Chatte*, spoiled again by the chorus, seemed on the whole more successful than it did in Paris. It revealed Lifar's ability to infuse joy and ardor into what would be in another dancer mere acrobatics. One wishes either that he had more brains, or that he would entrust himself implicitly to a *régisseur* such as Massine or Balanchine. Whether Lifar has great spirit, great personality, is not the question. He is the perfect instrument (if only he would allow himself to be it), and almost anything can be gotten out of him.

Marc Blitzstein

THE SECOND YEAR AT YADDO

THE individual pieces performed at the Yaddo Festival, 1933, have been widely reviewed elsewhere. Those of merit need no added encomiums here; those which were tentative or