

FORECAST AND REVIEW

HOMAGE TO RAVEL

L' HEURE ESPAGNOLE, the Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano, Les Chansons Madécasses, the Piano Concerto, Valses Nobles et Sentimentales, Daphnis et Chloé, Le Tombeau de Couperin, Histoires Naturelles, Ma Mère l'Oye will have no more successors, for the twentieth century has lost one of its best composers. Maurice Ravel was an exponent of that careful, precise workmanship, elegance and grace he so admired in the music of Mozart, of whom he was not an unworthy descendant. The type seems to grow rarer as this troubled century progresses. His work, however, was a monument to the dignity and precision that even now all worthy musicians should strive for and that French music has at its best always captured. Combined with an extraordinary sense of style and infallible ear was a refinement of taste and a unique inspiration that made every work he wrote right and final in its own category. All his life he shunned cheapness and facility, yet his style and manner of orchestration have already left their mark on all music from the simplest jazz to the most elaborate works of Stravinsky. His music will always be a great glory to the art he practised so long and so well.

Elliott Carter

VACATION NOVELTIES, NEW YORK

No new modern music of importance was played in New York this month. Apparently the vacation season is not considered an appropriate time for accustoming the public to music which requires any effort to understand.

Many innocuous American works in the single performance or novelty class were performed however. In fact "American" has become synonymous with "novelty" in the field of serious music, for there is no American orchestral work past or present that has

been permanently included in the symphonic repertory, to which Sibelius and Shostakovitch have recently been added here, and Elgar and Delius in England. (I mention only second rank composers, so there can be no cry that we have no one as good.) MacDowell, Foote, Chadwick, Hill, Gilbert, Parker, Payne are still considered novelties. Will American music always be treated so condescendingly? A first performance and then complete oblivion seems to be the fate of our composers' serious works even though critics often praise them highly and add the hint that they should be heard again.

The Philharmonic seems to have taken up the American cause and has been giving many first performances at its concerts. We should, I suppose, be thankful even for this little bit, no matter how bad the choice. Hearing the works played at these concerts in the last month, however, I am not surprised at the public apathy toward our music, for it has not shown up well.

Cadman's *Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras* is without musical interest. It was bad enough to be funny, but the American public is not prepared to appreciate this. Gilbert's *Dance in the Place Congo* and *Comedy Overture on Negro Themes* furnished meagre material, just what people used to expect of American music before it went modern: Negro or Indian themes over a polka bass. Cadman's form is not quite as good as Victor Herbert's operetta overtures and his orchestration is "livened up" with constant use of xylophone and glockenspiel. To bring the music up-to-date he introduces a piano cadenza on the whole-tone scale. I considered hissing the work but found that the dated stupidity of the style amused me. Besides hissing is impolite in Carnegie Hall.

Deliberate use of this dated quality to produce a musical effect is slightly higher in the scale of sophistication, as illustrated in Mason's *Abraham Lincoln Symphony*. With a program as ambitious as an Ives symphony, Mason dealt with all phases of Lincoln's life. His interest was in the picturesque quick-steps, and Negro tunes; the symphony disappointed by being small music about a great subject. It had a certain neo-early American charm that put it above the usual run of Mason's music, but it, too, was a feeble taste of what our music really has achieved.

There is a type of piano-concerto heard in every land which is written by the piano virtuoso. Its aim is to show off the skill of the pianist-composer as a digital technician. However, composition not being his metier, he puts together a pretty poor, tasteless score. It is no great honor to the pianist as a composer but it probably gives his performance an éclat that the playing of a Beethoven or Stravinsky concerto would not. We had to put up with one of these by Isidor Achron at the Philharmonic. It was to the glory of the American performer but not of the composer.

I fear we will always have with us, too, the pompous choral setting of great national texts. The Gettysburg Address is one of our supreme works of literature. On this speech Jacob Weinberg unleashed a turgid Wagnerian storm of passion that might well have embarrassed Lincoln as much as it did me. This is the occasional type of work heard at coronations and at inland music festivals which shows that music is being written in the land. And that is about all it does show.

Stokowski also did his share for America by playing William Grant Still and Robert McBride, the two recipients of the Guggenheim Fellowship for this year as one-half of one of his Carnegie Hall concerts. Still's *Symphony in G-minor—Song of a New Race* is a creditable workman-like job with a good jazz scherzo. The constant, heavy, airless expressive-legato style that makes Still's music popular but dull is mercilessly adhered to in three other long movements. Still obviously has a good melodic gift and real musical talent but the symphonic form is too ambitious for his present static harmonic vocabulary.

