

NEW RECORDS

By AARON COPLAND

AMERICAN composers as a body are gradually becoming aware of the importance of getting their works recorded. To the old cry for publication there is added the new cry for recording. Neither of the two major companies have adopted a consistent policy toward native works as yet, but there are signs that this may be changing. One slight indication is the featuring by Columbia of Deems Taylor's *Through the Looking Glass* suite and the issuance by RCA Victor of another in the considerable list of Roy Harris' recordings, a *Chorale* for string sextet.

The Harris work will be remembered by some as the middle section of a striking three-movement *Sextet*, composed around 1932. Harris' style has matured since then; it is doubtful whether he would permit himself the cloying sweetness of this *Chorale* any longer. Nevertheless it leaves one with the impression that there is something profoundly sentimental in the American soul which must get expressed in our music. The *Chorale* is a full-blooded expression of this kind of sentiment, teeming with personality, over-lush, loosely constructed, but important because it exposes a type of feeling which is certain to be developed by later American composers.

Deems Taylor's *Suite* out of *Alice in Wonderland* is not exactly unknown. Since it was first played in 1922, Taylor's name has become a household word—synonymous in millions of homes with American music itself. This gives the *Suite* an added, if only momentary significance. Moreover, Columbia has featured it as the combined effort of an American orchestra, an American conductor, and an American composer. It is not easy to keep one's critical poise in the face of all this. Nor does the piece, for that matter, present any deep critical problems. It is most agreeable when it is least pretentious, namely, in the warm lyrical passages. These make one suspect that an excellent light opera

composer was hidden away for the sake of the greater glories of a symphonic style that never seems quite natural.

Continuing our little list of Americana, it is instructive to put beside these examples of our "art" music, recent waxings of varied phases of American folk-art. Musicraft Records, Inc. have given the Old Harp Singers of Nashville, Tenn., an opportunity to record their versions of folk material, religious and profane, culled from the famous old manual *The Sacred Harp*. Unfortunately, some of these simple songs sound over-arranged. The best ones are humorous ditties like the *Barnyard Song* or *On Springfield Mountain*, a delightful bit that gives Miss Glen Carroll a chance to do some completely original voice glissandi, unforgettable once they are heard.

Another purely indigenous manifestation is supplied by Blue Note Records (235 Seventh Ave., New York), who plan to get on wax, untrammelled expressions of Negro folk art. The complaint has sometimes been voiced, and with increasing frequency of late, that even the finest of the better known Negro swing artists tend to "go commercial;" that is, they consciously tame a natural fantasy in order to make it more acceptable to the "big" public. The really distinctive aspect of the initial records of Blue Note—presenting Meade "Lux" Lewis in two slow blues improvisations, *Melancholy* and *Solitude*, and Albert Ammons, first class boogie-woogie artist in his own *Blues* and *Stomp*—is the peculiarly pure Negroid character they possess. The drone bass, the sudden sforzati, the ancient pianola sonorities, the lack of any shred of melodic invention, plus general unpredictableness, give them a winning naiveté that seems forever gone from the productions of their more sophisticated brothers. Still we mustn't make the mistake of "Brahms or Wagner" over again—Duke Ellington may still be listened to. However, you must have these records if you intend to engage in any hot arguments as to the comparative merits of swing, tamed and untamed.

While on the subject of folk music we should mention several single ten-inch records of Peruvian and Tahitian melodies which have appeared under the imprint of Columbia. All these are frankly arrangements, deplorable in the case of the Tahitian songs, and tastefully done by Beclard d'Harcourt for the Peruvian Indians.

The real thing can be heard on the record from the Belgian Congo (Reeves Sound Studios) made on the spot by the Denis-Roosevelt Expedition with the co-operation of the Belgian Government. They have a marvelous tang and savor, plus an intoxicating rhythmic intricacy that all the history books mention in relation to primitive music, but which we seldom have heard to so authentic a degree.

It's a far cry from these exotic musics to the usual European releases: Strauss' *Sinfonia Domestica* (RCA Victor), de Falla's *El Amor Brujo* (Columbia), Debussy's *Iberia* (RCA Victor). For some unfathomable reason, Columbia chose to present the American public with a choice example of French kappelmeister music—Philip Gaubert's *Les Chants de la Mer*. One must admire Monsieur Gaubert's frankness—his title quite openly tells all.

The Coolidge Quartet make their record debut with one of the finest of recent foursome recordings — Hindemith's *String Quartet No. III* (RCA Victor). This is the piece that has for its third movement one of the most haunting pages of contemporary music. It was written when Hindemith was barely twenty-five, but the work as a whole bears out the favorable impression it made when first heard in 1922. In many ways it is typical of the best of the new music in the healthy period of the early twenties.

Russian Modern Music is the title given to a two-pocket album of ten-inch records, containing excerpts from works of Shostakovitch, Mossolov, and Meytuss (Columbia). The commentator of the accompanying booklet was clearly overcome by the modernity of it all. "Strange Music of the Modern Russian School" is his heading. Someone should reassure him—this is neither so strange nor so modern as he thinks. The set merely comprises two dated examples of mechanistic program music: Mossolov's *Steel Foundry* and Meytuss' *Dnieper Water Power Station*; and a Polka and Dance from Shostakovitch's ballet, *The Age of Gold*. It is the Shostakovitch excerpts which make the set interesting. They are two diabolically clever parodies written in a style for which the composer was subsequently severely criticized. That the Soviets should have resented their fa-

vorite son thumbing his nose at humanity in general is understandable enough; but from the standpoint of unregenerate America, this is ample demonstration of the power of the grotesque in music.

IN THE THEATRE

By JOHN GUTMAN

THIS, as everyone has been advised by the papers, is the season of Musical Comedy. Just now the accent is all on smooth, domesticated ditties, and one begins to yearn for something a little more crazy, say like Berlin's *Walking Stick*.

Meanwhile, at the Federal Theatre, they swing *The Mikado*. But this so-called swing version which the Chicago WPA group is offering to thousands of New Yorkers has one definite handicap—it isn't a swing version at all. The idea was good, and where it has been realized, the results are satisfactory, but the adapters could certainly have dared a lot more. Nothing about this version will bring letters to editors. And anyway there's a growing conviction anyway that swinging a Bach toccata is a good deal less sacrilegious than adorning the same piece with the sugary mantle of the Strauss orchestra. The Chicago people, once they had decided not to throw the whole score into the pot, worked out another little scheme; they first do straight all those songs and ensembles which they have picked out for swing. The effect is irresistible: *The Wandering Minstrel*, the *Three Little Maids*, and the *Flowers That Bloom* become little masterpieces of verve, rhythm and humor. The whole performance, with its splendid Negro cast, is a vortex of continuous movement even when it tries to be Victorian.

Noel Coward's *Set to Music* should be nailed down as the season's most unexpected disappointment, and its most inexplicable success. Admittedly it's a revue; it doesn't even pretend to have any plot, and that would be all to the good, provided the single scenes had a spark of their own, some novelty or, lacking this, at least some good old-fashioned charm. But if any evidences of Coward's so-called genius were present, they just passed