

FORECAST AND REVIEW

SEASON'S HEIGHT, NEW YORK, 1941

THE re-established importance of the melodic line in contemporary music has been highlighted during the last few months by the performance of a goodly number of violin concerti, all new or of recent origin. That by Bernard Wagenaar, premiered at the Juilliard, stands out for the high quality of its lyricism and its great formal invention. In one continuous movement, the trunk is an interesting variation of the rondo form, interrupted before its retrograde recapitulation by a scherzo, and followed by a slow movement, concluding with an extended coda which reverts to the first theme of the concerto. With fine expressive logic and very convincingly, these closing sections take on the character of an epilogue, a complete philosophical musing on what has gone before. Rarely does an individual form grow out of a novel emotional progression so organically. The music itself is most appealing in the moderate and slow sections where it is dominated by a lyricism at times tranquil, at times poignant and longing. Throughout, as is typical of Wagenaar, the very personal quality adds individuality to material not in itself unusual. The opening section, with its carefully molded and balanced phrases, exemplifies his controlled skill at its best.

Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto* (Albert Spalding with the Philadelphia Symphony) is a sad story for our times. There is certainly a feeling for the long line, but what goes into it is not so very choice. The first two movements have genuine, unaffected simplicity, yet the intimate quality is kept at such a low pitch that the fire almost goes out. The finale however throws all restraint to the winds. It is harmonically and rhythmically confused, stylistically out of keeping with the preceding material. Even the virtue of a rather pale unity is thus lost. Far better-formed and scored was his student work, the *Overture to The School for Scandal* (Boston

Symphony). With its nice first theme for the violins, it should make a good curtain-raiser for almost anything light and gay.

Singularly unimpressive was Nicolai Miaskowsky's concerto, presented by the Philharmonic with Mishel Piastro. It is honest but unpenetrating music, flaccid, without the emotional cogency of those far distant representatives of the late-romantic Russian style which it imitates. One can admire only the balance and adjustment of the work.

The most interesting point about the Hindemith *Violin Concerto* (Ruth Posselt with the Boston Symphony) is this same expert balance between the solo instrument and the orchestra. Characteristic of *Der Schwanendreher* was thickness in the writing for the viola, which constantly weaves in and out of the instrumental fabric with superfluous comment, creating a viscous and overburdened texture; also the centering of interest in the orchestra. In the new work these faults have disappeared. The violin is definitely the protagonist, singing with a clear, commanding voice. The opening theme with its upward leap has eloquence, the second a quiet, poised beauty. They do not, as is usually the case, inevitably call to mind many other Hindemith themes. Yet before they are over both have been disappointingly finished off with the typical clichés. A few other details too have an element of novelty, yet in sum they are not enough. The same ordinary developments and methods, the emotional rehashing reveal that this is only a very good example of Hindemith's unsympathetic art. A more endearing work is the *Cello Concerto*, small and somewhat intimate (Boston Symphony with Piatigorsky). The charming music-box *Trio* of the final march gives a new turn to the overdone medieval German atmosphere. Yet it is even less a creative effort than the *Violin Concerto*. Not all music shows a tough but triumphant Beethoven-like carving out of rock; that which does not must offer instead delightful new twists of the mind, a free-flowing stream of fancy. These too, Hindemith lacks. Best are the finales of the two works, where one is breathlessly carried along on a wave of rapid virtuosity.

Some young composers are similarly busy turning out works of which the best one can say is that they are very well-written. Invention in style and material are forgotten. *A Concert Piece for Strings and Horn* by John Verrall (Philharmonic) certainly has personality, yet it is couched in most uninteresting and ordinary terms. The composer shows ability chiefly to make a smooth-running, sometimes even brilliant sounding piece out of unimportant and unpromising material. In Richard Arnell's *Overture*,

The New Age (National Orchestral Association), Mathis der Hindemith reigns supreme; no recognizably individual personality remains. A very different approach is that of David Diamond in the *Psalm* heard on the same program. A message of power, intensity, and deep feeling is brought forth within the confines of a tight, concise form. When the message is given the piece is over, a great virtue. The material is sonorous, colorful, and exciting, individually orchestrated, showing at all times great invention. I should like to see more such emphasis on making the sound interesting, on the inner justification of the music, and less on glib production of elegant but un compelling routine specimens. Though less striking music, the *Concertino for Flute and String Orchestra* of Norman Dello Joio (Orchestrette Classique) appeals too through what it has to say, forthrightly and directly. The snap and high-tension vigor of his fast movements, the wistful and moving lyricism of his slow movements are already recognizably his own.

