

## FORECAST AND REVIEW

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### ONCE AGAIN SWING; ALSO "AMERICAN MUSIC"

**S**WING. Most everything has already been said about swing. A good many people get more thrills out of swing than out of "classical music," though some say it is a kind of dope—lots of kick that puts your mind to sleep. Some call it non-indigenous and African, though it was really invented by whites, others call it entertainment music having no emotional or intellectual appeal, with the same relation to "art music" that *Saturday Evening Post* illustrations or comic strips have to the works by Tchelitcheff or Dali. Some say the future of American music lies here, still others, hating its illiteracy and routine formulas predict it will shortly die of emotional and intellectual starvation. Foreigners recall that gipsy orchestras used to play with the same kind of abandoned improvisation and historians that the "polka mania" was just the same sort of craze in the last century. All our lives we have been hearing this astonishing and vigorous music develop. It makes the money, it gets the performances, its popularity exceeds the wildest dream of serious composers. It has set the feet of the whole world stamping in four-four time.

At Carnegie Hall, during the holidays, the intellectuals of swing organized a fascinating historical concert. Starting with African records, they traced its development through the spiritual, jazz, boogy-woogy on up to Count Basie. Performers from little churches in the deep South who had never traveled before were brought out on Carnegie Hall stage, and in this spacious and, perhaps, specious atmosphere attempted to project the charm they exhibited back home. Negroes, probably because of their social history, have always been a race of entertainers like the gipsies in Europe. Theatrically their tradition is outside that of serious music. But this concert, since it was given in Carnegie

Hall challenged comparisons. Certainly the main factor is the hall itself. A concert hall performance of the usual kind takes place as a ritual in which public and performer are ultimately subservient to the ideas of a composer who has put his notes on paper. Swing on the other hand is the glorification of the performer. All the adulatory swing slang: "a killerdiller beating his chops," "gut-bucket licks," "in the groove," "boogy-woogy," "jitterbug," "a solid sender doin' some tall rug cuttin'" refer to the performer, to the type of performance, to the audience, but never to the actual, composed "paper" or music. It is, as we well know, a performance that stresses the intensity of nervous excitement "sent out" by the performer rather than the stuffed shirt feeling of the concert hall. In order to make serious music palatable to the swing audience, composers like Bach and Debussy have to be arranged, to eliminate everything but the tune; rhythms, developments and harmonies which might confound the jitterbug must be straightened out. When played in the appropriate jam style (for the "paper men," or men that can read music, do not play the notes in the classical time values but have a tradition which, from the point of view of the serious musician, distorts or "swings" eighths and quarters into rhythms impossible to notate) this becomes the genuine article and loses its original flavor. Just so, swing tends to lose *its* character and take on another when appropriated by serious composers for the concert hall. In that setting the music will never interest audiences until a serious composer with artistic perspective has been able to stylize and make it express his personal, creative attitude toward American life. Up to now swing still remains, except for a few isolated instances, in the stage of Russian folk song or gipsy music before Glinka, Moussorgsky, Liszt or Brahms.



"The American composer should . . ." Here we are back in the middle of a fight with the exponents of American music talking through their hats. The *New York Sunday Times* has, in the last months, published letters and critical articles revealing not only how wide a variety of opinions exist on this subject but also how little real information its steamy exponents have about

what has been and is being done by American composers. The question was not whether Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (so typical of Toscanini's choice in contemporary music) was good or bad in its reactionary style, or whether it was better, say, than Barber's or Roy Harris' *Symphony* and if so why; no, the question was, rather, whether *all* American music should be "reactionary" or *all* should be "modern." This furor disregards the fact that a composer is good not because he is reactionary (like Brahms) or advanced (like Beethoven), but because he has imagination, vitality and the other qualities which are always encountered regardless of school or nationality. In fact, I believe, none would be more disappointed than these critics and correspondents who so glibly tell the composers what to do, if musicians followed them and wrote scores in strict accord with their ideas. Certainly neither Henry James nor Walt Whitman ever fulfilled a previous "should" and no important composer past, present or future may be expected to do the same.

The critics are not well-informed about American music. How could they be? They do not cover concerts devoted to it, such for example as the WPA Composer's Forum Laboratory, or that of the Musical Art Quartet which this month presented four American quartets by Daniel Gregory Mason, Quincy Porter, Mark Wessel, and Rudolph Forst. Two of these men have considerable reputations and yet only the *Times* and *Tribune* bothered to send even their second string reviewers, who were perfunctory enough to come late or leave early. Other papers made the kind of passing mention accorded to third rate artists. Paul Henry Lang describes this critical situation brilliantly in his penetrating article "Ecce Criticus" appearing in *The American Scholar*, Autumn, 1938.

