

inative on a first hearing with piano accompaniment, Isaac Stern deserves our gratitude for the premiere of a work which some foreign critics regard as a culmination point in the Polish composer's career. As for Samuel Dushkin, his pre-occupation with contemporary music is, of course, nothing new. The *Two Dance Pieces* by Silvestre Revueltas might effectively replace the degrading show-pieces which normally close evenings of violin music.

Arthur Berger

MORE ON THE NEW YORK SEASON

APTNESS for evoking atmosphere and underlining dramatic significance is strikingly displayed by Virgil Thomson in his two suites from documentary film scores, *The Plow that broke the Plains* (Philadelphia Orchestra) and *The River* (Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra). One feels little of the fragmentary and subservient quality that much incidental music has when removed from its source of stimulation. Possibly the very typical style and feel of the music, so suitable for its purpose, irresistibly calls to mind the other characteristic elements of the documentary film with which it was integrated, and thus achieves completeness of expression by inference and suggestion. Yet I think the clarity of the emotional intention, especially if a little of the "argument" is known, guarantees its power to stand alone. And though the suites can be enjoyed simply as expert examples of building larger works on the basis of folk art and its straightforward feelings of the common man, this understanding of what is being depicted, especially in *The Plow*, makes for real pointedness.

Here a simple, uninterrupted progression toward destruction provides a strong unifying factor. From the opening movement with its mournful, broad sweep, prophetic of waste, there is a gradual build-up to the final *Devastation*. This movement is very similar to the beginning, yet the careful sequence of events which leads to it results in a quite different feeling of consummated rather than implied loss. On the way there is a subtle stroke in the unhappy, almost querulous gayety of the *Blues*, a fine piece of understatement, of making a slight, apparently dissimilar mood a symbol of something more deeply tragic. Throughout there are excellent balance and proportion, and, in spite of the serious message, no lack of pastoral and earthy charm.

The River seems a hastier distillation. The more complex and varied threads of the film are reflected in the score, and one misses the tightness and drive toward a point of *The Plow*. There is too much music, over-repeated, for its essentially similar nature, yet the free-moving, unrestricted

approach justifies much of this. The boisterously expansive, more optimistic moods are definitely pleasing. They are simply not as impressive as the quiet spaciousness and simple epic feeling of *The Plow*. When he is able to achieve this quite personal music of solid human foundations, with its moving sadness and good humor, Thomson offers something very real, which is not at all in his salon or concerted efforts, or in his skillful essays based on prosodic knowledge, frequently said to represent the composer at his best.

III

The exoticism of the very new and up-to-date was exploited by The League of Composers in association with the Museum of Modern Art, in a program of percussion music directed by John Cage. This turned out to be an attempt to change what was several years ago an ephemeral and scarce tendency into a thriving business. The concrete achievement was the uncovering of certain novel sounds valuable for incorporating into the normal musical woof. Especially attractive was Cage's resonant piano, transformed by screws and rubber mutes. But in no one piece, much less an entire program, was the lack of harmonic and melodic interest sufficiently compensated for. Both Cage's and Lou Harrison's works had an irritating stop-and-go quality that was quite surprising since rhythmic continuity was obviously of such importance. And Cage's dabblings in sound were so abstract as to seem almost without emotional meaning. Most satisfactory was Henry Cowell's *Ostinato Pianissimo*, a clearly-stated intention being well carried out. The presence of a piano and marimba was also a help. The pieces by José Ardévol and Amadeo Roldán disappointed by their dependence on mechanical rhythmical formulae rather than on their richer folk influences.

Another special program of the League was devoted to composers in the armed forces. Since only one work had actually been written while the author was in service, no conclusions as to the influence of a new mode of living could be drawn. This was a less interesting demonstration than most of the League's recent young composers concerts. Style was either too ready-made, though not unintegrated with what was said, or lacking in definition. In spite of its twelve-tone burden, Emil Kohler's *Second String Quartet* showed emotional honesty and distinct personality. It had a kind of early-Bartók intensity and very little Viennese hysteria. The *Sonatina for Violin and Piano* by Ulysses Kay was an easy, flowing piece with warm sentiments, though there is still too much dependence in his

work on Hindemithian facilities. An elegant and refined, if somewhat artificial *Sonatina for Piano* by Richard Franko Goldman had charm and sweetness that contrasted strongly with the sharp-edged forcefulness of Lehman Engel's *Piano Sonata*, rather crudely expressed. The lyrical passages were pleasing, but afraid of being completely themselves. Because it seemed less predetermined stylistically or emotionally, John Cowell's *Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano* was sympathetic. The dark coloring was however over-used, and the sprightly scherzo offered insufficient variety; nor was the interesting medium fully exploited.