Two premieres of Bela Bartok show this composer on an increasingly clear path. The *Quartet Number 6* (Kolisch) yields to none of his recent works in seriousness, yet it can be grasped at one hearing. It is in the brilliant form of three fast or moderate movements, each preceded by a short *Mesto* which in turn becomes extended to provide the entire closing movement. The work thus logically centers interest in the final section. Each time the brief introduction reappears the implied expressive significance becomes stronger, more urgent, reaching its final full deployment in the deep but gentle sadness of the close. Of the other movements the first, a clear sonata-allegro, has graceful vitality, the *Marcia*, with an eloquent interlude, has late Beethoven solidity and dignity. The *Divertimento for String Orchestra* (Philadelphia Symphony) expresses the very essence of the composer in broad simple lines. Though it does not say anything very new to us, it should make the personality of Bartok comprehensible to a larger section of the music public. Throughout, as always, there are great richness and invention in sonority.

A gala performance at Carnegie devoted to "Masters of Viennese Music" reminded us that the great Austrian capital has another tradition besides that of Schönberg. The program featured the works of such light composers as Oscar Straus, Emmerich Kalman, and Robert Stolz, and so illustrated the gayety, beery charm, and joie de vivre that we associate with Vienna. How the twelve-toners can have so completely avoided anything that suggests the more usual aspect of their city is mystifying. All the seri-

ous composers from Mozart and Schubert on have reflected this tradition. Somewhere along the line, about the time of Dr. Freud, I should imagine, the wires got twisted. Now Viennese good-humor is the sole property of the waltz kings and lives on only in popular art. Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* (Philharmonic) proves that the process of blotting out the senses began only recently. Here the exaltation of wine, woman, and song is raised to the high serious level of a hedonistic philosophy. Life is still worth living, though much that is moving and beautiful is so in a rather overripe way. Certainly no one would accuse the early Schönberg of being light-hearted, yet the *Kammersymphonie Number 1* (New School Chamber Orchestra) has Straussian élan and exuberance and the *First Quartet* (New Friends of Music), Brahmsian mellowness. It is a far cry from this to the almost complete extinction of life ca. 1940 as represented by the *Quartet Number 5* (New Friends of Music) of Artur Schnabel. There is delicacy and a certain chill lyric appeal, but the constant use of the same registers throughout creates a tangled, suffocating, and very depressing atmosphere. I prefer the less highbrow but more human reaction generated by *Zwei Herzen in Drei-Viertel Takt*.

The *Third Symphony* (Philharmonic) of Albert Roussel completely projects the indefinable, complex personality of that composer. Very French, it has also sheer size, which is rarely found in French music. It is delicate and cultivated, yet healthy and robust; gay, yet pungent and intense. There is sometimes an undercurrent of querulous dissatisfaction. The long full melodic lines leap sharply upward as if any constraint at all were too much. The harmony and rhythm are mobile, rich, and exciting. And there is the fascinating way the seams show ever so slightly, revealing the cerebral approach behind the music that sounds so spontaneous. Few contemporaries give themselves so freely and completely as does Roussel in this fine formal achievement.

There were many who found the *Roméo et Juliette* suite (National Orchestral Association) of Prokofieff cheap, yet to me it seemed full of sentiment and strangely moving. Melodic turns that have frequently been cheap before, here attain a new charm and appeal. It has sweetness and repose, a gentle twilight beauty reminiscent of *Apollon Musagète*. Especially good is the closing scene, which catches the feeling of grief so great it cannot quite express itself.

The Philharmonic goes on presenting new or infrequently played works at the rate of one or two a week, but they have been on the whole

disappointing. *The Dream Pedlar* of Emerson Whithorne is a frankly descriptive affair with a silly program and pretty second-rate imagination. Ever so often the piece falls apart, out of pure sectionalism. That's about all that happens. The thick but uninventive harmonic superstructure of Mischa Portnoff's *Piano Concerto* does not conceal the basic Lisztian influence; it is without the poetry but with all the empty virtuosity. Lushness and cinematographic romanticism were the general tone of David Van Vactor's *Overture to a Comedy*, whose humorous implications were far from apparent.

