

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

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## AIRBORNE OVER NEW YORK: SPRING 1946

**T**HE *AIRBORNE* brought Marc Blitzstein back to the world of music theatre with an impact and a spread power like a paratroop battalion in action. Opinions varied about the basic inspiration type of the work. Norman Corwin, for his large-scale radio pictures, probably won out, though some found a more obvious connection with documentary film technique. More important for me was the fact that Blitzstein's work stands quite by itself, direct and affecting in its appeal. The theatre is implied, but props and costumes would hardly cover up certain imperfect features of the score; Blitzstein is just obviously most obsessed at any moment by some strong dramatic point. This is equivalent to theatrical effect and takes precedence over precise details.

The work lacks the skinny half-hour pretentiousness of the radio lesson, and better still, though it is overlong, the fatty fullness of the usual concert work involving sizeable groups. Certainly *The Airborne* is not a symphony, as titled. Its many sections fail to group themselves into a four-movement pattern. And Blitzstein does not substitute some long-range form with a clear dramatic curve. Yet the score encompasses a huge canvas with great daring and frequent success. The audience reaction was instantaneous to this performance by the New York City Symphony and the Collegiate Chorale under Leonard Bernstein's direction, with Orson Welles as narrator.

Blitzstein leaves the doors open; one tends to think little of his musical style as such, since he freely uses so many techniques and approaches. This will some day lead to real style. His slow music, with its simple, fluent line and texture, communicates most. When things move fast or violently he tends to take what is close at hand, which sometimes merely fills the bill. Blitzstein cannot yet combine lyrical flow with speed; he falls back on crudities for effect, or, in more demanding moments, makes use of short Coplandesque motives with appropriate treatment. But when a touching letter back home or an almost naively intense warning for the future can hit the emotional nail so exactly on the head, there is clearly all the back-

bone needed to make an expressive work, in or out of the theatre.

Lukas Foss's *Symphony in G* was another premiere by the City Symphony, the composer conducting. For the sake of a bigger conception, Foss seems here to have enlarged the number of his stylistic attachments. Though one finds little Hindemith and few stringent formal Coplandisms, there are signs of some eclecticism. However, Foss appears more likely to bring forth his complete individuality after a struggle with his original obsessions, rather than by disregarding them for a free manner. The *Symphony* is less arresting than his other recent works because of this relaxing of manner. The slow movement, most impressive, has an ornate middle section filled with invention and mystery. Not so Roy Harris's *Memories of a Child's Sunday* (New York Philharmonic) in which palpitating polytonalities give any secret away by their intensive application. Or William Grant Still's *Poem*, another Philharmonic offering, which goes to great trouble to present and clearly develop its undistinguished ideas. The opening theme, with its Scriabinesque leanings, suggests an Ornstein revival.

The B'nai B'rith Victory Lodge's prize-winning piece, Harold Shapero's *Serenade in D*, had only its first movement conducted by Leonard Bernstein at the George Gershwin memorial concert. The results of Shapero's intensive study of Viennese classical techniques and textures are admirable, his command over form and material is a wonder. But though he rings many changes on a basically Stravinskian method, one feels that the composer does not give himself completely. When Shapero expresses some of the slap-dash force of his earlier works through his present comprehensive means, relaxes his serious intentness a bit for a few purely lighthearted moments, we shall have a more rounded composer.

Two of his *Three Amateur Sonatas* for piano, on a League of Composers program, revealed his talent more sympathetically, since the flavor is more characteristic. From the standpoint of piano style the pieces are impeccable. Shapero's extended and gentle slow movements are most compelling, but one also notes an almost Brahmsian interlude that passed like a quick breeze and the rollicking finales. Copland's orchestration of his *Danzon Cubano*, performed at the George Gershwin concert, adds another effective concert piece to the modern repertory. The shy but confident elegance of this evocation is even more apparent than in the original two-piano version. Bernstein, who conducted the concert, presented his own *Three Dance Episodes* from *On the Town*. These exert much sinuous and sexy charm, but remembrance of the show does add to their enjoyment.

