

FORECAST AND REVIEW

AMERICAN MUSIC IN THE NEW YORK SCENE

CRITICS, performers and public are making an unprecedented effort these days to evaluate American music. The difficulties of this job have recently been aggravated by bringing into an already acrimonious debate, allusions to other arts more productive and successful here. Although perhaps natural enough, such comparisons lead easily to confusion. Obvious and important distinctions between the arts and their various developments are not kept clearly enough in mind. In America painting and literature, for instance, have had a good head-start over music and are already in the midst of a kind of Golden Age. Music has been handicapped by certain physical and economic factors; not only must a work be written, it must be performed before it can be heard. The hazards of the field naturally act as a deterrent to the entries, they limit the number of creations. Moreover, in speaking of an obviously American music, the abstract nature of the art should not be overlooked; it is harder to associate music than painting or literature with the external facts of locale.

America, it is frequently pointed out, has as yet developed no composer of the importance of writers like Whitman or Poe, or indeed of many contemporary painters. But how many other countries have? Germany certainly; perhaps also Italy. The plain facts elsewhere are that now, as in the past, composers have less importance than painters or writers. This concession, however does not deny the virtues of men like Moussorgsky, Purcell, Couperin, Berlioz or Debussy — all composers in countries where music is generally overshadowed by the other arts.

Nor do parallels between the cultures of other nations and of America come to much either, for it grows steadily clearer that America cannot and will not follow in Europe's footsteps. We won't have an American Beethoven or an American Moussorgsky, even though we may have composers who bear forward the same high musical standards Europe has raised.

Nevertheless, important composers are already with us in America. Ours is a varied musical scene; the music-makers, few as they are in comparison with other artists, write in every kind of style whether it derives from Europe, is boldly original, extreme, conservative, crude or highly polished. They make up a complex, interesting picture, as interesting and much more individual than many a European scene. Their quality, competence and seriousness is on a generally high level. Indeed, the variety of current esthetic attitudes is proof that the question of musical competence is no longer the problem it was. One might almost say that American music was born when these differences began to take convincing shape in works. That happened not so long ago, but it has happened, and all-American concerts like the ones given here by Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony (whatever the argument for or against them) show how much life there is in our music today.

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Of all the new pieces played at these Koussevitzky concerts, Roy Harris' *Third Symphony* stands out as the most striking and thoroughly unusual score. A rehearing of this has overcome many of my previous objections. It now seems to me to be his best orchestral work. Its inspiration is remarkably sustained and eloquent, and that grand expansiveness so often sought by Harris has never been achieved so well as here. Harris' work reveals several important tendencies that deserve consideration at this moment — chiefly the apparent deliberate effort to write "American" music. Toward this end his procedures seem intelligibly recognizable. First of all, he has given musical expression to the challenging, vigorous, "strong-arm" movement, already well known in our indigenous art and literature. The emphasis is prevailingly on qualities of American pioneer life, physical strength, unflinching courage, strong conviction and the grand, lonely bleakness of certain stretches of the natural scene. The work is of the school of Dreiser, Benton, ultimately of Whitman. Sharing this attitude, Harris has not, however, fallen into the naiveté of previous American musical folklorists. He has invented a whole new style to give his point fresh meaning. The themes are not actual quotations of folksongs or hymns although they retain reminiscent melodic turns. The rhythms are closer to various types of American speech and voice inflection than to the native dance forms. It is much the most sophisticated and intelligent approach yet made in the American treatment of folklore.

Musically, Harris' *Third Symphony* represents a step toward simpli-

fication so that only the most typical and fundamental characteristics are expressed. It is in five block-like sections, each one with a dominating idea so definite that its character can be grasped at once; within each section very little happens that goes against it. Each of the five is built on clearly stated themes, often of considerable length. The articulation of phrase and of section is always clearly marked; transitional material is almost completely eliminated. Voice leading is arranged to give a contrapuntal impression even in places where harmony predominates; counterpoint with one part well emphasized dominates the entire piece. Themes return formally in different sections but surrounded by such a changed atmosphere that little sense of musical position results. This has always been one of the curious qualities of Harris' work. Here such constant change is saved from giving a sense of wandering by the emphasis each theme receives when it first appears. As a folklore work with literary overtones, it reminds me of the Borodin symphonies but, of course, it is in an entirely new idiom.