Stokowski began this program with five terse, amusing pieces from McBride's ballet, *Showpiece*. Beside the other American music played this month, McBride's stands out for its freshness and originality and especially for its skill in orchestration. McBride has little commerce with contemporary European music. His basis lies in jazz and in the other kinds of "background" music used in our movies. Fortunately avoiding their melodic and formal clichés, he does use their harmonic scheme. The abuse of sixth chords and the avoidance of strong progressions in the bass can be good in music that is intrinsically weak in atmosphere, but in McBride this harmonic weakness seems to short-circuit

the strong effects he achieves rhythmically. Meandering harmony also leads to a melodic formlessness which has no natural line of development. But the brilliant, transparent and yet simple orchestration, on first hearing draws the ear away from these defects and gives the music its liveliness. By turns full of a jazzy verve and typically American sentimentality, it will make a good number for summer concerts if symphony orchestras feel they are above happy modern music.

The other American work that impressed me was Virgil Thomson's *Scenes from the Holy Infancy* well sung by the Lehman Engel Singers. These *a cappella* choruses are in Thomson's deliberately naive neo-early-American style which avoids all fancy effects and, when good, catches a certain quality of austerity that is unique in American music. The settings of parts of St. Matthew's beautiful gospel were only partially successful; they seemed to have little conviction about the text and to be written more as a stylistic demonstration.

There were other places for American music on concert programs. For instance, Barbirolli has been giving some quite inferior English works such as the Bax *Third Symphony* and Goossens' *Intermezzo from Don Juan*. It is hard to understand why these places could not be filled with superior American works. Hill's two excellent symphonies or Randall Thompson's *Second Symphony* are a good deal more interesting than Bax's and not one bit more difficult to listen to; on the contrary. When we have excellent modern pieces like Sessions' *Black Maskers* and *Symphony* or Aaron Copland's *First Symphony* and *Ode*, to mention but a few lying around waiting to be played again and again, why do we have to put up with foreign trash?

Poulenc is beginning to be heard in this country. Bartlett and Robertson played his *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra* with brilliance and persuasion. As in all his recent works, Poulenc employs a mongrel style in this piano concerto. A pastiche of music ranging from Scarlatti, Mozart, Schumann, Chabrier to Stravinsky and popular songs, the concerto is convincing only because of its great verve which, with Poulenc's remarkable sensitivity to harmonic and orchestral sonorities, ends by captivating the most stubborn listener.



STATE TROOPER



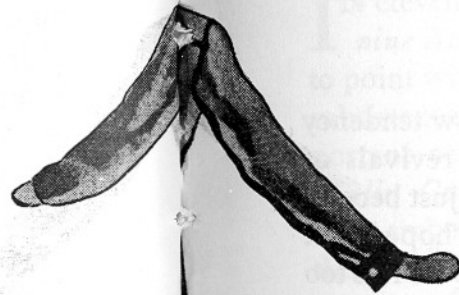
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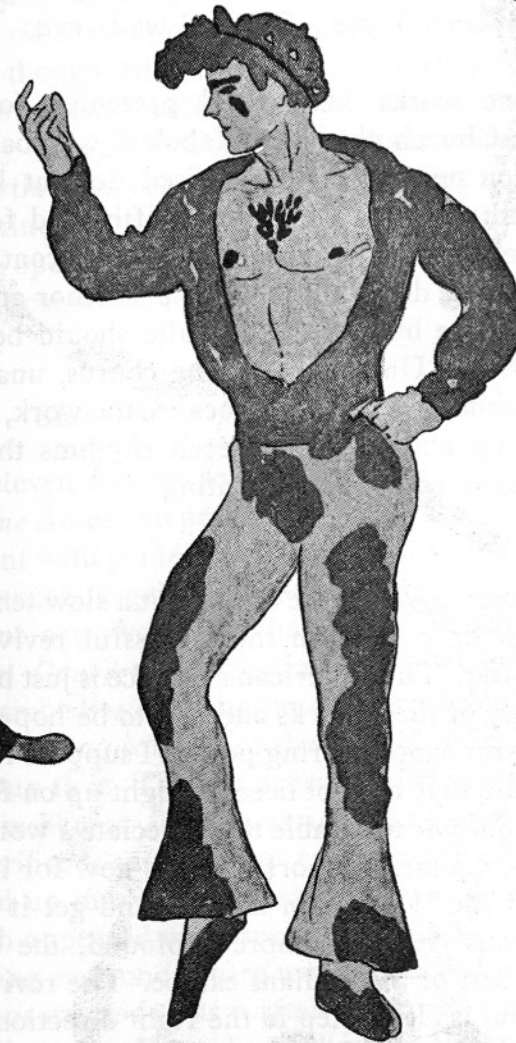
New Ballet By
VIRGIL THOMSON