A new *Nocturne* by Jerzy Fitelberg appeared on a Philharmonic program along with a *Festival Overture* by Jacques Ibert. Fitelberg's piece shows him with a less astringent, more romantic style than formerly. A quiet, meditative theme is followed by four variations which explore the



SNOWING



GELLO PLAYER

MUSIC IN A PAINTER'S WORLD

Pictures by MARC CHAGALL

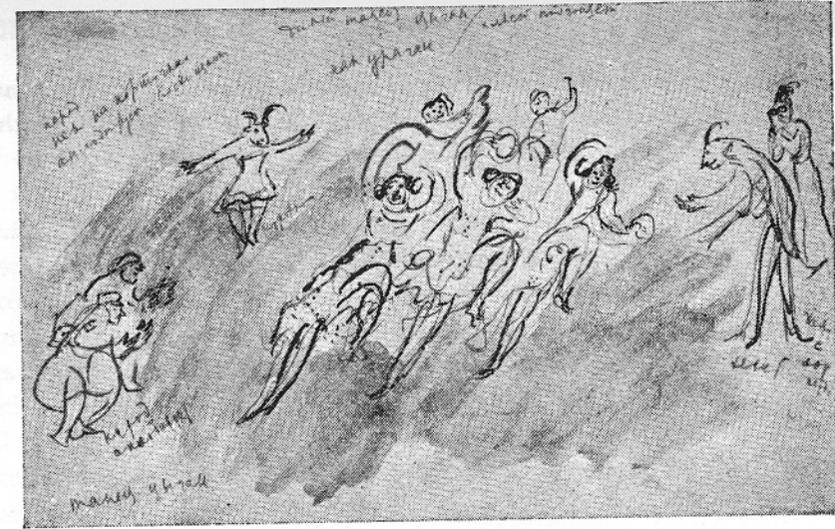
From the current exhibition of his work  
at the Museum of Modern Art  
New York City



DIE BASSGEIGE



ACROBAT WITH VIOLIN



CHOREOGRAPHIC SKETCH FOR "ALEKO"



MUSICIAN

more fanciful and mysterious aspects of the night. Ibert's material is rarely very striking, but the complete clarity of his music and the sense of joy in writing that it reveals always afford me much pleasure.

## III

Stravinsky has followed up his recent *Symphony in Three Movements* with a little charmer, the *Ebony Concerto*, written expressly for Woody Herman and his band and performed by them at their Carnegie Hall concert. The piece is of course expertly contrived for the group; the sonority is delicate yet full and varied. Stravinsky has succeeded amazingly in combining jazz elements with the lighter side of his late neo-classical manner. The gay but restrained first movement wavers insidiously between styles, seems often about to become out-and-out jazz yet remains something completely itself. The slow movement, like a reconsidered blues, ponders its unhappiness with gentle concern. I should, however, have liked more excitement in the finale, where a bit of sound and fury would have been effective. The *Concerto* seems a touching yet very wide-awake rumination on what once gave Stravinsky material for a rather rowdy *Ragtime*.

Works for more conventional small orchestra combinations appeared on an American program of Joseph Barone's New York Little Symphony sponsored by the League of Composers. Main interest centered on the first performance of Charles Ives's *Third Symphony*, which Lou Harrison presented as guest conductor. What can explain the neglect of this simple and direct piece? The more conventional harmonic scheme shows Ives at his best and in no way precludes many imaginative progressions. The form, though hardly traditional, is quite convincing. Folk material – in this case hymn tunes familiar at revival meetings – is used with natural feeling, never with an over-professional touch or so as to make the composer's own sentiments subservient. The closing Largo, most elegiac, unfolds beautifully, with a spirituality both intense and serene.

Harrison also presented his own *Motet for the Day of Ascension*. In this piece, part of a work in progress, a rich yet transparent sonority is achieved by a small body of strings. The technique, twelve-tone in origin, produces limpid and expressive results. Carl Ruggles' *Portals* was heard, too, in a revised version losing none of this work's rather heavy if passionately sincere poetry.

