

FORECAST AND REVIEW

STRAVINSKY AND OTHER MODERNS IN 1940

THE recent performances of Stravinsky's music, inspired by his presence in America, and particularly the Town Hall benefit for Allied relief which gave us a telescoped view of his development from *L'Histoire du Soldat* to the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* cannot, it seems to me, fail to raise important questions about his position in our musical life. Here is certainly one of the great figures of the period. He is now fifty-eight years old and his fame has been world-wide for more than thirty years. The important fact remains that, of all his rich and varied output, only two works, both of them early – *Fire Bird* and *Petrouchka* – have won a definite place in the standard orchestral repertory. Is this situation the result of certain elements and a development peculiar to Stravinsky's musical nature, or does it reflect tendencies more general to the musical life of our time?

In the not so distant past, a work would find its way into the repertory if it displayed the civilized qualities of imagination, depth and scope of feeling, a high degree of craftsmanship, and inspiration (and, of course, if it was scored for the normal symphonic or chamber combinations). Thus with the music of Brahms and Tchaikovsky. But although most musicians will agree that many twentieth century works meet all these requirements, very few have been so recognized by the public. The reasons advanced for this increasing resistance – the standard repertory is large enough to fill several subscription seasons, nobody wants to gamble on doubtful items, the taste of conductors and performers is less revered than in the day when Brahms and Wagner could be put over "on faith" until frequent repetition should develop appreciation – are surface apologies. It is much more apparent that there has been a rather conscious "hardening" of attitude, shared and indeed to some extent now fostered by musicians, against "modernism" by which is meant the musical styles and the technical discoveries that are the special innovations of the past thirty years.

How permanent this reaction will be is something that only time can tell. At the moment however, the defection of the various European groups which chiefly nurtured these twentieth century innovations, and the accelerated pace at which American composers are now directing their attention to the native scene, have temporarily fixed the attitude of both performers and audiences.

Reviewing his career, it now seems open to question whether Stravinsky could have attained his prestige without the opportunity supplied by Diaghilev. Notwithstanding all his réclame and the tremendous interest of conductors and musical élite in each new work, his music since *Petrouchka* and the *Fire Bird* still seems, for the great public, too unusual in sonority and feeling, too disconcerting in its distortions of the familiar. This includes *Les Noces*, and to some extent even *Le Sacre*. His point of view has been rigidly set down as "cerebral" and mathematical, and it has earned the opprobrium of being "neo-classic." To give his all-Stravinsky programs he must include the two old works and add interest by his own appearance as conductor. Thus assiduously, and, by painfully slow steps, introducing one at a time, newer and more typical compositions, he attempts to familiarize the public with his recent self. This year the *Jeu de Cartes* and the *Capriccio* showed signs of thawing out the audience, although *Apollon*, like the *Symphonie de Psalms*, still remains remote and puzzling.

The Town Hall concert gave us an excellent view of the span of Stravinsky's most significant work. His stage music has always been dense and full enough of musical ideas to stand up in the concert hall. But in *L'Histoire du Soldat* and the *Octuor*, we find the beginning of that remarkable series in which he concentrated and purified his musical personality. Both reveal his astonishing intensity, his succinctness, his ability to give a special unity and character to each work. All his music bristles with discoveries, yet in each piece, even in the dance parodies, there is a distinction, a sense of importance, a seriousness of purpose which few composers since the days of the early romantics have so consistently maintained.

These two pieces also mark the direction he was to take in using familiar musical material, a habit which has proved so disturbing to many listeners. From *L'Histoire*, in which certain violin figures are derived from gypsy music, and the fanfare and other themes from ordinary military marches, down to his *Two-Piano*, and *Dumbarton Oaks Concertos*, he has been building up a large vocabulary of so-called musical commonplaces.

Sometimes they have been taken from periods, but so utilized that they spring to new life – as in *Pulcinella* and *Apollon* (Italian and French eighteenth century) or as in *Baiser de la Fée* (nineteenth century ballet). All these melodic, harmonic and rhythmic turns, whether of formal periods or from popular sources – derived from history and from the music of the ordinary man – have been completely transformed by Stravinsky and today are welded into one style, his own.

The *Octuor*, one of his first important non-theatrical pieces, is also one of the first successful attacks on the problem of creating music whose effect depends chiefly on integration, choice of theme and development. To his example here with eighteenth century forms, can be traced the consequent use of dissonant counterpoint, canonic imitations and motivic construction of melodies which has characterized nearly all contemporary music since the appearance of the *Octuor*. From that date on, Stravinsky in his non-theatrical music has been bringing to condensation point the various atmospheres of his stage works. With each new piece he comes more and more to grips with the problem of concert music.

