

## SCORES and RECORDS

By AARON COPLAND

AMONG the more important scores received this winter is a recent work of the English composer Constant Lambert. It is an elaborate, fifty minute choral symphony for orchestra, chorus and baritone solo, on words of Thomas Nashe, called *Summer's Last Will and Testament*. It took the composer three years to write, and has all the earmarks of a *magnum opus*. There is no questioning the seriousness of intention.

As far as one can judge from the piano-vocal score, Lambert is already in possession of a remarkable technical mastery for a man of thirty-three. The handling of the contrapuntal texture and the form is admirable, though the choral writing sometimes presents serious problems of intonation. But despite its many qualities, one cannot escape the conviction that the manner is more distinguished than the content. What Lambert lacks is a well-defined personality. No amount of distinction makes up for that weakness. Moreover, the work as a whole mirrors a kind of inner pessimism which is not pleasant to contemplate. The general spiritual tone of a composer's work is of more interest to us than his politics. If his music is alive and healthy and forward-looking in spirit, there is a good chance that we shall have no reason to be ashamed of him as a man. Perhaps the question is not even apposite in Lambert's case, for occasionally the spiritual ambiance is no deeper than that of Massenet's *Thais*. Nevertheless, despite its lack of real depth and personality, *Summer's Last Will and Testament* seems to me to be one of the best choral works to have come from England in many years.

Vaughan Williams' *Symphony in F-minor* is now available in miniature score (Oxford University Press—Carl Fischer). This is one more monument in a successful English composer's career. In this *Symphony* he abandons his folk-song inspiration for a rather heavy-handed neo-romantic style. Vaughan Williams at his best writes music of a robust, and sometimes poetic, bourgeois inspiration. When his manner is that of the *sturm und drang*

symphonist, he cuts a less sympathetic figure.

To jump from the "sublime" to the theatrical, eleven numbers from Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* are hot off the press (Chappell). Anyone who hears this music without having first seen the drama that provides its reason for being, is likely to be disappointed. It was never intended to stand on its own feet. It is an integral part of the play, where it is enormously effective; often for the very reasons that make it seem trite when considered apart from its context. But those who have seen the play will want to own the music; and musicians will want to study how Blitzstein turns the ordinary, banal musical language of the day into a pungent and laconic commentary on human frailty and injustice.

Conlon Nancarrow is a brand new name to me. I first saw it on the January 1938 cover of *New Music*, containing a *Toccata* for violin and piano, a *Prelude and Blues* for piano alone, all by Mr. Nancarrow. His biography is brief: "Born 1912, Texarkana, Arkansas. Studied at Cincinnati Conservatory for two years. Worked way to Europe in 1936. No job since return. Went to Spain to help fight Fascism." There is nothing to do but hope for his safe return. Otherwise America will have lost a talented composer. In fact, these short works show a remarkable surety in an unknown composer, plus a degree of invention and imagination that immediately gives him a place among our talented younger men.

Henry Cowell's *United Quartet* (New Music) is a recent example of the California composer's output. A long and detailed foreword tells the idea behind the use of every element in the piece. It is impossible to supply a note for note explanation of a composition without fostering in the reader a natural wariness of the contents. An actual performance will make it easier to forget the introduction and judge the work on its purely musical merits.

Otto Luening's *Two Symphonic Interludes* for orchestra (Affiliated Music Corporation) are two short sketches by a composer who knows how to handle the symphonic medium. It is difficult to get a comprehensive picture of Luening's work because of the extent and variety of his production. He is the type

of composer who tries his hand at every field and every style in music, with the result that it is hard to catalogue him. The *Interludes*, taken alone, show us a talented writer, inclined to eclecticism in style, and a somewhat too hurried workmanship. With a greater concentration of his gifts, Luening should take rank among our best men.

#### NEW RECORDS

Nothing could make more apparent the divergence of taste between the record-buying and the concert public than the persistence with which the music of Darius Milhaud is put out by the companies and the infrequency of his name on concert programs. This time it is Milhaud's three *Opéras-minutes*, issued as usual by Columbia. These caused quite a stir when they were first heard in 1927. The chamber opera form was new then, though actually these eight-minute "operas" of Milhaud's are little more than cantatas for soloists, chorus and chamber orchestra. They were charming works when we first heard them, and they are still charming. The recordings were made several years ago, and though they each fit two sides of a twelve-inch record to perfection, they leave much to be desired in the way of a proper balancing of voices and accompaniment. Still I can easily recommend them to anyone who possesses some inkling of Milhaud's freshness and originality.

Ferroud is a comparatively unknown name to American audiences. For years he filled the role of Florent Schmitt's official pupil, and was just beginning to emerge as a composer in his own right when he was killed in an accident two summers ago. His *Sonata* for cello and piano (Columbia), beautifully played by Maurice Maréchal, belongs with so many other French works of taste and clarity. It is with compositions such as these that a school of French music is built up. But there is no gainsaying the fact that it suffers from an insufficient sharpness of outline and individuality.

Busoni's piano pieces, *Indianisches Tagebuch*, are brilliantly performed by his pupil Egon Petri (Columbia). Busoni's music is rarely enough heard to make us grateful for this or any other opportunity of becoming more familiar with his work. But the

listener who would enjoy these little pieces must ignore the fact that they are based on Indian motifs. Except in No. 2, Busoni completely failed even to come near creating an American Indian atmosphere. But considered by themselves, they make up an attractive suite of pieces by one of the most original minds of our day.

A well recorded *Suite* for saxophone and piano by the American Paul Creston is issued by New Music Quarterly Recordings. It is one of the signs of the continual development of American music that a young man like Creston can turn out so finished a piece of work. As music, it does not always say as much as it should. This is less true of the middle movement, a *Pastorale*, which is one of the best things Creston has done. If he can create more music of real mood such as the *Pastorale*, and guard against those fast movements that run on pleasantly enough without getting anywhere, we will be able to count on him for the future.

Robert McBride and Harrison Kerr share two sides of a recent N.M.Q.R. record. The McBride side is made up of a *Warm-up* for English horn alone and a *Let-down* for the same instrument with piano. Our preference goes without question to the *Let-down*. In fact, it is so far above the *Warm-up* that it is a little disconcerting to have them juxtaposed in this fashion. McBride's principal weakness as a composer thus far is his inability to distinguish between the good and bad in his production. It's a natural fault in a young man. But the musician who can write that second piece should be unwilling to sign the first, which is little more than an exercise.

Harrison Kerr is one of those Americans who work quietly by themselves, with little enough assurance of public performance. It would be unfair to attempt to judge his talent on the basis of this *Study* for cello unaccompanied. The medium is an ungrateful one at best, yet the composer seems to have avoided the usual astringencies of the solo cello without benefit of piano. There is a line and a formal sense that make one wish to know more of his recent work.