

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

---

NEW YORK MEDLEY, WINTER, 1935

**T**WO Shostakovitch premieres; six one-man evenings (not counting the New School series); the first theatre-piece of Eisler in America; New York's first music symposium; a brand-new voice in American music; and an excellent movie-score. Also performances of Sibelius, who had an anniversary, and of Mahler, who was handed one by Klemperer. A large assortment.

Dmitri Shostakovitch is something special in the way of white-headed boys. Certainly no other modern composer—not Debussy or Stravinsky or Ravel or Hindemith—has been received here with such intense anticipation or such abandoned acclaim. Maybe, decades ago, R. Strauss; and here the comparison is truly odious. For although Shostakovitch's arrival on the musical scene is also perfectly timed, he brings to it more than merely qualities very much in demand; he has really unique talents. There is his abundance. Whether it is the ballet-suite *Bolt* (National Symphony, Dec. 16), the *Piano Concerto* (Philharmonic, Dec. 19), or the *Lady Macbeth* opera heard last season, one can be sure that an all-embracing flow of very-good-to-not-too-good music will bear down upon the audience with the energy of an onslaught. He is the embodiment of the third generation. The first generation were the pioneers of "modern music"—grim, inspired, studied, inhibited. (Stravinsky eked out a large and a small work each year; Schönberg managed a single piece every two or three years.) The second generation were more prolific (Milhaud, Krenek, Weill, particularly Hindemith, who may hold a record for pages written, and for the number of notes to the page); but the music itself echoes strain and manipulation, the weighing

of formula and the worry over balance. Now, in Shostakovitch, there seems an almost indecent lack of worry of any kind; abundance becomes a trait in the music, as well as quantity. This flinging ardor, this nonchalance, have something to do with the unevenness of quality, and with the fact that one isn't always sure what is serious and what is spoofing. I should say the talent of Shostakovitch is like that of Prokofieff—lyrical, naive, and far more inventive; and that his mind is like the early Stravinsky's in its sharpness and clarity. But Shostakovitch is good-natured and much more essentially "popular" than Stravinsky. *Bolt*, for example, uses material quite similar to the *Petite Suite* or the *Histoire du Soldat*—tangos, polkas and the like—inflated to the dimensions of the largest and loudest ensemble conceivable. It stirs the belly-laugh of the multitude, whereas the Stravinsky works got a subtle intellectual laughter. The *Piano Concerto* is gay, and totally innocent of either spite (Stravinsky's *Piano-Rag-Music*) or the slumming-party-mood (Poulenc); and it comes to a circusy Rossinian finish with a repeated C-major chord that keeps a ready applause waiting through a dozen and a half repetitions. Shostakovitch is the happy product of a society which believes in him and backs him to the limit; and he is practically the first composer in our day to write good music which is also contagious.

Two of the one-man concerts on my list belong to the Composers' Forum-Laboratory series. (I missed the programs of Henry Cowell, D. G. Mason and Harold Morris.) Young Mr. Goddard Lieberman is new to us. The "experiment" involved in his evening (Nov. 27) was presumably to see if a program can get away with thirty-three small pieces and no sizable work. The answer is no. Mr. Lieberman presented thirty-two mediocre examples and one really bad one. His music, as to style, dates as the 1915-25 Paris *genre*-school. Each piece is an attitude; the attitudes range from the familiar *habile* (never fluent) to the familiar satiric (never sharp), from pseudo-primitive (*God's Trombones*) to cute-curt (*Two-Line Poems by Ezra Pound*). When there are words, they bump against his notes; vocal line is as yet no great talent of his. But all the music indicates that he must be a pretty good pianist.

Virgil Thomson made his program (Nov. 13) into a good show, the flavor part *théâtre-intime*, part schoolroom. It contained *Le Singe et le Léopard*, as expert a piece of vocal delineation as has been heard in a long time. The *Serenade* for flute and violin has charm, and, in the *Fanfare*, brilliance as well. The difficulty lies in the fact that Thomson's music is at once very ordinary and very finely wrought; so that ordinary ears get troubled because it isn't ordinary enough, and the professionals are bothered because it's all too ordinary. There is a *de luxe* set which currently finds super-ordinary music exactly to its taste, but also wants the unmistakable stamp of professionalism; and Thomson's music suits this public very well indeed. . . . There were also little illustrated speeches, with words and music by Virgil himself. To an impertinent question, "Why should people lend their ears to your music?" he rejoined pensively, "I have always felt the lending of any part of the anatomy should be an act of simple faith." The quite pertinent question about his music's relation to the social scene was sidestepped with, "My politics, as well as the source of my income, I consider a personal matter, which I shall gladly discuss privately."

