

BIBLICAL TEXTS SET TO MUSIC

THE performance of two choral works, both commissioned by the League of Composers, provided occasions of great interest to me; not only for their intrinsic musical content, but for their clear indication of the vital ties that knit text and music. In both works the text is from the Bible. *The Peaceable Kingdom*, by Randall Thompson, (presented by the Harvard Glee Club) is based on passages from the prophecy of Isaiah. *From the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, by Colin McPhee (presented by the Princeton Glee Club) indicates its own source. Both texts seem to have been chosen by the composers for their appositeness to the world of today. The Apocalypse with its terrifying visions of war, famine, and destruction, has a distinct bearing on the catastrophic events of the present; and the fierce indignation of Isaiah is likewise relevant to our day.

If the basic emotions of these texts are appropriate to our times, their form is less so. In particular, the text from St. John offers almost insuperable difficulties in setting. First of all, its sheer allegory, its spun-out symbolism and imagery, make it impossible to seize hold of that kernel of poetic thought and concentrated expression which permits a choral form to develop in all musical freedom. If a poetic idea carries with it a whole complex of imagery and symbolic expression, then it is obvious that the *verbal* elaboration will obstruct the musical elaboration. That, to me, is the case with Mr. McPhee's work. The lack of a freely-prevailing musical development arises from the excess of verbal detail and image which the music is called upon to digest. And since it is almost impossible to encompass the prolixity of the text within the bounds of a musical form, a recitativo-like declamatory elaboration is about the only recourse. The dramatic intensity of what I may call the declaiming-technic demands that it be used sparingly. Continuously employed it quickly loses its effectiveness. That is why this work, after a highly effective opening, begins to lose its hold. Dramatic tension, evoked continuously by the prevailing tension of the text, becomes an end in itself. The prose of the Revelation, however magnificent, offers no clear cut channel in which to gather up its climactic

forces within the bounds of a well-organized musical form.

In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Randall Thompson displays a canny control over problems of choral technic and text setting. The excerpts from Isaiah are arranged in seven sections, each of which is treated as a musical entity. Though the texts of two of the sections are of some extent, each develops out of a single idea. The music can therefore concentrate its forces on the development of a clearly articulated idea. The free declamatory rhythms of the prose are utilized by the composer to make an excellent contrast with the more formal development of the other sections.

While *The Peaceable Kingdom* leaves little to be desired in its mastery of a-cappella technic and text setting, the essentially creative aspect of the music, its imaginative content, is not so well sustained. The musical setting attains real inventiveness only when the text seems to fire the composer's imagination. The poetry, for instance, of the end of the sixth section inspires the composer to a musical conception of real beauty. Where the text lacks that bright edge of sheer poetry or sheer reality, the music likewise begins to lose a certain freshness. The fierce denunciation of the prophet, the howling city, the afflicted multitudes, those motives in short that strike a note of deep reality today, evoke the best sustained and most vital moments in Mr. Thompson's work. But texts like that of the first section, or of the dénouement of the last, offer an altogether abstract inspiration. "To come into the mountains of the Lord" was a downright concrete matter for the faithful of former days. Today it loses that sharply defined significance. The symbolic meaning with which we endow these texts makes them a poor substitute for the realities of heart and mind which the composer demands of the word.

Israel Citkowitz

REVIVAL OF DIAGHILEV'S NOCES

Noces in the choreography of Nijinska (revived this spring by the Monte Carlo Ballet) is one of the finest things I ever saw. I'm sure it is one of the finest things one can see anywhere. And if I could think of higher praise I would write it.

Noces is noble, it is fierce, it is simple, it is fresh, it is thrilling. It is full of interest. It is perhaps an indication of the heroic age