

RECENT BOOKS

MUSIC IN HISTORY

HISTORIES of music as a rule fail to relate their material to the parallel course of general events. Now come two authors, Howard D. McKinney and W. R. Anderson, who propose in *Music in History* (American Book Company) to correct this error. The idea of such correlation is excellent if obvious. Unfortunately the execution is not convincing. Many of the historical events recorded here are unimportant both to history and to music. The work remains primarily a routine, conventional history of music, with a few extraneous, directionless points. At no time does it explore the interesting if difficult subject of the basic relation between music and the economic and social modes of people in different epochs. As for modern composers, they are classified into "schools" but without any clear reason for the categories. The vague chapter on American music is full of allusions to "popular" and "folk," with little information about either. "Serious Music," as applied to modern Americans takes half a page.

Any book attempting this task might well take the view that to the person living today, today's trends and problems are of prime importance. Our knowledge of history matters chiefly if it can illumi-

nate our present moment. How, for instance, is modern music to be interpreted in terms of modern life and society? McKinney and Anderson abandon almost entirely any extra-musical considerations in dealing with modern music. Their material is both curt and misleading. Those native Americans whose works do not, in the opinion of the authors, belong to a European-influenced eclectic school are disposed of in the following passage: "Ives, Ruggles, Whithorne, Sessions, Harris, Virgil Thomson, Piston, and Antheil are well-known names among the progressives. A few years ago it seemed as if Harris showed promise of being the long-awaited great figure in American creative music; there is usually an impression of strength and suggestion of emotion in his works, but his later development has been curiously disappointing. Gruenberg and Copland have made frank use of jazz idioms in their music." This in a book of 904 pages! Perhaps the best thing in the volume is a supplementary list of phonograph records. If the student were to listen to all these, he would have at least some idea of the history of music; then he could form his own opinions on the relation between what he has heard and what has happened in the world.

Henry Cowell

A DANCER WHO THINKS

IF you feel ballet is a real thing, as I do, you will find the first part of Serge Lifar's new book *Serge Diaghilev* (G. P.

Putnam's Sons) excellent, and the second part wonderful. The first is an account of what was said and done and thought

by and around Diaghilev from his childhood till the end; the second is what Lifar saw happening from the time he joined the company (1923) till his friend's death. It is all clear and concise; and it is brilliantly translated.

In the first part what interests me more than the history is Lifar as a dance critic. He is the best dance critic living. It isn't that I subscribe to his decisions. To be sure, it's fun when he demolishes a stage rival with a few appreciative words; but I often violently disagree. No, it's not Lifar's opinions I stand up for, it's his attack. Because first, he has the professional experience which turns dancing from a thing you buy ready-made into a thing you make yourself. And second, he sees dancing with the eyes of intelligence, as an ordinary person sometimes sees a friend, or sees the weather, sees and believes at the same time. The eyes of a poet, people say who know what poetry is about. If criticism makes any sense at all, which I often doubt, the sense it makes is that it suggests to others this way

of seeing. And opinions are no more than one of the ways of doing it.

But I recommend you try the second part of the book first, the autobiographical part. It reads like a house afire, like a Russian novel. Hotel furniture is smashed all over Europe; broken ankles lead to triumphant premieres; apathy turns to illumination, too deep a love takes the form of estrangement, and passion rises dialectically by its reversal. It all sounds very improper in our flat country. A decent American finds it too personal, too portentous, too eloquent; even possibly too aptly fitting a classic pattern. But you will notice there is no snobbishness or vanity or cynicism. It is a foreign way of telling a story, but the real surge of dancing is in it, as it is in Isadora's *Life*, and Nijinsky's *Diary*. As from those two books, you will get from Lifar's the sense of what a living dancer is. Not directly as you could out of a poet's novel, but indirectly as you would out of a long letter. It is as real and as strange as what a living business man is.

Edwin Denby