Early Hindemith, about which we'd almost forgotten, what with concerti flying around Carnegie Hall, was revived by the *Kammermusik Number 1* (New School Chamber Orchestra). It is a grim piece with a largely documentary value, disclosing the very special feeling of the period with at least a certain urgency of expression.

Recent chamber music events included the performance of Roy Harris' *Four Preludes and Fugues* by the Roth Quartet at the Manhattan School of Music. Although each piece by itself is sturdy and solid, it makes difficult listening, since it is throughout in Harris' well-known, rather uncompromising quarter-note style. The expansiveness of the last group does a lot to help, yet I don't feel that any particular logic explains the juxtaposition of four such similar essays. I liked best the second set with its strange, murmuring, expressive overtones.

Two violin and piano recitals by Eudice Shapiro and Irene Jacobi set a high standard with two modern sonata classics, those of Debussy and Ernest Bloch. The *Sonatina* of Werner Josten, written in a rather sketchy style, suggests rather than fulfills the implications of neo-classicism. It made pleasant listening, with a pretty little *Air* in the middle. Nikolai Lopatnikoff's *Sonata for Violin, Piano and Snare Drum* had for its end-pieces two examples of the usual wiggly German counterpoint, spiced up by the addition of the unexpected member. The *Andante* shows the composer's lyric talent although the drum seemed a little self-conscious. Harris' *Poem* is a melodious work in a quasi-impressionistic style.

The New Friends of Music gave us the *Piano Trio* of Ravel, his finest chamber work, and the *First Quartet* by Frank Bridge which reveals his able approach to the art of chamber music, his sincere expressiveness in a conservative style. None of this was denied either in the performance of his *Phantasy Quartet* by the Chamber Music Guild Quartet. On the same program Bohuslav Martinu was his usual refreshing self in a *Duo for*

Violin and Cello, a medium which can easily seem poverty-stricken, here treated with great invention. Wallingford Riegger's *New Dance* is very adaptable to the two pianos on which it was performed by Luboschutz and Nemenoff, showing as always its rhythmic strength, which inevitably suggests the dance. The *Fourth Sonata* for piano by Harold Morris, premiered by Thomas Richner, sounded like salon music, but it was too heavy throughout to be successful as such.

Theodore Chanler has again revealed his affinity for the art of song-writing in his *Five Rhymes from Peacock Pie*, commissioned by the League of Composers, and sung in part by Dorothy Maynor. The piano accompaniments, mobile and inventive without ever being overburdened, form a splendid prop to the vocal lines, on which the interest centers. Chanler has caught with great sympathy and understanding the naive, wistful feeling of these children's poems of Walter de la Mare. As is usual with works of this sort the songs are for the adult's retrospective glance rather than for the child. Yet I feel that their appeal could hardly fail to take hold of the imaginations of those to whom they really should be sung.

Donald Fuller

MORE SEASONAL NOTES

ARON COPLAND's *Quiet City*, for trumpet, English horn and strings, played by Chicago's Saidenberg Little Symphony on its first visit here, is a small and perfect piece. There is indeed danger of praising it all out of proportion to its size. Small though it is, however, it is essentially the reflection of a distinguished and important personality. Its long rising line of emotional intensity reaches a climax of great poignancy and then subsides again to the mood of the opening. The texture throughout is a joy. On the same program were Roussel's seldom heard *Sinfonietta*, *Opus 5*, and the well-known Bloch *Concerto Grosso*. The persistent rhythmic drive of Roussel's first movement brings his *Third Symphony* to mind and the noble chorale opening of the slow movement made one hope for things better than what followed. But the full-blooded contrapuntal vigor of this man's music inspires the wish to hear much more of it.

The merit of the music on the last concert of the WNYC Festival program was unfortunately out of relation to the pre-concert ballyhoo. Paul Creston's *Symphony* started out impressively but soon degenerated into a rather dull work of a thick texture which was emphasized by an orchestration neither brilliant nor even experimental. The *Violin Concerto*