Kurt Weill's music suits Thomson's public even better than Thomson's does; it is much more ordinary, and as cunning in detail. The hand-picked public at the Cosmopolitan Club (League of Composers, Dec. 17), determined to pull no gaffes for the amusement of Parisian tea-drinkers and relatives (Weill was "made" in Paris by the *Sérénade* ladies), applauded all the numbers with equal fervor. Both the music and Lotte Lenja were worth a more discerning response. Parts of *Mahagonny* are stunning music of the faux-populaire school; on the other hand the new *J'Attends un Navire* is about rock-bottom in melodic cheapness. Lenja is too special a talent, I am afraid, for a wide American appeal; but she has magnetism and a raw lovely voice like a boy-soprano. Her stylized gestures seem strange because of her natural warmth; but in the strangeness lies the slight enigma which is her charm.

One can talk of Eisler and Weill together. They write the same kind of music, although their purposes are completely at variance. Both use severely simple melodies, regular two-four

stepping tunes, to hum on your way out; perfect cadences, symmetrical phrase-lengths, unvaried *oom-pah* accompaniments. But Eisler's music for the Theatre Union's *Mother* revealed (even through a wretched performance) that both in temperament and knowledge he is the superior. Weill is flaccid (he wants to "entertain"); Eisler has spine and nerves (he wants to "educate"). Weill hits at random, or surrealistically, upon novel yet easy harmonies; Eisler's harmonies are just as fresh and "natural," and he builds them out of a logical referable scheme of *schwebende Tonalität*. Compare the *Barbarischer Marsch* from Weill's *Die Bürgschaft* with *The Party is in Danger* or *The Whole Loaf* from *Mother*. In the Weill, a Bizet-like hurry-music treats war partly with a sickening colorfulness and martial good spirits, partly with a horrified wounded-baby air. The Eisler music is taut, succinct, its emotional power implicit, its manner direct and strong. It is music which answers its purpose, which "works." You will find no song in Weill to touch *In Praise of Learning* for concision or tartness; on the other hand Eisler never gets the insinuating charm of the love-duet from the *Dreigroschenoper*.

Hans Lange has rung the bell again. Earlier in the season he presented the Philharmonic Symphony Chamber Orchestra in a concert of neglected pre-Bach music which made even the daily reviewers sit up and rub their eyes. Now he has introduced an authentic American talent, in the person of Robert McBride (Philharmonic, Nov. 22). McBride is a born composer, who has no difficulty in projecting exactly what he conceives. The *Prelude to a Tragedy* has an obscure and disturbing rather than helpful title, but the work itself shows fine sturdy stuff: a vigorous and new-sounding *Allegro*, followed by a "stubborn," well thought-out *Andante*. The second section seems more solid and apposite than the *Allegro*, with its occasional capitulation to chimes and tremolos. But the harmonic scheme of the *Andante* has a tendency to lack sharpness and become pulpy, especially in the chord-passage-work. There is also a certain disproportion between the two parts, which, aside from actual thematic congruity, might have been separate works. This is decidedly American music—not New York music, and not Negro or Indian

music. The "American scene" is happily absent. Stravinsky and Schönberg and the other ancestors are present but absorbed. McBride appears to be totally free of the one thing our composers have in common—a complex about being one.

On the same program, Still's *Afro-American Symphony* failed to come through, I thought, on all three counts. Still is a composer made for Paul Whiteman: give the public a smooth melody, real or hatched; a new effect every eight bars; slide your harmonies and swing your rhythms; wrap it all in cellophane, and deliver with a wow-finish. The piece bobs up and down interminably on sweet-and-low cadences; it does finally go down for the last time. The servility that lies in the willingness to debauch a true folk-lore for high-class concert-hall consumption makes the work vulgar.

The Bach-transcription has become a problem-child in orchestra literature. Three examples appeared on Mr. Lange's Nov. 19 program. Lucien Cailliet's version of the Chorale-Prelude *Herzlich Tut Mich Verlangen* uses the method adopted so successfully by Stokowski—solo-lines of brass and woodwind, followed by strings in full harmony, and culminating in a crescendo to a terrific *ff*, with additions of trilled timpany, big drum, cymbals and tam-tam. It is a sober and sound enough principle, if not overworked or repeated too often; the final percussion gives an anonymous roar to the cadence, much as the organ must have sounded to more innocent ears in the churches of eighteenth-century Weimar and Leipzig. The Chorale-Prelude *Kyrie, Gott Heiliger Geist* has received at the hands of Eugene Devereaux a peculiarly wooden and primitive-sounding adaptation, also owing something to Stokowski, but not nearly so deft. The solo trombone and tuba are too thin or too rough to be used for a choral melody without the softening of plastic basses or celli. The effect was of a wrench away from the Prelude—the last thing a transcription should be. But if I am to mention wrenches, let me crown the shade of Edward Elgar for his inimitably execrable workout on the *C-minor Fantasia and Fugue*. Only the Respighi caricature of the *Passacaglia in C-minor* approaches it for manhandling. It is the grab-bag of R. Strauss' orchestra which serves in both cases. Here kettle-drum heartbeats, glockenspiel-doubles,