The other major event of this season was the all-Sessions concert at the Composers' Forum Laboratory. In opposition to Harris, Roger Sessions is, obviously, more austere. His devotion to the purest tradition of his art is such as to eliminate all non-musical literary elements. Among the latter he would probably include the trivialities of folklore and the cultivation of personality by the indulgence in formulae that give a trade-mark to music. This concert, which included his *Piano Sonata*, *String Quartet*, two songs, *On the Beach at Fontana* and *Romualdo's Song*, and two short new piano pieces, was a clear demonstration that Sessions, during his whole life as a composer, has shunned the easy effect and the immediate appeal, has fought to keep his music honest, serious, conscientious to the limit of his power. Slowly over the years he has developed his own style. Though every work has always had great musical qualities, not all have been as original as the more recent ones. His development has been by conquest and mastery of the whole art rather than by the cultivation of personal manner. While not so insular as the later works of Bartok, Schönberg and Berg, Sessions' recent music resembles theirs in thoroughgoing point of view: like theirs also it is open to the criticism of over-intellectualization. Certainly his music is not easy, even for the musician. But no one can fail to be impressed by the strong, stubborn conviction and the musicianship which have produced this highly developed music. It takes a lot of concentration to penetrate the musical structures of Sessions and yet one is,

I think, amply repaid by the severe, orderly completeness of their expression. Sessions is unique in American music and yet his intransigent rigor is certainly familiar to us as a native quality; his devotion to high standards and ideals is typical of our best. . . Along with the older works, often mentioned in these columns, there were the two new short piano pieces, *Pages from a Musical Diary*, which are the kind of music he should bring to light more frequently as preparatory for his longer works. In these few but concentrated measures he has packed an extraordinary amount of meat. The slow piece based on ninths is particularly fine in its sudden, violent rise to an abrupt climax. It presents in small form all the power and impressiveness that is Sessions.

III

Many other figures appeared on the American landscape this month. The Koussevitzky concerts did not stop with the Harris work, nor did the Composers' Forum with the Sessions evening. The former gave us Walter Piston's elegant *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra* which has been reviewed here before and William Schuman's new *American Festival Overture*, written for the occasion. Schuman's work is frankly in a lighter vein than his better *Second Symphony*, but it has vitality and conviction behind it. Unfortunately he begins here with his weakest foot—a long "motivic" introduction based on the minor third "wee-awk-ee" street cry that supplies a certain amount of material for the ensuing fugue. This first section, which returns again later, has not the character of an introduction, being too long and too emphatic and closing with a big "collapse," nor is it integrated as a section in its own right. But when the fugue starts up in the strings, there is, in spite of a redundant repetition of the exposition in the woodwinds, a considerable amount of real musical interest. The overture follows the constant accelerando pattern so familiar among the disciples of Harris, and in the end winds up with lots of good spirits and gaiety. Schuman's gift is undeniable, though so far his musical material has shown a tendency to be slight.

It is always a pleasure to rehear Carpenter's *Skyscrapers*, his best score to date. It was superbly performed at the Boston concert and I mention it now only to say that here is as directly pictorial a work as any critic might want for comparison with other arts in America. In spirit close to the Reginald Marsh and Dos Passos pictures of the American 1920's, it evokes just as keenly as they do that boisterous, brutal era of the mechanical heart.

Among the reactionary pieces played by the Boston orchestra, Howard Hanson's *Third Symphony* proved once again how skillful, fine and ambitious a composer he is. It rightly won acclaim for its clear, excellent writing and seriousness of mood. While not so advanced as *Pan and the Priest*, it has many a place where the sombre atmosphere reminds one of Sibelius. To me this work compares more than favorably with the best works of the Finnish composer (the *Fourth* and *Seventh Symphonies* and *Tapiola*); it has many more interesting musical events and more meaty material.

The *Violin Concerto* by Edward Burlingame Hill, although its slow movement is sensitive, was not on the level of his more significant works. Randall Thompson's *Second Symphony*, with its charming attempt to bring back the kind of American folklore practised in the 'Nineties, does not bear up under frequent hearings. The conventionality of development undermines the buoyancy of this very lighthearted work, and it is not saved by the suavity and beauty of scoring from growing a little pedestrian. *Americana* and the *Peaceable Kingdom* are much more successful.

David Diamond's *Cello Sonata* received a performance at the Composers' Forum Laboratory which was the subject of considerable debate then and there, between the composer and the program arrangers. To me there seemed some justification for Diamond's complaint; everyone knows that it is hard to tell how accurately a new work is being played; composers have suffered, and probably always will, from bad performances. Nevertheless many pages of the *Cello Sonata* did come across very well, the opening of the first movement and the closing of the last; the slow movement seemed particularly effective. In the hands of five Juilliard students his *Quintet for Flute, String, Trio and Piano* was excellently done; its gaiety, strength and great musical invention were apparent, as they were not in a previous performance reviewed here. Each work of Diamond's (and there are many) seems to have a new point of departure. While there are sensitive musical qualities in most of them and much originality of technic, there does not always seem to be a clear individuality behind the music. However his *Elegy in Memory of Maurice Ravel*, originally composed for brass, harps and percussion and played last month in a version for strings and percussion by the Orchestrette Classique under Frederique Petrides, is a sincerely touching and moving work, its appeal more direct in the strings than in the brass. In these slow, expressive works, Diamond's originality seems to be most in evidence. Since they

are in the dissonant style that conductors and audiences seem to shy away from we do not often hear them.