The qualities which are the result of this process in the *Two Piano Concerto* were discussed here last year. In the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto*, just introduced to New York, we see Stravinsky renewing his approach to the concerto grosso form. This is no easy task today. Since *Pulcinella* and the *Octuor*, many contemporaries have set themselves the same goal and there are now hundreds of modern works of this genre. Unquestionably *Dumbarton Oaks* goes them all one better. In this piece for small orchestra, so gay and lively in the manner which seems to come most naturally to him, Stravinsky has carried out his ideas on a large scale and with rhythmic amplitude. The transparent second movement is tender and delicate, the remaining two, vivacious and directly attention-compelling. With his newer austerity he avoids the more pointed effects of his earlier music and at the same time brings all the technical innovations of his past together with freedom and ease. Since the *Violin Concerto*, Stravinsky has been developing a single style, and in these new pieces we see it carried to its most refined point.

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One of the impressive features of the Ballet Theatre's debut this winter was its revival of certain choreographic and theatrical scores whose very existence may be traced to the influence of Stravinsky's successful "breaking through," via Diaghilev. However accidental that collabora-

tion may have been in inception, the lesson learned was deliberately applied by composers everywhere. Many important musical developments of the contemporary period have been the result of the activity and energy which they transferred from the more limited concert hall to the theatre. Today in America the music-theatre is just beginning to be explored, notably by organizations like the Ballet Caravan. The Ballet Theatre, though it did not give us one of the usual Stravinsky works, revived Milhaud's beautiful *Création du Monde* and made quite extraordinary use of Kurt Weill's *Dreigroschenoper*. The experiment was justified in the immediate public reaction. Mossolow's *Iron Foundry* and Honegger's early piano pieces, were also utilized, as well as Prokofieff's recent *Peter and the Wolf*. The music commissioned for Saroyan's *Great American Goof*, Henry Brant wrote with tact and ingenuity, taking as many precautions as possible not to cover up the extraordinary speech-making going on all over the stage. But in this work the composer apparently had the least say of anyone. Indeed the character of the ballet seems to have been not quite clear in the minds of any of the collaborators; the score had the distinct air of being an afterthought.

A determined and what seems for the moment to be a last stand for quotation marks modern music, is being made by the Contemporary Concerts which Brunswick, Sessions and Steuermann have organized. Here we have a rare opportunity to hear extraordinary performances of little known works of the past together with many of the "learned," serious pieces of the last thirty years. Each work is chosen for its excellence alone. The result of these fastidious evenings is a sense of satisfaction and a compulsion toward thought which, alas, are what very few other concerts of contemporary music now inspire. Hearing again Von Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet* with their rarefied, delicate atmosphere, and Berg's *Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano*, or Bartok's *Second Violin Sonata*, we experience not the sterility which is the easy and complacent brand-term now so frequently applied to music of that period, but great beauty of imagination and very special feeling; Bloch's *Quartet*, though not so curious and individual perhaps, and Brunswick's work also, maintain the same high level of seriousness which is apparently the basic consideration of these concerts. Because of its special atmosphere and difficulty, such music may never gain very wide popularity. The performance is something all the more welcome in a day when even the specialized audience seems to be precipitately abandoning these works as too tenuous and too precious, and

turning with eagerness to broader and more popular forms of expression.

Two Europeans who were among the earliest pioneers of the retreat to a more relaxed style – Prokofieff and Martinu – have been represented here recently. Martinu's *Second Piano Concerto* was performed with great success by Germaine Leroux at the Czecho-Slovak benefit. Martinu's extreme musicality and freshness of expression are directly winning qualities. He does not always give an impression of unity because he juxtaposes all kinds of music in one piece, even in one movement. In this work he seemed to be playing off Hindemith against certain romantic composers, but the effect is somehow natural and convincing. Prokofieff's *Second Violin Concerto* (Heifetz in a surpassing performance with the Boston Symphony) is a more integrated, also a more conscious effort to reach the public. Indeed this intention appears to be the mark of all his recent music. The *Concerto* is one of his slightest works. Has he discovered that for symphony concert habitués new music must be so obvious – or that a text must be supplied, as for *Peter and the Wolf*, or a film plot, as for *Lieutenant Kije?*

III

Among the Americans who have never retreated from their public to the distant point reached by the composers published in *New Music Quarterly*, are Quincy Porter and Walter Piston. Both these men have steered a consistently moderate course. Piston, maintaining a comparatively dissonant, contrapuntal style, reaches his audience essentially through clarity of form and great musical orderliness. His new *Violin Sonata* performed by the League of Composers is a step toward more direct communication. It is less dissonant than his earlier works and tonally clearer; the classical forms come through more easily. The last movement is characteristically brilliant and the first is graceful with a dependence for contrast on the simple juxtaposition of eighth and sixteenth note motion. There are many cohesive devices of retrograde, passacaglia and fugato. In this sonata he returns to the intimate quality of his *Oboe Suite* and *Flute Sonata*, but the scope is greater, the workmanship easier and there is a pleasant romantic atmosphere about the whole.

