

## FORECAST AND REVIEW

---

### COOLIDGE CRUSADE; WPA; NEW YORK SEASON

**D**ESPITE storms, war scares, and the seeming apathy of the public, Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge continues her intelligent and laudable crusade for modern music. Floods prevented many from reaching her Pittsfield festival, and the tragic radio reports of European news interrupted her performances over the air. Nevertheless, still undaunted, she opened the season in New York by bringing those ill-fated programs of new music before the public in two concerts at the Public Library. A characteristic gesture, typical of the conviction and courage which have made her free concerts throughout the country a great success.

As always, her commissions went this year to composers of top rank in their respective countries: Ernst Toch, Anton von Webern, Frank Bridge, Louis Gruenberg, and Frederick Jacobi. Unfortunately, I missed the Bridge *Quartet*, but arrived in time to hear Toch's excellent *Quintet*. In this work Toch carries on the line of last year's easy-flowing, transparent *Piano Concerto*. He has never been among the startling innovators of our time. Since his post-war beginnings he has relaxed into grace and charm, joining the fine line of composers who, like Mendelssohn and Mozart, never startle but rather interest, delight and move by persuasion instead of force. Yet Toch uses a very distinct, personal style which has grown spiritually with every year. This *Quintet* is a good example of his latest work and deserves wide hearing.

There is a certain similarity in the relation of Toch and Gruenberg to the music of their time. Neither are adventurers along new, striking paths but rather men who follow, consolidating what is new to their own personal use. Gruenberg, too, has

a personal style and like Toch seems to have given up his post-war sarcasms, the "jazz-berries" and "indiscretions" that date faster than they are written. Like Toch he has a trivial and obvious side; in his new works this has been submerged. The *Quartet* shows what interesting and serious music Gruenberg has in him and how skillfully he can use all the brilliant effects of string quartet writing. This is a well-formed and convincing work.

The other American piece on the Coolidge programs was Frederick Jacobi's *Hagiographia*, or musical portraits of Biblical characters. This quintet for piano and strings also showed a trend toward seriousness and meditation, but in spite of manifest conviction, it was too prolix and the intention hard to grasp. It did not seem to me as successful as Jacobi's quartet of two years ago.

Mrs. Coolidge has never been frightened by the atonal school of Schönberg and has extended plenty of opportunity to hear that tormented master's work. Now she gave us a hearing of Anton von Webern's new *Quartet*, which is not nearly so hard to understand as those of the later Schönberg. Formerly everyone thought of Webern as the composer of tiny pieces for huge symphony orchestra that sounded like a hasty visit to the insect house at the zoo, but now we begin to see that his music, though still very tenuous and delicate, has a real and not merely an odd character. This *Quartet* is much larger and more worked-out than his previous *Trio* and also is less dissonant and rhythmically more straightforward. A transparency and sensitiveness to sonority distinguish it from other twelve-tone works; they make it absorbing if puzzling listening.

Paul Hindemith's score for *St. Francis*, one of the new ballets the Monte Carlo troupe staged at the Metropolitan in October, deserves comment here as an important musical event. The score is the culmination of a long series of religious works by this composer, starting with the *Marienleben*, going on through some of the school-music canons and cantatas on pious texts, to the symphonic music for *Mathis der Maler*. It is evidently with knowledge of this latter work that Massine asked Hindemith to write a ballet like it. Ever since the settings of Rilke's *Marienleben*, Hindemith has approached his religious subjects with an

archaizing spirit very similar to Rilke's and in this early score he poured out some of his freshest and most beautiful music. The *Mathis der Maler Symphony* is the best presentation of archaic simplicity which he had achieved on a large scale. This quiet and simple mood has always existed in Hindemith side by side with a more ebullient, dynamic and arresting spirit. *St. Francis* is a reworking of many ideas from earlier music. Actual themes are taken over and redeveloped in a new and simpler way. The scoring is very spare as is fitting for a story about poverty and chastity and, hence, is for small orchestra. This does not mean that the work is a bore—far from it. There are several points of interest that quite make up for its lack of thematic freshness. The first is of course the wonderful imagination with which constant variety is achieved in a work of constant calmness. It is not only a tour-de-force but a very convincing musical expression. The other is the attack Hindemith makes on the problem of ballet music. *St. Francis* is not in the conventional form of a series of dances, with or without picturesque transitions, startling entrances and solo and ensemble numbers, shared by works so dissimilar as *Lac des Cygnes*, *Petrouchka*, and Auric's *Concurrence*. It is rather a series of large over-all symphonic patterns, developing according to their own musical logic as often "against" the stage action as with it. Some sections are definitely dance music, others are clearly background for pantomime, but whatever they are they fit into a large symphonic pattern. This gives the score a dignity and an interest that more illustrative treatments of ballet have to make up for in brilliance. There is a grand scale, an expansiveness, about this music which no other modern composer handles so convincingly.

