

FORECAST AND REVIEW

SEASON'S CLOSE—NEW YORK, SPRING, 1941

NOW that the season is nearly over, it seems the proper moment to discuss an unfortunate characteristic of much "contemporary" activity. I refer to the unhealthy monopoly exercised by the Viennese and German moderns or those strongly under their influence. Greatest recent sinners in this respect were the New Friends of Music. After making the encouraging decision to offer us, for the first time, samples of today's music, they considerably lessened our pleasure by giving, outside of some earlier, well-established items, almost exclusive representation to the aforementioned school. And now the New Friends say: "Not viewing contemporary music as something special or apart in the world of art (but as either good or bad music written by composers of today) we do not plan to include it in the coming year's programs." Its first venture into the present has certainly reflected the organization's usual policy of presenting "neglected" music. For it has given us on the whole just the sort of contemporary music least frequently heard outside the programs of special societies. And also least well-calculated to expand the sympathies of the average audience. Devoting a part of only one year's performances to new music hardly seems adequate. Surely the implications in the promise ". . . and contemporaries" are not realized on programs which omit or barely represent late French, Russian, and American trends.

Even more of the same results were obtained earlier in the season by programs of the New School Chamber Orchestra, which had an almost perfect record for specialization. Now glance at the selections of the coming I.S.C.M. festival and see, despite a certain diversity, their oneness. This tendency to perpetuate only a limited aspect of the contemporary movement—important, but certainly not the whole stream—is visible in many other quarters too, for it is a dominating kind of tradition. The teaching profession is one of its greatest strongholds; schools and uni-

versities are very sympathetic to it. It represents an overemphasis in our musical culture on something which, since it is least closely allied, emotionally, with our native selves, should exert a much smaller influence. Let us hope for some diminution next year.

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On a Philharmonic program devoted to American music, the *Third Symphony* by Bernard Wagenaar stood out sharply for its finish and very personal coloring. The simplicity of shape, the smooth movement, are admirable, yet I find the material not as interesting as in some of his other works. The general moderation of pace is too constant; unrelieved, too, is the mood of questioning which, at times gentle, at others more insistent, remains unanswered at the end. It is a successful emotional plan, but its very success entails a certain unsatisfied reaction. The *Three Pieces for Orchestra* by Roy Harris have too much the look of a *pièce d'occasion*. The simple and vigorous end-pieces (out of the *Folk-song Symphony*) should never have been removed from their context, especially the second, whose lovely close, with its quieting-down feeling, obviously leads to something else; the middle movement too makes little connection with the other sections except through being definitely Harris. Morton Gould's *Foster Gallery* has an easy-going charm and the real flavor of a *divertissement*; yet, as in all such attempts at free arrangement, the basic material has an already established personality which it is impossible to develop or combine with any other and is at its best when the original flow is not broken into fragments for improvisations that disregard the essence of the ideas. On the other hand Gould's nice feeling for diatonic progressions, active texture, and melodic parts, might have shown to better advantage if the original substance were his own.

The *Sinfonia da Requiem* by Benjamin Britten (premiere by the Philharmonic) has free-flowing material made interesting more by the individual and striking orchestration than by inherent personality. It is broad, full and serious, without being over-rich or pretentious. The expressive content implied by the title of each movement is aptly rendered; the experience however appears not to be entirely cumulative and the final impression falls short of complete emotional integration. Apart from its "program," however, the work is certainly an organic whole.

Interesting too for its instrumental texture, clear and always active, is the *Ninth Symphony* by Gustav Mahler. Twentieth-century orchestration owes much to this work. The slow movements have the expansive and

beautiful philosophic calm of the close of *Das Lied von der Erde*. The faster ones I find on a lower plane; they are afflicted by a sort of grotesque, bloated good-humor that is not entirely heart-warming.

A kind of relaxed music, not outstanding for great character, but with a natural impetus and distinct profile, is to be found in the *Third Symphony* of Nicolai Berezowsky (Boston Symphony). The energy and élan of its straightforward first movement and the majestic feeling of the last, though spun out at too great length, are its greatest distinction. The *Introduction and Waltz* by the same composer (Philharmonic) is a slight version of the same approach, with a complete, continuous projection of its pretty sentiments. The music of Eugene Goossens appeals similarly, yet the material of his *Symphony* (Philharmonic) is better adapted for use in small pieces; it lacks sufficient strength for strenuous development. There is also a little too much of it to be grasped, and it is not well enough contrasted, which makes its course difficult to follow.

Nadia Boulanger's interesting concert of religious music at Carnegie Hall gave us a fresh and lovely excerpt from the *Stabat Mater* of Karol Szymanowski, a fine early Polish hymn in an alert arrangement by Mlle. Boulanger herself, and the *Requiem Mass* of Gabriel Fauré, its aristocratic and delicate sentimentality shaped with subtle art. Minor items on the Philharmonic programs include the *Descobrimento do Brasil, Suite Number 1*, by Heitor Villa-Lobos, a disappointingly conservative work without his frequently mysterious and fascinating vistas; a competent but uninventive *Overture to an Italian Comedy* by Arthur Benjamin, only superficially Latin; a plain *Overture* by Zoltan Kurthy, merely competent; and Horace Johnson's dated *Streets of Florence*. The *Concertino in Stilo Classico* for piano and orchestra by Norman Dello Joio, played by Vivian Rivkin with the New York Chamber Orchestra, is a work more influenced by popular derivatives than by earlier styles. It is, however, personal throughout and melodious, with an exciting final *moto perpetuo*.

