

SCORES and RECORDS

By AARON COPLAND

SWING

SINCE the record makers persist in forgetting *la musique moderne* during the holidays (according to them, Bach makes an appropriate gift, but Bartok does not) this is a good moment to see what the swing bands have been up to recently.

When swing was new, it was little more than "hot jazz" masquerading under a new name. Since then things have happened. The jazz boys have learned how to incorporate what was once a reckless kind of improvised playing into their regular commercial product. The result has been a freshening of the older pre-swing variety of jazz, particularly along harmonic and instrumental lines.

If you are inclined to doubt my statements, listen to the *Symposium of Swing* (R.C.A. Victor). Here are four twelve-inch records, complete with "program notes," each double side featuring a different maestro: Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Bunny Berrigan, "Fats" Waller. The first thing that attracts one in listening to these top-notchers is the pleasant sense of never knowing what will happen next. The second thing is the brazenly dissonant harmonies that are often used. In the old days of hot jazz these would happen by chance; but now they are deliberately provocative. A few more years of such harmonic writing and Stravinsky's boldest flights in that field will sound quite ordinary to the man in the street. Finally, there is the solo-playing, which gets more virtuoso-like every year. Goodman's clarinet, Dorsey's trombone, Berrigan's trumpet and Waller's piano, each in his separate and personal way, will bear close listening to. They lift swing out of the dance field into the concert hall.

Two new aspirants toward swing fame—Raymond Scott and Joe Usifer—have a particular knack for original instrumental combinations. Scott's *Reckless Night on Board an Ocean Liner* (other side: *Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals*) (Brunswick) may not be great music or even great swing, but

it is the creation of a clever and sophisticated orchestrator, economic in the use of his materials, with a keen ear for novel tonal mixtures. Joe Usifer provides a paraphrase on Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King* (Brunswick) which literally tears that poor tune to shreds, but is very amusing in the process.

But the master of them all is still Duke Ellington. The others, by comparison, are hardly more than composer-arrangers. Ellington is a composer, by which I mean, he comes nearer to knowing how to make a piece hang together than the others. His recent *Diminuendo in Blue—Crescendo in Blue* (Brunswick) cannot be placed in the completely successful category with his *Mood Indigo* or the amazing *Clarinet Lament*—but they are far from being dull pieces nevertheless. (The end of the *Diminuendo* is particularly inventive.) These records all indicate that Swing is here to stay—at any rate until something more startling comes along.



While the larger companies have been napping so far as contemporary music goes, the smaller, less publicized ones have been active. Gamut Records have put out a well recorded set of Bloch's *Violin Sonata* played in an authentic version by Harold and Marian Berkley. It's a strong work, although not as exciting as it seemed at its premiere in 1921. Several features might be objected to: a certain overblown romanticism in the content, an obvious straining at the medium of violin and piano, and an overdependence on cyclical form. Nevertheless, it remains a strong work—one that Bloch enthusiasts will want to own.

New Music Quarterly Recordings introduces the work of three Americans of the youngest generation: Henry Brant's *Five Songs* from his *Lyric Cycle*; Edwin Gershefski's *New Music for Piano*; Gerald Strang's *Sonatina for Clarinet*. I find it difficult to be enthusiastic about any of these. Brant's songs, with their unusual accompaniment of three violas and piano, should be more distinctive than they are; Gershefski's piano pieces are unnecessarily dry and brittle; Strang's well-conceived clarinet work leaves me somehow indifferent. All these pieces, well done tech-

nically, are strangely unrelated to any American feeling, and give their composers an aura of isolation which is deadly.

NEW SCORES

It is interesting to compare the work of these younger men with that of some older American composers as represented by recent publications of Shepherd, Converse and Stoessel. What these older men write is often eclectic, naive or merely trite, but it nevertheless manages to have some connection with the big public. My own preference goes to Arthur Shepherd's cantata, *Song of the Pilgrims*, for chorus, orchestra and tenor solo (C. C. Birchard). It is a well written, solidly constructed choral symphony, by far the best example of this composer's work that I have seen. Frederick Converse's orchestral suite, *American Sketches* (E. F. Kalmus), follows a familiar pattern with its typical Negro melody in the slow section (English horn solo, of course) and *Chicken Reel*, fiddler's tune for the scherzo. The first and final movements are more impressive, though the scoring seems distinctly on the heavy side. Albert Stoessel's opera *Garrick* (J. Fischer & Brother) should be judged—like all operas—in the opera-house. For those who are interested the piano-vocal score is now available.

Two other American works deserve more than passing mention. Ross Lee Finney's *Piano Sonata in D-minor* (New Music), first heard at Yaddo in 1933, stands re-examination very well. This despite an obvious dependence on neo-classical procedure. The opening page is particularly memorable, and arouses an expectant interest in whatever Finney may do in the future.

A volume called *Negro Songs of Protest* (Carl Fischer) needs a little special explanation. Lawrence Gellert, while living in the South, collected three hundred songs, twenty-four of which were published with piano accompaniments by Elie Siegmeister under the above title. They bear a definite musical kinship to the traditional spiritual. But the texts are eye-openers as to what the uninhibited Negro really sings about. Siegmeister had the almost impossible job of making appropriate settings. Somewhat paradoxically, he did not succeed as well with those songs which call for a simple round-the-piano type of accompaniment as with his more elaborate concert-like versions. The American Music League is to be congratulated on having sponsored publication of the collection.