

FORECAST AND REVIEW

THE CHANGING SCENE, NEW YORK 1940

THE first half of the spring season has fulfilled the prophecy made at the beginning of the musical year by the all-American concerts of Koussevitzky and ASCAP. War abroad is having its predicted effect and our musical attention turns increasingly to home-made composition. Some quarters demand a fiercer nationalism, others a perhaps more civilized interest in whatever qualities our composers have to offer. There is a discernible effort to stand by the precarious standards of our time, to maintain them against the brutalizing forces released by Europe's conflict.

From the latter point of view, the premiere of Walter Piston's *Violin Concerto*, played cleanly and with fine feeling by Ruth Posselt, Barzin and the National Orchestral Association, is the new work of the quarter which commands the most attention. Piston's music has gradually been evolving toward a simpler, more diatonic style with greater definiteness of feeling. Since the ballet, *The Incredible Flutist*, his style has become increasingly melodic; he now avoids the nervous, dynamic motor rhythms of his earlier works and also its harsher dissonant textures. His formal clarity and completeness are never banal and, in this concerto, never long-winded or dry. The finish of his music is impeccable in every apposite detail, and an easy order, illumined by personal romanticism or good humored vivacity, makes it particularly ingratiating, and not difficult to follow. The writing for the violin is inventive without relying on brilliant stunt passages to divert attention from the total effect; the orchestral fabric is cleverly varied without being too recondite. It is, all in all, a highly successful work, distinguished in feeling, personality and imagination, excellent in musical handling. The same engaging qualities are also in Piston's *Carnival Song* for men's chorus and brass (Harvard Glee Club New York concert). Less impressive than the *Violin Concerto*, it has considerable interest because of the flexible setting of the Italian text by Lorenzo di Medici and its sure

command of form. The instrumental combination is particularly well chosen to underline the poem's virile gaiety and although at times the orchestration is a little over-refined, the general effect of jollity tempered with wistfulness is convincing.

A completely different order of native music was exhibited by John Kirkpatrick at his perennial all-American concert at Town Hall. Except for Roger Sessions' by now familiar *Piano Sonata*, all the works appear to have been chosen with an eye to special character rather than for musical perfection, although all demonstrated a high degree of musical mastery. I am glad of the opportunity afforded by this program to say that Aaron Copland's *Variations* seems to me to be one of the finest pieces in contemporary piano literature. The feeling, lofty, serious and dramatic, is intensified in a remarkable way by unifying form. Every detail of the work is instinct with a personality, original and sincere, which makes a profound impression not because of novelty, but because of the vibrant imaginative power and the strong expressive intention. The music is, of course, percussive, bare and strongly dissonant, with little singing quality, but these characteristics seem so much a part of the composer's feeling that the absence of a more ingratiating style is amply compensated for by the extraordinary emotional qualities and their distinction of statement.

Like the MacDowell *Woodland Sketches*, *Fireside Tales* and *New England Idylls* and Gottschalk's *The Union*, the sonatas of Hunter Johnson and Robert Palmer seemed chosen rather for their personal quality than inherent musical interest. (This was largely true also of the Ives *Concord Sonata* on Kirkpatrick's last year's concert.) Johnson's *Sonata*, written in 1934, reflects many of the traits found in his more mature recent works, although it has less clarity and individuality. It is music of considerable expressive breadth. Shot through with reminiscences of Roy Harris' *First Piano Sonata*, its confused textures and forms reveal musical uncertainty, but these faults do not obscure the many points of personal feeling.

Robert Palmer's *Sonata* also indicates a personality, perhaps not so pronounced as Hunter Johnson's. Last year his *String Quartet*, played at a Young Composers' Concert given by the League showed a more definite individuality, partly because formal considerations were not so much in evidence. Now Palmer aims at a more flowing line and apparently tries to integrate the fragmentary character of his earlier student compositions. As so often happens with young composers, form seems to be gained at the expense of some characteristic qualities. Nevertheless, Palmer's music

is still full of promise; the *Sonata* may be a passing phase.

John Charles Thomas also gave an all-American evening, including songs by Ives and Virgil Thomson. I could not attend but I find, by study of the program, that the emphasis was placed, as appears inevitable in a song recital of Americans, on the genre type of music. Indeed very few other kinds of successful songs have as yet been composed in America. Concert songs and serious vocalizing arias are prone to be artificial and cold, difficult to put across; outside of opera, there are few in contemporary literature that have much value.

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The League of Composers' program of North and South American music was chosen from such completely different categories of works as to make it impossible to compare our own with that of our Good Neighbors'. The serious instrumental music of the U. S. A. was juxtaposed with light genre songs, including Brazilian folkmusic of Spanish and Indian derivation that are (like much folkmusic) better heard in more informal surroundings. The striking personality of Elsie Houston took more than adequate charge of these and "projected" them so far into the audience that even if many were not of great musical interest, with the exception of those by Villa-Lobos, they were all arresting and made the more impersonal music of our own America sound austere and sedate. Of Roger Sessions' *Quartet* much has already been said in these columns. Of Roy Harris' *Soliloquy* for viola and piano, I wrote last year; its companion piece, a *Dance*, performed for the first time at this concert, seemed to me too long for the limitations of sonority and material which the composer set himself. It is in a morris-dance spirit and so, for Harris, surprisingly un-American. Bernard Wagenaar's *Third String Quartet* which is, of course, of excellent make, did not impress me as being so individual as his *Triple Concerto*, or his *Third Symphony*. It made good use of the combination but is in a romantic style which the composer does not handle as personally as he does his more striking and dissonant one.