The League of Composers devoted the third program of its "Young American" series to a group of sonatas for violin and piano, expertly performed by Eudice Shapiro and Irene Jacobi. All three showed formal ability and the expressive warmth of neo-romantic trends. Treatment of the medium was understanding and sure-handed, but not often striking in invention. Dello Joio's sonata had the greatest freshness of mood, variety in personality, and color; it was also thorough yet concise. Edward Cone's sonata is distinguished by its sincerity, completeness, and thoughtful ap-

proach, but the constant heaviness in mood, the overwrought texture, and super-maturity make it a not very *sympathique* work for a young composer. Lukas Foss' youthful spontaneity is both pleasing and appropriate though the juxtaposition of Hindemith with Gallicisms is somewhat naive, and there is too great a dependence on superficial and unexciting facility.

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The Sixth Annual Three Choir Festival presented at Temple Emanu-el under the direction of Lazare Saminsky suffered from an unvaried diet of somewhat too brief works. The medium was written for simply and effectively. But the contemporary offerings appeared to progress too much phrase by phrase; they lacked the broad span in conception typical of the smallest of the earlier pieces. Douglas Moore's *Dedication* was both airy and appealing. His *Prayer for England* had less finish however; it seemed to place words and purpose above the music. Mr. Saminsky himself departed from the prevailing conservatism in his *Prelude to Man*. This has many striking effects; it seemed however to imply a more extended treatment. Rebecca Clarke gave a viola performance of *An Ancient Chinese Song* in her own attractive arrangement, and also of her own expressive *Passacaglia on an Old English Tune*. The forceful, archaic *Page from Ecclesiastes* by Paul Dessau was another first performance, and there were premieres besides of works by Marion Bauer, Normand Lockwood, Isadore Freed, Miriam Gideon, and a brace of South Americans.

The Shostakovitch *Piano Quintet* (Carnegie Hall program sponsored by the American Russian Institute) is a far more impressive demonstration of his talent than any of the recent symphonies heard here. The prevailing mood is one of contemplative relaxation, most beautifully revealed in the expansive and unscholastic *Fugue*. The last of the five movements, though a little unnecessary, succeeds by skilfully carrying this basic feeling into the spirit of the *Finale*. The *Scherzo* is bright and simple, relaxed too, and not at all smart.

The perfectly proportioned song recital of John Walsh contained a group of settings to poems by James Joyce, sung in memoriam. The special feeling of the words was not captured by Arthur Bliss or Samuel Barber. E. J. Moeran, and Eugene Goossens who picked a sure-fire text, were more successful, though their songs lacked distinction. Truly matching the perfection of the verse is Roger Sessions' *On the Beach at Fontana*; yet it is difficult to reconcile the warm vocal lines with the hard, calculated and unresistant piano part. Its artistry is not so persuasive as the simple, well-

organized tonal pattern that shapes David Diamond's tender and direct *A Flower Given to My Daughter*.

III

The Coolidge Quartet gave us a chance to hear some of Virgil Thomson's chamber music on a program at the New York Public Library. Also played were an able and sensitive *Quartet* by Mary Howe, and the *Second Quartet* of Paul Hindemith, which is post-graduate Brahms. The Thomson *Quartet Number 1* is not so striking a demonstration of the Thomson tradition as his choral and vocal compositions, which I find more individual and contemporary. Its easy flow and melodiousness are attractive; perhaps they would be more satisfying if the material were more striking and individual. There is considerable immersion in the eighteenth century, not however à la Stravinsky. The *Quartet Number 2*, presented at the last of the House Music evenings sponsored by the Town Hall Club, is a more interesting piece, especially in its imaginative first movement. There is certainly nothing quite like these quartets, whose special approach precludes neither simplicity nor naturalness.

The House Music series has for its purpose the presentation of one contemporary American work at each concert, followed by audience discussion. On this particular evening (the only one I attended) the results were not notably constructive. The audience couldn't be galvanized into action, and when the questions finally started coming they were more about *Four Saints* than about the piece performed. Perhaps open forums like these need a number of given starting points of some significance, to insure a clear relative course in debate. Nevertheless the mere idea of the House Music series is in itself an antidote to the New Friends disease referred to previously.

Donald Fuller

ROCHESTER'S ELEVENTH U. S. A. FESTIVAL

I LIKED this year's Eastman School Festival of American Music, presented as usual under Howard Hanson's energetic direction, because so many good new works were uncovered and because several others had their second or third performances – not just their first and final ones.

The repetition of Charles Naginski's *Sinfonietta for Chamber Orchestra* proved the value of such hearings. After two performances at the