The four first performances by the Musical Art Quartet were chosen to give a picture of the studious and serious side of American chamber music. Mason's *Intermezzo* for string quartet is one of the best pieces of this academic composer from the point of view of musical interest, though it lacked the personal quality of his *Abraham Lincoln Symphony* played here last year. Quincy Porter's *Sixth Quartet* is one more Porter quartet with his usual smoothness, excellence of string writing and transparency. There

is a lighter touch here than in some of his others, but nothing is told that we don't already know about his music. Rudolph Forst's *Quartet*, as might be expected from an NBC award, was a fireworks piece, all the tricks of impressionistic quartet writing, form stunts from Brahms and Strauss, ideas having no stylistic or emotional relation to each other and a lack of musical conviction. Mark Wessel's *Quartet* was the surprise of the evening. It was not altogether easy flowing nor free from reminiscences of Hindemith, but it had a kind of suffused passion and excitement which left one anxious to know his other music.



When Aaron Copland has two premieres in one short month, it is an event of considerable musical importance. Again the critics revealed their lack of information and interest. In reviewing Koussevitzky's excellent performance of *El Salon Mexico*, these probers gave no evidence of ever having heard works by Copland before, and hence failed completely to discuss the important change in style made evident in this piece. *El Salon Mexico* is clearly a milestone in the composer's development for it represents a change from the introspective attitude shown in its immediate predecessor, *Statements for Orchestra*, and in almost all his previous works. Beginning with the Mexican piece, Copland's music has become more relaxed and free, more ascetic in texture, more tonal, more consonant and much more straightforward and melodic. He has discovered a kind of beautiful simplicity which bears a definite spiritual relationship to the simple, direct and honest people of this continent. Characteristically *El Salon Mexico* is a musical description of the liveliness of a Mexican "hot spot" and it is done with gayety and abandon. The clear orchestration—no trick doublings and messy textures, strong and free—is very typical of its composer. The style is much more accessible to the average public than in his earlier work yet it is marked at every point with Copland's personality. In the *Symphonic Ode* there are the same breathless rhythms, insistence on brilliant triads and crescendi of excitement, but here there is a jubilation that is new.

If the critics did not do justice to this work, they scarcely even mentioned Copland's most recent *Outdoor Overture*, sen-

sibly written for high school orchestra, commissioned and performed by the New York City High School for Music and Art. These orchestras, far less bound by tradition than our more impressive institutions, will unquestionably play a very great role in developing the appreciation of American music. The score is cleverly suited to the needs of young musical performers and serves them especially well as it makes them sound like an orchestra of professionals. Since *El Salon Mexico*, Copland's music has become clearer and more sharply defined in feeling and character. The *Outdoor Overture* is a more impressive piece than the high-school opera, *The Second Hurricane*, for it contains some of his finest and most personal music. Its opening is as lofty and beautiful as any passage that has been written by a contemporary. It is Copland in his "prophetic" vein, a vein which runs through all his work, the slow pages of *Vitebsk*, the opening of the *Ode*, the conclusion of the *Piano Variations*, the "prophetic" movement of the *Statements* and the beginning and end of his new ballet, *Billy the Kid*. Never before, though, has he expressed it so simply and directly. The rest of the overture with its changes of pace, like the *Music for Radio*, develops very naturally with lots of charm and variety. Each new work of Copland only goes further to prove that he is one of the most important, original and inspiring figures in contemporary music either here or in Europe. But it is useless to expect the critics to hail him so, for they do not bother to hear or study his works.



During this season Barbirolli trotted forth only two new pieces, both undistinguished, Arnold Bax's tedious *Fourth Symphony* and Haubiel's pedantic-fancy *Passacaglia*. The effort to find new works that will not disturb the ancient and venerable trustees of the New York Philharmonic proves too great, and new music is now almost completely eliminated from their programs.

*The Lives of St. Cyril and St. Methodius*, by the Yugoslav composer, Sirola, conducted by Hugh Ross at an *a cappella* Schola Cantorum concert proved a great success. Justly so, for this work, in archaistic style, is both effective and stirring. Let us hope that some day we may hear the whole, instead of only one quarter.

*Elliott Carter*