

BIOGRAPHY, PREMATURE OR OVERDONE

ON the heels of last year's publicity for the Shostakovitch *Seventh Symphony* comes a more documented and extended version of the typical newspaper blurb. *Dmitri Shostakovitch, the Life and Background of a Soviet Composer*, by Victor Ilyich Seroff, in collaboration with Nadejda Galli-Shohat, aunt of the composer (Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), is a book of all-around undue haste. Biography implies a rather complete landscape, a full experience viewed, a real measure of achievement. Shostakovitch is now, at the very best estimate, in process of a more satisfactory integration which may carry him beyond his earlier, centrifugal developments, but this is hardly a significant point at which to take stock. The actualities of the recent symphony itself, of its "message" and reception, indicate no finished epoch in his work.

The book opens with the all too familiar clichés that accompanied the debut of the *Seventh* ("... nothing can surpass the direct emotional appeal of music. The whole drama of war and suffering can be broadcast over the air for all the world to hear and understand. For music is an international language of the imagination. . .") and there is a tidy joining of the circle at its close: the music's triumphant premiere is described, and the composer's mother, who has moved a little too efficaciously through the story is seen patly at his side. Within this frame, we find the Shostakovitch family-tree, sketched in strangely gauche and bourgeois overtones; the atmosphere of a nineteenth-century Russian novel overlaid on scenes of Soviet hunger and cold; a kind of

celebrity enthusiasm — "the famous sculptor whose statue of Tchaikowsky," "the famous singer Fyodor Chaliapin," and "Claudia Luskashevitch, the famous writer of children's stories." And a naive unquestioning acceptance of the tie-up between music and politics. The book's tabloid proportions are enlarged by irrelevant material which fails to make well-rounded characters and leaves even Shostakovitch in only two dimensions at the end. In this setting it is no surprise that his music should receive no serious consideration, nor is it integrated for us with his emotional development. On the one hand there is not the reserved but penetrating command of material that such a study should ideally demand. On the other, despite the futile attempts at entrée through the composer's aunt, (who has known him only via correspondence since his seventeenth year) it does not come off valuably as a book of personal reminiscences. When the facts about Shostakovitch eventually organize themselves into some kind of near-finished structure, the author who works with them will have to move about the scaffolding with considerably more elasticity and absorption than are shown in this premature sketch.

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Quite in contrast is the careful scholarship of Edward M. Maisel's *Charles T. Griffes, the Life of an American Composer* (also A. Knopf, 1943). His detailed researches explode the usual myth about Griffes' early life, such as his discovery of the new music through Rudolph Ganz's performance, in a nearby apartment, of Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. Just how he became acquainted with

contemporary trends is not made clear, but we at least see the pre-World War generation of American composers not as outsiders cut off from the main line. Maisel discusses the personal facets of Griffes' life, particularly his homosexual tendencies, with discretion but only superficially. Though there is an almost day-by-day account of his doings, we fail to discover what are probably the origins of the characteristic passion of his music. The man appears finally somewhat unemotional, his small-town qualities intensified. One suspects however that he remained to the end a naïf. Passages from early letters during his German apprenticeship, "the play is real pathetic" and "to me it was too flat for anything," are mirrored, if less obviously, in later writings. His passion appears to have been that of youthful enthusiasm, rather than intense personal experience. By leaving some of the picture veiled, Maisel perhaps falls short of giving us that satisfactory integration of music and personality, which I miss even more strongly in the Shostakovich book. Outside of a rather elaborate analysis of the *Piano Sonata*, comment on the music is limited to interest-

ing quotes of contemporary criticism. For my taste the routine account is too detailed. Only a Griffes enthusiast could go some of the episodes. In the end I do not find that he emerges more than a minor figure.

There is, however, a good deal of valuable matter on the difficulties of establishing a career as composer in America. Griffes' attempts to obtain interest for his work in the most insignificant and unrewarding places are pitiful. The list of his annual royalties is unbelievably meager though his eventual success in placing most of his compositions for publication is hardly matched by many today.

If the Shostakovich story has been offered too soon, the Griffes' life appears to have been too vigorously explored. Biography's success depends upon the vitality of its material, and an interesting life is not always the concomitant of significant creative achievement. Both books contain good appendices and indexes, though the present confused state of the catalogue of Griffes' compositions hardly justifies omitting it completely from this volume pending future clarification.

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