With Designs By
PAUL CADMUS

This work was given its premiere by the Ballet Caravan on January 6th at the Avery Memorial in Hartford. Lew Christensen is the choreographer.



MAC



TRUCKMAN



CHILD

Another work by him, *Sept Chansons* for mixed voices *a cappella* was sung by the Lehman Engel Singers. As so often in modern choral music, the demands made on the singers in the matter of intonation was very great and Director Engel saw fit to double the chorus with a piano. This robbed the chorus of its flexibility and made it difficult to come to a decision about the music. The style of writing for the most part is like the French madrigals, harmonic, with occasional difficult modulations and dissonant chords. The simplest ones, *La Reine de Saba a peine défigurée*, and *Belle et ressemblante* came off quite well, even at this performance.

Beside the Poulenc works Mr. Engel presented four arrangements of Greek Church chants by Nabokoff who based his style of harmonization on the old improvised descant he had heard in Russia when a boy. With parallel fifths and fourths, Nabokoff's stylization was full of new and interesting contrapuntal and choral effects. The doubling of a two part tenor and bass passage two octaves above by soprano and alto should be mentioned as quite beautiful. Unfortunately the chorus, unable to master the Russian words, was forced to vocalise the work, which robbed it of the strong and exciting speech rhythms that are so vital a part of Russian ecclesiastic chanting.



No new music has been given at the opera, but a slow tendency in that direction must be noticed in the successful revivals of *Otello* and *Rosenkavalier*. The American audience is just becoming aware of the beauty of these works and it is to be hoped that they will pave the way for a more daring policy. I suppose it is too much to expect a public that has not been brought up on *Rosenkavalier*, *Elektra* and *Salome* to be able to appreciate a work like *Wozzek*. *Otello* is particularly important to us now for it may lead the public out of the Wagnerian miasma and get it to see how much more serious, yes even more profound, the spare, melodic works of the best of the Italians can be. The revival of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is also a step in the right direction.

The London Intimate Opera Company presenting old music that was new to America was also a further step on the good way.

This company gives short seventeenth and eighteenth century operas with a cast of three and an orchestra of string quartet and piano. As the sets are miniscule and the costumes very simple the whole has an amateurish air that would be misleading if the company sang less well and did less interesting music. But the music was both interesting and beautiful, especially Purcell's *Don Quixote* which was filled with the pathos and tenderness as well as high spirits that are so typical of him. The evening was worth while just for the chance of hearing this first-rate music.

The other three operas by Arne, Dibdin, and Carey were more trivial though still quite amusing. They gave us in brief a history of light music before Sullivan. Carey and Arne were of the healthy straightforward Handelian times and Dibdin with a Mozartian pathos prefigured the great comic-opera composer. This kind of troupe should be more common because it helps to take opera out of the opera-house and give it life, which apparently it cannot have there.

E. C.

SEASON OF PREMIERES IN BOSTON

IN eleven concerts so far this season, Dr. Koussevitzky has given *nine* American premières, which is a proper reason for Boston to point with pride. For, as is well known, orchestras depend for subsistence largely on "conservative" audiences. The most important new work that has been brought out was the *Second Violin Concerto* in G-minor of Prokofieff (1935, Opus 63). This embodies the lyricism, the incredible technical display, and the satisfying solidity of the *First Violin Concerto*, yet does not come up to it. There is never any lag in interest, but that interest is its weakness. It is so varied that the unity of the composition is sacrificed, and the impression is one of many single creations bound up into a movement. This was true especially of the first which appeared to be running through a long corridor of doors, opening each one in turn until it reached its goal. This seems a laborious method; was it after all, worth the effort? The other outstanding point about the work is that Prokofieff seems to have gone Russian again, artistically and politically. We have only to com-