A moving little monograph by Harrison, *About Carl Ruggles*, has been published by the Alicat Bookshop. The *Evocations* for piano are taken as a starting point for the analysis of Ruggles' style and the expressive quality of his music. The difference between Ruggles and members of the Schönberg school is made clear and the spiritual qualities of his work are thoroughly explored. Many who are not so convinced about the importance of Ruggles will surely be distressed by Harrison's remarks about the

"pushed artifice of the dry Stravinsky, Buxtehude, Beethoven texture." But this is a long overdue discussion of one of our musical figures about whom too little is known.

The first half of Barone's program featured works by two of our finest young neo-classicists, Alexei Haieff and Arthur Berger. Haieff's *Divertimento*, in five brief movements, has great flair, admirable perfection and proportion. It communicates its fresh moods with sharpness and no fussiness. Berger's *Capriccio* is not as successful as his more recent works in its formal continuity, though the sectionalism often seems quite in keeping with the nature of the piece. One is always conscious of an inventive structural intelligence at work. Berger's materials are not unfamiliar but there is a strong personal slant to them, an almost romantic subjectifying of neo-classical formulas. A short and starkly expressive *Prelude to "Spoon River"* by Harry Hewitt opened the program.

## III

An attractive premiere on a League of Composers chamber music concert was the *Partita* for flute, oboe, string quartet and harpsichord obbligato by Vittorio Rieti, in which Sylvia Marlowe was the soloist. The work makes excellent use of the medium and the emotional quality is most apt. Though outwardly neo-classic the work has definite romantic touches; sentiment is expressed most elegantly. The first of the five movements is a moderate and sweetly-singing pastorale. But I liked even better the racy fast sections which bubbled with high spirits. Before this, Miss Marlowe performed *Three Sonatas* by Harrison, bright essays in the Scarlatti fashion, and Virgil Thomson's *Three Portraits*, equally well suited to the harpsichord because so reminiscent of the expressive manners of early keyboard music.

Olivier Messiaen made one of his first local "appearances" at this same concert. Excerpts from the *Poèmes pour mi* were sung by Nell Tange-man. Messiaen's cadence figures, harmonic scheme and rhythmic displacements distil their own strong perfume. But the material is not really so new. The juxtaposition of elements accounts for the unusual tone. This method is so rigorous and unvaried that the effect is often monotonous. And his religious mysticism does not always come through as a very penetrating or even convincing state of feeling.

He seemed even less effective, however, in a sizeable work, the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, presented on one of the excellent concerts of "France Forever." The opening, with its bird effects, is striking, but this almost Schönbergian pointillist technique, which introduces most of the eight movements, is extended to nearly unbearable lengths. The composer seemed to be trying to stave off the event he described, with what for me

was some pretension. The slow parts, especially the close, are quite lovely; they are informed with an almost old-fashioned lyrical sense.

This vague seeking was shown up by the Milhaud *Twelfth Quartet*, which constantly preaches mastery through simplicity. Dedicated to the memory of Fauré, it reflects that composer's fluid melodic style, his formal methods. But the feeling is completely Milhaud, in one of his twilight romantic moods. Henri Sauguet's *Quartet in D Major*, similar in outlook, is spontaneous music, distinguished more for its honest directness and natural sentiments than for any striking qualities of invention. It seems strangely related, even stylistically, to Schumannesque romanticism.

Poulenc's moving song cycle, *Tel Jour, Telle Nuit*, was sung by Maggie Teyte, and choral works were presented by the Lehman Engel Singers. *Salve Regina* shows Poulenc in his mystical religious mood. It is music of deep conviction, often quite powerful in its gaunt but resonant sonorities. The *Sept Chansons* reveal the heartwarming Poulenc, poet of daily emotions. The exquisitely tender alternates with the exquisitely gay; the evocations of love are often violent and impassioned. Surely Poulenc's mastery of choral technique and effect is unsurpassed today.