Porter, whose *Third Quartet* was recently performed at the Juilliard Alumni Concert, has written a body of interesting chamber music which fills a special place in American quartet literature. There are now six works in this form; not being hard to play they could be presented by amateurs who are eager for what is new (without too many problems of intonation and fingering) and yet at the same time rewarding. The third,

fourth, fifth, and sixth, composed between 1930 and 1936, deserve some consideration as a group. They show many common traits, chiefly in excellent writing for the combination, an easy use of all sonorities and an avoidance of special effect. The harmony moves placidly and, while sometimes dissonant, is never strident. The themes are often drawn from scales, while the textures are of great variety, reaching from polymodal counterpoint back to a purely harmonic figuration. The third and fourth quartets show a gradual abandoning of French mannerisms. The third has a dark sonority and in character is singing and flowing; the fourth, more lyrical and contrasted in style, has a brilliant last movement built on shifting accents. In the fifth and sixth, Porter definitely leaves French influence behind; individual characteristics are to the fore. The fifth has a breathless, excited quality produced by many pedal figures; its slow movement, with contrasts of calm and expressive themes, is one of Porter's best. The sixth, in a much lighter vein, has a first movement which sums up his favorite methods of thematic development; it is simply and lucidly built on variants of a short motif of a descending second and a rising fourth, and a little changing note figure in sixteenths to break the continuous eighth note flow. The modulations resulting from melodic movements are rarely abrupt. It is this lack of abruptness and of tension that is the chief expressive characteristic of all Porter's quartets.

The Composers' Forum Laboratory introduced Douglas Moore's *Ballad of William Sycamore* which is scored for the unusual combination of piano, flute, trombone and bass voice (in this case John Gurney's). A rollicking operetta number, it is written in what is clearly becoming the American folk-style, with cultivated crudity and simple heartiness. This should find a place in our light music; it comes across well and audiences like it immediately. . . . The same program brought out several works by the many-sided Henry Cowell, which represent largely his consonant efforts to meet the audience with diatonic melodies of a lyrical nature. Cowell's work always has some special distinguishing character that is due as a rule to the extremes to which he goes in putting his ideas into practice. The attempt to reach the audience has made his music simpler, more diatonic and clearer than that of almost any other composer moving in the same direction. However he does avoid musical obviousness and there is something fresh and new about his work that is appealing if not world-shaking. . . . At a concert of the New Music Group, Paul Creston played the piano part of his *Sonata for Violin* and his *Sonata for Alto Saxophone*.

While not arresting, these works are well constructed and interesting. The piano submits to the humble role of accompaniment; the soloist bears the full burden of statement and development.

The quartet which the League of Composers commissioned of William Schuman is his third and was performed at Town Hall by the Coolidge Quartet. Schuman's music is always personal in conception, even in its weaker moments. This work reveals a new side of his personality, lyric and elegiac and perhaps not quite so original, with less extensive range than his more dynamic one. In harmony, texture and rhythm, the quartet is more conventional than his previous pieces. Being quite long it suffered from a lack of grand plan and variety. Yet it has very sensitive moments. Undoubtedly it would be more convincing if its organization were more coherent.

Ives' *Sonata No. 4 for Violin and Piano*, sub-titled "Children's Day at the Camp Meeting," was heard for the first time at the opening League of Composers' concert. It has terrific, obvious faults of construction. Yet it has such a special American flavor, such a charming feeling for American folk-art, that it cannot easily be dismissed. The weakest registers of the violin are pitted against a full piano part. I think the music would sound better if it had been written for viola. It is not nearly so well made as the first *Violin Sonata* and it is less interesting.

Many of the recently arrived Europeans now living in the United States were honored at a second, special concert of the League of Composers. Not quite up to the expectations aroused by Nikolai Lopatnikoff's other music, heard here in the past, was his *Cello Sonata*, with its cold "Neue Sachlichkeit." Alexander Von Zemlinsky's songs, although expertly done, were of the jumpy school; there was little essential relation between them and works in the same category, but of very different quality, by his former pupil, Schönberg, and by Schönberg's pupil, Berg. Karol Rathaus' *String Quartet* is serious indeed and contrived with great skill. It left however less of an impression than Paul Dessau's archaic *Psalm III* for voice and three strings, a work of very direct appeal. Stefan Wolpe's *March and Variations* for two pianos, was in my opinion the only work on the program with signs of real originality, an originality which, I am told, has developed greatly since 1931 when this piece was written. The concert gave us a brief view of many of those crosscurrents flowing in Europe's musical streams before the present war, and which for the moment seem, to be checked and almost stopped up on both continents.

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