

CHORAL MUSIC, NEW YORK, JANUARY 1935

THE concert of the Schola Cantorum on January 9th, in a program mainly devoted to modern works, proved to be an interesting and enjoyable occasion. One is so rarely given the opportunity of hearing contemporary music cast for combined chorus and orchestra that Mr. Hugh Ross should be thanked for the occasion itself as well as for his brilliant conducting. It is unfortunate that so extraordinary a medium as chorus and orchestra should be so inaccessible. Would it not prove fruitful and inspiring to many composers if the channels of production

for such works were freer and more plentiful? It has been intimated by many that the character of our times will find its deepest expression in just this medium. I would hesitate to speak for the *Zeitgeist*, but it is obvious that the tremendous union of chorus and orchestra, its vast resources, offer a framework to the composer within which he may shape all his thoughts and feelings into a new and grandiose structural unity.

In *Belshazzar's Feast* one had the feeling that William Walton was exploiting his medium. All its resources of volume and sonority are played up, right to the hilt. Two hundred and fifty voices plus an orchestra are turned on full force in much the same way that one turns on a powerful hose. The result is exciting in almost a purely physiological way. The music races on, somehow, anyhow, in a spirit of complete abandon. If the music has the virtue of uninhibitedness, it is not the uninhibitedness of inspiration, of the free, untrammelled working-together of all one's powers. It is the principle of *anything goes* that obtains here. Walton's abandon is curiously like a travesty on that complete surrender to inspiration that characterizes real genius. Some may say that the thunder and fury of the Biblical text justify the character of his music. But this is precisely the point on which to base objections. One condemns not the violence and recklessness of the moods, but the extreme superficiality with which these moods are translated. Of real energy in conception and execution there is very little evidence. It's as if an actor were content to present an angry mood by shouting and stamping his feet, or a mood of simplicity by lisping, or an expressive one by rolling his eyes and vibrating his vocal chords. I may have given the impression that *Belshazzar's Feast* is a continuous sound and fury. The music has its expressive mournful passages, but these I found very unconvincing. The poignancy of the *Psalms* is rendered in a soggy characterless way. The magnificence of "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem," strikes no spark in the music. Perhaps the most incongruous and unsatisfactory feature was the handling of the recitative, which, with all its traditional inflections, gave somehow the effect of a take-off on the recitative of the academic oratorio.

The *Ode* of Nicolas Nabokoff was a welcome contrast. It is

a work of genuine musicianship, clear and poised in its handling of the solo voices, chorus and orchestra. Written when the composer was twenty-four years old it is remarkable for its grasp and control of the medium. A well-articulated balance is always maintained between the various units. While some of the music is superior to the rest in its greater crystallization of mood and expression, all of the music has unity and cohesiveness of style. The work is based on an extraordinary text of Lomonosoff called *Evening Meditation on the Majesty of God on the Appearance of the Great Aurora Borealis*. Nabokoff has caught the spacious brooding quality of the poem. Even when some of the music seemed banal, it had a curious poetry that moved one nevertheless. There is every reason to expect extraordinary work of Nabokoff in the medium of chorus and orchestra. His broad, clear sense of line, his feeling for words and voice, the transparency with which he can relate orchestra and chorus to each other should make this field a fruitful one for him.

The *Songs of Russia and the Orient* by Lazare Saminsky were very enjoyable, although the three airs for soprano solo seemed too similar in mood to be completely effective. The utilization of folk-song in modern composition creates a very delicate problem. If the texture that accompanies the song is over-elaborated, the effect is disparate. I feel that the simpler the setting, the closer it is to the source, the more artistically successful will be the result. Mr. Saminsky's songs were completely satisfactory in this respect. And their restraint and simplicity of design were a welcome relief from the heaving, shapeless music of Walton's oratorio. The *Caucasion War Song* was perhaps most evocative in its folk-quality. His striking use of the ostinato in the chorus seemed to capture the very essence of tribal music.

Israel Citkowitz

WHITHORNE'S SYMPHONY; JOSTEN'S SERENADE

IN Emerson Whithorne's *Symphony No. 1, in C-minor*, recently performed by the Cleveland Orchestra under Artur Rodzinski, one finds little of the pictorial suggestion and urbanity that have characterized such works as his *New York Days and*