A program of Ernst Bacon's smaller works was sponsored by Syracuse University. Though his pieces for violin and piano and for two pianos show a fresh treatment of folk material, Bacon's métier is obviously with words. The vocal line of the songs is charmingly fashioned, the accompaniments are in themselves perfectly shaped and also give knowing support to what is being sung. The same care and subtlety is revealed in his choral settings. *From Emily's Diary*, a cantata for women's voices, manages to catch the spirit of Dickinson about as well as anyone has so far.

On Gold and Fizdale's two-piano recital, there were first performances of two American sonatas, by Paul Bowles and Alexei Haieff. Bowles's work is as extended and developed a non-theatrical piece as he has done. The textures are rich and satisfying; Bowles is not afraid to take advantage of his medium. The capricious but solid first movement has a strangely individual quality. In the slow movement the use of languid jazz produces delicious results. The finale, an experiment in almost pure rhythm, is exciting, though its emphasis on one element gives a rather one-sided impression. Haieff's work, beautifully conceived on a large scale, reveals his personality more sharply than any of his previous works. The neo-classical viewpoint is colored by a very Russian display of temperament, most apparent in the fast movements, especially the brilliant troika-like finale. The Andante, however, is the true crown of the work, deeply introspective and moving. Haieff's skill at inventing interesting sonorities is fully revealed by the combination of two pianos.

The Stravinsky *Sonata* had one of its rare performances, and there

were shorter pieces to replace the usual endless two-piano arrangements: Virgil Thomson's *Five Inventions*, pleasing for their straightforward clarity of line, and three excerpts from Rieti's *Second Avenue Waltzes*. These are quite often unabashedly sentimental, as waltzes should be, but have many witty and satirical touches. John Cage's *Dance* for prepared pianos revealed his sensitivity to sonorities in a form whose very personal kind of continuity had considerable drive. The close, with a repeated tone against a background of monotony, was quite magical in an almost frightening way.

Earlier in the season a memorial program to Bela Bartok was presented by the League of Composers. The large works heard are by now, of course, modern classics. They were expertly performed by the artists, the *Second Violin Sonata* by Tossy Spivakovsky, the *Piano Sonata* by Andor Foldes and the *First Quartet* by the Budapest String Quartet. Several of the songs given by Enid Szantho were unfamiliar and quite recent; their deeply expressive quality made one hope they will now appear more regularly on recital programs. The striking individuality shown even in the early *Quartet* indicates clearly that from the very beginning Bartok was a figure of real distinction, who encompassed a wide emotional range with a technical skill of great invention and power.

Donald Fuller

## MOSTLY CHAMBER MUSIC

THIS small mid-season I found more interesting for its chamber music presentations than for its orchestral ones. A *Suite* for violin and piano by Alexei Haieff, played by Joseph Fuchs, was vigorous and interesting. The few slow sections were both affecting and well-made, and though the fast ones adhered rather rigidly to the Stravinsky and Copland manner in their pattern, they bounced and jumped quite convincingly. Lehman Engel's new *Cello Sonata*, played by Bernard Greenhouse, was singularly lacking in motor drive, not because it was calm and meditative but because of its tonal and rhythmic weariness. Though quite competent in shape, it was tedious in expression. The first performance of another *Cello Sonata*, by Alfredo Casella, was given by Ana Dritelle. This has only a moment or two of warm sweet air and rather continuously laments the passing of empire in a set of barely concealed "marches of armies by night." It stays somewhere around the early thirties in texture and suggests that its composer wished music would stop developing new means, though mastery of the restricted material it does employ is also shown.

Webster Aitken galloped brilliantly through a quite shocking *Fantasia Burlesque* by Olivier Messiaen. I was incensed by its gaudy and vulgar swoops and swishes and firmly convinced that it was just an especially revolting work for the post-graduate perfume trade. Later I reflected on the