This summer afforded a chance to hear contemporary works out-of-doors. Surprising results: Copland's *Music for the Theatre* for small orchestra, played by Koussevitsky, made fine open air listening, while Stravinsky's more massive scores for *Les Noces* and *Symphonie de Psaumes*, played by Smallens at the Stadium, were distinctly disappointing. *Noces* with the Stadium amplifiers at work sounded like a concerto for snare drum and xylophone with accompaniment of off-stage chorus and pianos. Under the conditions obtaining at the Stadium, at least,

no idea could be formed of these two extraordinary works unless one were already familiar with the scores. I suspect that this is true of much that is heard in the open, but usually the music is so familiar that listeners automatically fill in harmony and bass when these are inaudible. David Diamond's *Overture*, also played at the Stadium, had the misfortune of being in an unfamiliar idiom whose fragmentary orchestration depends on careful balancing even in the concert hall. Exposed to the mercy of tricky acoustics it becomes almost impossible to judge. The Stadium is clearly not a place for premieres of music in anything but the most familiar and straightforward style. Nevertheless the *Overture* seemed to be a strong and interesting work.

The Westminster Choir School Festival, held too late to be reviewed before the summer, was the ideal all-American festival. Three concerts were devoted to rehearsing of at least two important works of each of the following outstanding composers: Roger Sessions, Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, Walter Piston and Quincy Porter; then, several concerts, well-chosen from many younger, less famous men and from older composers like Arthur Farwell and Edgar Stillman Kelley; all performed by the excellent Roth Quartet and the Westminster Choir.

The works of the older men seem to improve vastly on rehearing. As to the younger composers, William Schuman's choral setting of Whitman's *Pioneers* left by far the best impression and fully confirmed Copland's enthusiastic review of it in the last issue. David Diamond's *Trio* also proved interesting though it suffered from the fault of not being well thought out for the three strings. Alvin Etler, one of the Midwestern "primitives" played the oboe in a fresh little *Quintet* for that instrument and strings. I liked Etler's humor and charm but regret that he seems to share with McBride a contempt for European influences, influences which might help them both.

Schuman, whose *Second Symphony* was played by Schenkman at a WPA concert of the Greenwich Orchestra, suffers from the opposite fault of a too obvious plan, the plan being filled with ideas often of no very great interest. The symphony, in one fairly short movement, is built of three long orchestral crescendi over three long pedals. It is repetition music gaining its effect by the

hammering in of little fragments and tonalities. This plan, so new in the overture to *Rheingold* now begins to wear thin, whether used with thematic interest as in Wagner or Strauss, or without thematic interest as so often in Sibelius, or with rhythmic interest as in the earlier Stravinsky. The day for discovering a new kind of plasticity and free moving harmonies and lines seems to be here. Nevertheless, Schuman has worked out the device of repetition with a seriousness and strength which, though derived from Roy Harris, is original. I hope that he will soon write music that has a more convincing form.

The WPA Composers' Forum Laboratory in New York begins its fourth year with a brochure listing the one hundred and fifty-eight composers whose works it has played. Old and young, academic and "modern," ultra-dissonant and ultra-consonant, famous and obscure composers ranging from Mrs. H. H. A. Beach to David Diamond, from George Gershwin to the composition students of Eastman, Juilliard, Westminster, Bennington, Columbia, Sarah Lawrence and New York University. Slight changes in the organization of the series are noticeable: a complete abandonment of orchestral works and a decrease by half in the number of concerts. All these seem to favor an improvement in the standard of performance, and in the concert of Lazare Saminsky and Charles Haubiel, which I attended, the performances were indeed much better than they have been. But what of the public who ask such pitiless questions of the composers?

There have been no recent rehearsals of successful works. Men who have been discovered in these concerts (I suppose there are some) are not played more in other places, nor have publishers rushed forward to print their works. The famous remain famous and the obscure men obscure. These concerts appear to have done nothing more than to give a small group of friends and others a chance to hear their works. But is this enough after three year's constant work? What I expected was that by now a group of people in the public, would know what they wanted in American music and insist on hearing it from WPA organizations and at other concerts. Maybe questionnaires to the public might help.

Why not, with the several excellent orchestras and conductors at its disposal, give a series of retrospective programs of music by composers since 1900, both European and American? Or an historical series of American works from J. K. Paine on, chosen by a good jury? This could happen if enough people wrote letters to the Federal Music Project. There are many who would be only too glad to take steps in that direction.

*Elliott Carter*

### FORBIDDEN OPUS — PROTESTANT

NOT in many years has the opening of an opera been so eagerly awaited as Paul Hindemith's new music-drama, *Mathis der Maler*. Although it was written in 1932-1934 and published in 1935 (piano excerpts and the libretto; B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz), the composer remained a storm center in Germany and the premiere was continually postponed for political reasons. When finally the piece was freed from the Reich's proscription it was not mounted in the Berlin State Theatre, as Furtwängler had so fervently desired, but in the Municipal Opera House of Zurich, which has been devoting ever increasing attention to contemporary opera. The performance, a magnificent pinnacle in the June festival of this pioneering Swiss theatre was a red-letter day in the world of art, an occasion for the gathering of musicians and music critics from all over the globe. Their great expectations were not let-down; Hindemith's work is one of the most powerful and individual achievements of recent years, remarkable in its poetic and musical structure. It is the artistic credo of a great musician.

The composition, which is national opera in the very best sense, and gives powerful expression to a part of German history, German art and German mores, was lifted out of the baptismal font in the very hour when Hindemith's scores were being pilloried in the Düsseldorf exhibition of "Degenerate Music" as un-German!

The pictorial panels of the Isenheimer altar inspired Hindemith to compose the three orchestral pieces, *Engelskonzert*,