

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

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NEW YORK MID-SEASON, 1942 — '43

FOR this usually busy season there has been a disappointingly small amount of interesting new music. The concerts given in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of The League of Composers are reviewed elsewhere in this issue. To these can be added only the *First Symphony* by Bohuslav Martinu — premiere by the Boston Symphony — and the *Folksong Symphony* by Roy Harris in its first performance here by the Philharmonic.

However, the Martinu work would surely be one of the high spots of any season. None of his past achievements has indicated so clearly his stature as a truly sizeable composer. Besides his usual untroubled yet taut fullness, which seems to come from a whole being so clearly felt and set down, there is a rare integration of matter and of its shape, of personality, of expression, that marks the well-rounded creator. It is characteristic that no one element stands out much above the others, that none is especially striking considered by itself. The melodies are simple and natural, the harmonic progressions strong and convincing but without obviously planned originality. There is also a very fresh, new-sounding rhythmic freedom, extraordinarily smooth and uncomplicated. I did find that the rich, pulsating sonorities were a little too frequently present, though they are in no way appliquéd. The singing first movement with its pregnant opening and the beautifully sustained *Largo* are most memorable.

The Harris symphony has already been extensively reviewed in this magazine. It is certainly the most valid and natural treatment of folk material, and this because the limitations of its use are accepted. A simple form dictated by the songs themselves is employed. There are faults of balance between the sections and of over-naïve harmonic methods, but these seem unimportant viewed in the fresh drive of the music, which retains the moving qualities of the songs to a great degree. The two brief orchestral interludes make real sense in their natural setting and should in fact not be performed separately in concert, as has frequently been the case.

This was one of the Philharmonic's few good deeds in a period which has not lacked for performances of contemporary works. Bernard Herrmann's *First Symphony* was given its first concert hearing. It is full of musicality and effectiveness, but of a sort which is all too clearly adaptable only to more obvious purposes. Even had this material been worthy of symphonic treatment, the piece would still be too long. Morton Gould's *Spirituals for String Choir and Orchestra* had its Philharmonic premiere and seemed a quite deeply felt abstraction of Negro themes, with distinct dramatic power and profile. There is a certain unpleasant slickness in the work, but I find it much less in evidence than in his familiar *American Symphonette, Number 2*, where the whole feeling is pretty superficial. The *Variations for Orchestra, "Marco Takes a Walk,"* by Deems Taylor (first time anywhere) is a pointless, cheap affair, based on an amazingly foolish poem. The mere fact of its use made it possible to determine the tastelessness of the music in advance of a hearing. Only slightly better was the *Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra* by José Iturbi. There are so many of these mildly amusing Spanish sketches lying around. When the going got a little tough a piano glissando served to bridge the gap. On the same program Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* finally entered the Philharmonic repertory. The performance was so carefully considered and high-class as to be almost vulgar. Ease and grace of flow were lost. Harl McDonald's shabby tribute, *Bataan*, was given its premiere here, and there were in addition re-hearings of such works as William Schuman's *American Festival Overture* and Robert Russell Bennett's *Etudes*, previously presented by other orchestras.

## III

On the non-American side the big success story concerns the best-known Shostakovitch symphonies, which are being mercilessly re-performed by all. In spite of this overdoing they stand up really quite well and are preferable to even so comparatively interesting a new work as the Miascovsky *Symphony Number 21*, first concert performance in this country by the Philharmonic. A certain charm and feeling are in this music, but it is clearly an extension of the salon school and will bear little repetition. Ernst Krenek's *Variations on a North Carolina Folksong, "I Wonder as I Wander,"* had its first New York performance. The poignancy of the variations is not the poignancy of the theme. Taken by themselves they have sensitivity and many interesting orchestral effects, but an original theme would surely have served to better advantage, at least helping to achieve stylistic

unity. The end was very different from the beginning. Kodály's *Suite*, "Háry János" and the Weinberger *Polka and Fugue from "Schwanda,"* both familiar and pleasing excerpts, and some of Rachmaninov's more recent music were also performed. But with all this the Philharmonic hardly seems to be discharging its debt to contemporary music with any great discrimination.