harps discovered making arpeggios at every lull, and an entrance of cymbals, off the accent, combine to provide a stunning instance of the Bach jitters. The defense is offered for this kind of "translation" that "Bach himself . . . revelled in instrumental color." But the objection is not to the instruments used; it is to their persistent misuse: they are sequins, birds-of-paradise and nugget-earrings plastered on a work filled to the brim with organic decoration.

Mahler's *Symphony No. 2* (Klemperer, Dec. 13) is very hard to stomach. In literal size and length it equals or tops any of the post-Wagnerian elephants. At the same time Mahler's melodic vein is here at its most trivial and most lavishly empty. This is the hymn of the petty-bourgeois—it takes its heritage of passion and philosophic conviction with complacent faith, not quite at first-hand. The Mahler of *Das Lied von der Erde* is great and winning; the Mahler of the *G-minor Symphony* affects us like his notes: "Amid the awful silence we seem to hear a far, far distant nightingale, like the last quivering echo of earthly life."

The Soviet *New Gulliver* film, done marvelously by Ptushko's puppets, has an almost perfect score by Leb Schwartz. The method of Disney's Silly Symphonies is used—a continuous scheme comprising set songs, marches, melodramas, dubbed-in speeches, factory-whistles, cannon-shots and noises. Schwartz knows both his music and his movies. The aria sung by the after-dinner soprano is a killing take-off on the interpolated solos in recent films of Grace Moore and her rivals. There is a march for the parade that passes under Gulliver's legs which is both nifty and murderous—*Pomp and Circumstance* has once and for all been neatly dispatched. I also go for *My Mongolian Baby*, or whatever its title is. The score is less eccentric, less precious than Auric's *Sang d'un Poète*—and ranks with it as grade-A movie music.

New York wasn't quite sure what to do about a symposium which called itself "Music in the Crisis," and which bristled with the ferocious names of Georges Barrère, Aaron Copland, Hanns Eisler, Oscar Thompson and Henry Cowell; and so the orchestra was only half filled. The cheaper seats were packed, however; and at a certain point their occupants took over the proceedings, startling the staid Town Hall rafters with calls for

music, special pieces, louder speeches. The meeting itself—questioning the various interrelating functions of critic, foreign and native composer, interpreter and public—and the points brought out were unmistakable symptoms. It is clear to me that one conception of music in society, with us these many years, is dying of acute anachronism; and that a fresh idea, overwhelming in its implications and promise, is taking hold. *Marc Blitzstein*

## THE WORK OF ROGER SESSIONS

**T**HIS we have known before, and definitely. In American music Sessions is not only a leader of distinction but also—and this is particularly true—one of the few masters of cultured craft, we can still count them on our fingers.

The imposing all-Sessions concert at the New School for Social Research added another certainty.

He is a neo-classicist of the Hindemith and Prokofieff kind. Not a stylizer, not a clever manipulator of tired pasticcio, but a man aroused by a vision of the orderly frames of the classical world, intoxicated by their lucid reason.

However, Sessions' reset classicism is possessed of his very strong, very individual emotion; and so is the tonal material he uses.

There is a sharp personal tang to his cryptic melos, a peculiar weight and color in his tonal plaster. Swarthy and of powerful mold, those drastic steles of tonal plaster used by Sessions to lay his spacious forms remind one of the Egyptian bas-reliefs and the Black Madonna of Chartres.

This is exactly the impression—an extraordinary one—had from the physical appearance of the composer himself. Most unexpectedly, a very deep and remote ancestry lurks in the emotional make-up of an American artist, and an Anglo-Celtic, too—in his parlance, his physical type, his ways.

In the opening *Giusto* of his *Symphony* an obstinate force with deep glints of emotion clearly racial yet personal and centrifugal, streams through the cyclopean lines of its structure. And, one must add, this force is coupled with a stark innate rigidity that allows for only well defined, limited and predictable swings of creation.