Béla Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion Instruments* has now appeared as a concerto with orchestral accompaniment (premiere by the Philharmonic). It is difficult to understand just what Bartók wished to achieve by amplifying his work. No new material is added. The entire orchestra is displayed for practically the sole purpose of pointing up what were originally sonorities of some piquancy. Now much is appliquéd and gilded. It is a depressing spectacle to see so many instrumentalists, especially the strings, waiting around beyond normal limits for something really significant, or anything at all, to do. This has a severe effect on the music's originally fine scaffolding. Things now appear sectional, overlong, and unbalanced, which are in reality not so. Much that is beautiful and exciting remains, there are certainly passages to which the added mass brings more articulateness, but in the end no true justification is uncovered for this strange skeleton of an orchestra.

A satisfying contrast was the Philharmonic's welcome revival of Stravinsky's *Le Chant du Rossignol*. What a precise and varied mechanism lies behind the glittering but delicate surface of this ornament. These are Stravinsky's coloristic gifts at their most sensuous. Though the end is overburdened by successive slow sections, and the whole exotic conception generates little emotional urgency, this exercise in pure charm can be heard more often without damage to its relaxing beauty. Another revival at these concerts was Prokofiev's *Third Piano Concerto*, with Dimitri Mitropoulos doubling amazingly as soloist and conductor. This work, in typical romantic concerto style, retains completely its freshness and vigor, where so many other special new interpretations of the form, fearing to be too popular in manner, have petered out. What one expects from a concerto, Prokofiev's really gives us. It represents his most fertile period, with its full-blooded lyricism, hardly surpassed by any other contemporary, and its clean, sharp, vibrant atmosphere. Rehearings were given to Vaughan

Williams' *Symphony in F minor*, Daniel Gregory Mason's *A Lincoln Symphony*, pleasing period music rather than any satisfactory picturization of its subject, Deems Taylor's *Marco Takes a Walk*, Villa-Lobos' second suite, *Descobrimento do Brasil*, and Abram Chasins' insignificant *Parade*, ten years old, but with a new opportunist dedication to our warriors. Alexandre Tansman's *Polish Rhapsody* offered his usual set amount of entertainment value, pretty superficial at this moment for this subject, and with far too many North and South American rhythmic echoes in the national dance forms.

Donald Fuller

NEWS FROM RUSSIA

By Cable to Modern Music from Moscow

ON "WAR AND PEACE"

SERGE PROKOFIEV'S new work, *War and Peace*, is an ambitious and spectacular contribution to Soviet music. The idea of making an opera out of Tolstoy's famous novel occurred to the composer in the first months of the war when many thought there would be no time for writing operas or symphonies. Nevertheless, Prokofiev undertook his project and carried it through to the last note, completing the score in mid-December. As in all of his previous operas, he collaborated with Mira Mendelson on the libretto, which is in prose throughout, the authors attempting to follow Tolstoy's original text wherever possible. The opera is scheduled for production by the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow under the direction of the well-known film director, Serge Eisenstein, with Samuel Samasud as conductor.

The conversion of *War and Peace* into an opera is an obvious temptation for almost any Russian composer today when the Soviet is fiercely resisting Fascist invasion, for it provides the opportunity to project in music those great images and events which have brought immortality to Russian literature, and which have come to symbolize the moral strength and the heroism of the Russian people. Out of the copious novel, Prokofiev chose as his theme the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 and the events directly preceding that year. He also set himself the task of reproducing not only the stirring episodes and historical personages of that period, but of retaining the lyrical story that is woven into the novel. It was his intention to weave the great range of emotions, the spirit of the Russian people, the beauty of the Russian soul, as Tolstoy portrayed them, into the entire content of the opera.