A chance to hear some of the late music by Szymanowsky was offered by the Philadelphia Orchestra when it gave the *Symphonie Concertante for Piano and Orchestra*, a curious work that is far from satisfying. All the expected sensitivity, aristocracy, and intensity are here, but there are also a neo-classical façade and folk leanings which hardly ring true and only help to cover up the music's real qualities. The same program also gave us Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* and the Shostakovitch *Prelude and Scherzo for Strings*, which sounded very sloppy and confused indeed in this amplification. The Bloch *Three Jewish Poems* were performed by the National Orchestral Association. It is unfortunate that Bloch has so overdone this manner, for it is becoming increasingly difficult to appreciate such examples even at their best.

The recital field has been unrewarding even in quantity. There was a very progressive program of songs by Doris Doe including an Ives group with unfamiliar numbers, a Reger cycle, which contained more natural expressiveness than any of his music I have heard, a Debussyan but pleasing work by Louis Aubert, and a Szymanowski group, in which impressionistic and German post-romantic elements were subtly mixed. Virgil Thomson's *Air from Racine's "Phèdre"* was artful, most stylish and appropriate, with an entirely expected command of prosody.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold appeared in a program of his music at one of the Waldorf-Astoria's Monday Morning Musicales. This is a very dated and second-rate talent, perhaps of more interest in works from his prodigy period. Excerpts from a recent opera, *Kathrin*, do not inspire much hope for its artistic success when it is produced later this year by the New Opera Company. It is almost pre-Straussian music.

Hindemith's richly dark and insidiously moving early song cycle, *Die Junge Magd*, with its moments of pale twilight relief, was presented by Lillian Knowles on one of the New York Times Hall's Concerts at Nine, along with some especially beautifully early English music. On this same series Emanuel Vardi offered Arnold Bax's impassioned, but diffuse, lush, and quite static *Sonata for Harp and Viola*. Some Gershwin arrangements

by Michael Gusikoff were in the usual poor taste.

A fine series of French Music by French Artists is in progress at the Coordinating Council for French Relief Societies building. These programs have stuck largely to the familiar in the modern repertory, with emphasis on Debussy, Ravel, and Fauré, but there have been some interesting flute music by Roussel, a delicate, precise *Sonata da Camera* by Gabriel Pierné, and a premiere performance of the *Second Violin Sonata* by Robert Casadesus, impressionistic in feeling, yet with a definite neo-classic underpinning. An entire program by Judith Litante was devoted to the French art song.

A new *Two-Piano Sonata* by Hindemith was performed by Dougherty and Ruzicka. It is one of the better of the series, but the imaginative bell effects of the opening made one wish for less academicism in the rest. The old English song which inspires one of the movements seems to have had little beneficial influence. There were minor works by Germaine Tailleferre, Henry F. Gilbert, and Mary Howe, all of whose appeal was lessened by interest in the Stravinsky *Circus Polka*, as arranged by Dougherty, in its first performance for this medium here. There are a delicacy, grace, and wit in this little concertante piece, which are not at all incompatible with the elephants for whom it was written. There is no feeling of a stale joke. The *Polka* was also presented on the Vronsky and Babin recital in the latter's arrangement, which seemed to differ little from the other version. It was accompanied by a strangely inanimate *Tango*, which I believe is a piece written by Stravinsky for a piano teaching series, hardly worth while extending beyond its proper function. Babin's own *Three March Rhythms* proved skillful if none too original works, and the recital closed with the scintillating and gay *Scaramouche* suite of Milhaud, fresh and clear in its sonorities as the Stravinsky is elaborate and refined. But this *Circus Polka* is a piece of real charm and good humor.

Donald Fuller

## BIRTHDAY PIECES

TWO programs of Birthday Pieces written especially for the occasion, the first tendered by the Town Hall Endowment Series as a "Salute to The League of Composers," while the second was offered by the League itself at the Museum of Modern Art, were an appropriate celebration for the League's Twentieth Anniversary. If on the first occasion the good people of the Town Hall audience, with their essentially philanthropic