Lazare Saminsky also had a concert devoted entirely to his music. It suffered both from poor performances and a poor choice of pieces. These were all short, mostly slight compositions which made it hard to form a definite picture of the various sides of the composer. It was clear, however, that Jewish themes such as in the *Two Chorales*, adapted from ancient chants, and the *Violin Pieces*, adapted from old Eastern melodies, had awakened in Saminsky the most beautiful and delicate treatments. In fact the whole evening of music demonstrated that a sensitiveness of ear and refinement of sonority seem to be Saminsky's greatest attributes. There was no chance here to judge his longer, more extended works.

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When Ralph Kirkpatrick announced a program of twentieth century music for the harpsichord, no one could fail to wonder what music he would play. Most of it, not surprisingly, was written for the occasion. Otto Luening's *Sonata for Flute and Harpsichord* was the best conceived work for the instruments; it had a delicate, wistful simplicity, an elegance skillfully "more made for sweetness than for violence." By comparison with Florent Schmitt's *Trio for Harpsichord, Flute and Clarinet* it seemed more suitable; it avoided the heavy chords and soggy sonorities that filled the latter mildly humorous work. Other works by Robert McBride and Ernst Levy were equally suited for piano.

The New York Philharmonic goes on quietly, unobtrusively selecting new pieces that never offend or surprise. Occasionally they delight, as did Ibert's *Concertino*, already reviewed in MODERN MUSIC. Little pleasure was to be derived from Arthur Bliss' *Suite from "Checkmate,"* a well composed, brilliant score in a style which no longer entertains except when used by its originators — Ravel, Strauss, and the Stravinsky of *Petrouchka*. Weinberger, it seems, is a permanent fixture at these concerts; now we have an appropriate *Christmas*, far less amusing than *Schwanda* or even the *Chestnut Tree*.

Like all other music, that intended for the masses can be good or bad. Effectiveness in putting across a message is no criterion of artistic value. Both Eisler and Blitzstein have shown that real musical imagination and originality can be of great service to their political points by adding character and incisiveness. But such music on the recent TAC evening (the "Spiritual to Swing" program is reviewed elsewhere in this issue) as the

gallery-funny pieces of Henry Brant's *Marx Brothers* or Morton Gould's *Sonatina*, or *Child Prodigy* or such gallery-serious cantatas as Kleinsinger's *I Hear America Singing* or Earl Robinson's fresher *Ballad for Americans* begin to sound thin and the attitude of the composers condescending. Their apparent assumption is that the masses don't know anything about music and never will. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if works like the *Sessions Quartet* or the *Harris Symphony* were to become more popular than these self-conscious and restricted compositions ever will be.

Elliott Carter

A STRENUOUS ITALIAN SEASON

Turin, December 30th

THE 1939-40 musical season in Italy seems likely to compare favorably with those of the recent past. Just as many events are announced. There are the same singers, the same performers and conductors we saw advertised on the placards last year and the year before that. There is, however, a notable tendency to bring younger elements into the picture, to give greater prominence to talents that have been growing during the last few years (I am thinking, among others, of the new conductors Franco Ferrara and Nino Sanzogno, not yet thirty years old, but rich in experience and facing secure futures). This shift in the picture is due to the present international situation, with the difficulties of interchange it involves. In view of that fact, one is tempted to say that it is an ill wind that blows no one good. . . . I should add, however, that numbers of foreign artists of all nationalities will also be in Italy during the winter and spring, such men as Giesecking, Cortot, Paul Paray, Mitropoulos, Jochum, Georgesco, Honegger, Poulenc, Bartok and Strauss.

Strenuous preparations are being made for the Florence and Venice festivals, the former to take place in April and May, the latter in September. A plan is under consideration for a similar modern festival to be held in Rome in the spring. In the meanwhile, the first important operatic presentations have been given. At the beginning of December, the Rome and Milan seasons were inaugurated with the customary pomp and success and the first novelty is scheduled in Rome within a few days: Ludovico Rocca's three-act *Monte Ivnor*, libretto by Cesare Meano. Those who already know something about this opera say that it is intensely dramatic and that the chorus has as important a role as in the same composer's *Dibuk*. No new operas of particular note have been presented in Milan.