Besides a repetition of Palmer's *Sonata*, the League's first Young Composers Concert presented several able and interesting works. Rudolf Révil's Parisian night-club songs were emphasized by Elsie Houston's performance but otherwise seemed a bit weak and ordinary, in a field already very well-known. This was not the case with Harold Shapero's *Three Pieces for Three Pieces* in various contemporary styles, "Classicale, Orientale, and Contrapuntale" for flute, clarinet and bassoon, which are

full of musicality and show excellent mastery, though perhaps no great individuality. Bernhard Heiden's *Sonata for Violin and Piano* is a simplified version of recent Hindemith via Beethoven and Brahms. It was, however, graceful and grateful both in form and material, and moved with such ease that it was very agreeable. Donald Fuller's *Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano*, the most striking music on the program if not the most completely articulate, had plenty of verve, fresh rhythmic vigor and gaiety. It resembled at times Copland's *Sextet*. Here is a composer who has something to say, even if he has not yet found a very personal style.

The one thing clear from this program is that young composers today seem in closer touch with their audience than ten years ago. Obscure, inarticulate works are not so frequent. The composers now are more relaxed, and at times they manage to strike a mean which retains a personal sincerity in the effort to make things clear and easy to understand, not too bizarre.

Benjamin Britten's *Violin Concerto* is an English work which exhibits these same new tendencies. It was played at the Philharmonic under Barbirolli with Antonio Brosa brilliantly executing a violin part with all the old and new-fashioned fireworks expected of a virtuoso piece. Without demonstrating a very integrated conception, the music makes its chief impression by very skillful, original orchestration that had many really inventive and striking moments. The intrinsic quality of the music varied enormously. In this it appears to be an English counterpart of recent Prokofieff and Shostakovitch music. A composition of this kind has an autobiographical air about it; its appeal lies, I think, in its disarming frankness. The varying feelings of the composer appear to be projected with such intense directness as to make the listener forget the great disparity of styles. Prokofieff succeeds sometimes in creating this effect. Britten's work was a little too artificial and contrived. Yet at almost every moment, nobody could fail to be impressed by the remarkable gifts of the composer, the size and ambition of his talent.

Bernard Herrmann's cantata, *Moby Dick*, received a barrage of publicity which made its premiere more like a Hollywood opening than a first performance at the Philharmonic, where new works usually creep in unobtrusively and pass away in like manner. Indeed, the Hollywood atmosphere was sustained throughout the music. As radio-arranger-and-composer's work it is uncommonly good, being an elaborate, highly dramatic setting of the usual film version of the Melville action (a version, of

course, which leaves out of account the most characteristic parts of the novel with its long philosophical, meditative and scientific digressions). The music sounded its Americana note in the paraphrase of a New England hymn; the program added local color by a dedication to Charles Ives. The score was stern, vigorous and highly effective in the illustrative style, utilizing all the panoply of radio "background" effects – the roar of the sea, thunder, calm, etc. These punctuated choral shouts and recitatives. No great effort was made to work out big numbers, except in a few instances. The style was largely Honegger in the noisy places, Delius in the quiet ones. Since both novel and movie lead up to the great scene of Ahab's chase and fight with the whale, I expected Hermann would follow suit, especially as all the preceding numbers were either broken up or lightly orchestrated and seemed to demand a grand, vigorous finale, perhaps a big sea-terror number combining the best features of *Horace Victorieux* with *Sea Drift*. This need for a long overwhelming piece was not satisfied by a few violent exclamations and a choral scream. As for the music itself, effectiveness appeared the main consideration; style, depth, originality, invention, all the qualities of concert music were subordinated thereto.

However I must say that I enjoyed *Moby Dick* more than Prokofieff's *Cello Concerto* played by Piatagorsky at a Boston Symphony concert. This latter, lacking in the same qualities, was also pretty ineffective, so let's forget it.

Elliott Carter

MORE ON THE SPRING SEASON

THE last two weeks of April brought to hearing more new music than can be discussed within the limits of this review. Taking the events in chronological order, the first was the Fifth Annual Three-Choir Festival given at Temple Emanu-el under the leadership of Lazare Saminsky. These festivals have become known as a presentation medium for new choral works that might otherwise have long to wait. The opening program well bore out that reputation; it consisted largely of first-times. There was a short but interesting canon by Armando Carvajal of Chile, then an Ave Maria by Honorio Siccardi of Buenos Aires, an example of "medieval" style which as such offered little contemporary interest, and, still of South America, *Quenas*, a song for voice, lute and organ by Andres Sas of Peru,