

FORECAST AND REVIEW

SEASON'S END, MAY 1944

THE end of New York's season was in many ways more exciting than any other part of it. Three large new orchestral works were given first performances and in the chamber field we heard two experimental concerts which went to prove that the restless days are not over.

The much-heralded *Eighth Symphony* of Shostakovitch, Opus 65, was played by the New York Philharmonic under Rodzinski's baton. By at least two counts Shostakovitch has now passed beyond the pale of ordinary musical criticism. First, he is as much a part of the war effort as Winston Churchill; and, second, it has been his inscrutable choice, with this new work, to enter the Elysian Fields and take tea in the company of Wagner and Mahler. Eliot's famous shadow which falls between the idea and the reality appears to have been steadily descending in musical Russia ever since it was decided more or less officially that German musical culture after 1900 was no good at all and that Parisian art was similarly decadent. In an age which seems in all else to be devoted to expanding communication, it is frightening to see that the art of music and its esthetics can be studied anywhere as a form of tribal witchcraft. Here we have the spectacle of a creative mind – apparently isolated – straining after progress and being able only to write descriptive propaganda and to make each piece longer and longer. How much could have been saved, if the post-romantic Germans had been fully and freely exposed in Russia. For Shostakovitch's *Eighth Symphony* is a dismal rewriting of Mahler and early Schönberg minus their spirit and sensitivity. When the performance was over, I wanted to hear one of those frivolous little symphonies of Bruckner; it made me realize how really full of musical ideas both Bruckner and Mahler are. Now I simply dread the Ninth.

Another work related to the war was Samuel Barber's *Second Symphony*, Opus 19 (dedicated to the Army Air Forces) played by Kousse-

vitzky. This piece had moments of great interest and several of convincing beauty. Barber has a healthy disregard for good taste and sometimes the inevitable jolts are disturbing; at others, they result in a surprising life and beauty. I liked the opening measures, the development and the coda of the first movement. The coda is especially striking with its high pedal point and the strange tense resolution. The use of major seconds skipping about in the woodwinds, mixed with piano, was quite interesting also. The second movement culminates in a strongly lyrical section of massed polyphony, which though sincere and moving, is suddenly interrupted by a mysterious radio signal that merely makes one wish he knew the Morse code. The finale was a more conventional but still vigorous section, opening with several striking bravura runs for the violins.

For the quiet and well organized world of strings William Schuman has made a solid and likeable *Symphony*. His polyphony, while not really independent nor original, is well written and continuous. I got a little lost in the energetic first movement because nothing in particular held my attention but at any rate such a style makes one want to hear the piece again. A sensitive and noble *Larghissimo* is followed by a brilliant and skittery *Presto Leggiero*. On the whole, I felt that the restriction to string instruments had a happy result on Schuman's style.

Stokowski at the new City Center played Virgil Thomson's suite from *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and Dai-Keong Lee's *Pacific Prayer*, which like Shostakovitch's work was rushed from overseas via microfilm. This was fairly undistinguished, in the Americanistic style with a little of everyone.

The Philharmonic series of League commissions continued with the performance of Darius Milhaud's enigmatic *Cortège Funèbre*. It is a beautiful demonstration of Milhaud's bewigged lyricism. The grand gesture is there and the formal passion of the French mind. Performances of Milhaud are getting to be rare occasions, and it is a great pleasure to catch one when you can.

The Gordon Quartet played William Bergsma's *Quartet Number 1*. Bergsma has handled the ensemble with skill and variety. He is influenced by several composers, early Schönberg and Shostakovitch being most in evidence. The first movement was the best and sustained its intensely expressive character throughout. The two fast ones I found pointless. The *Quartet* exhibits strength and a developing technical command.

Richard Arnell's new *Symphony* proved long and rather dull. Occasionally there was a good melodic chain but accompanying everything, almost from beginning to end was the unimaginative jittering of a chord set forth as constant semiquavers. Even the use of the Alberti bass would have been welcome. The atmosphere was neo-Schubertian, but held promise of more charm and romance than actually came through. Sir Thomas Beecham danced his way through this with a chamber orchestra at Town Hall.

The Busch Players, also at Town Hall, played Samuel Barber's sweet and short *Serenade*, Opus 1. It was well written and unified. All one remembers of Adolph Busch's setting of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* for saxophone and chamber orchestra is that the sax is a really lovely instrument, though still a shocker.

Dougherty and Ruzicka played Stravinsky's *Concerto per due pianoforte soli*. The work is ten years old and needs no further explanation or comment in these columns. On the same program was a sonata called *Music from Seas and Ships* by Dougherty, a clever and facile getting up of a number of American folk tunes.

Andor Foldes played an all contemporary piano concert at the Y.M.H.A. featuring a juxtaposition of the Bartok and Copland sonatas. This was interesting to hear and made evident what is in many ways a similar formal and technical approach between the two composers and threw into relief the extreme difference in expressive material. Jacques de Menasce was represented by a *Sonatina Number 2*. This is a carefully written piece, pleasant to listen to. The Adagio reaches into a solemn region and sustains a singing polyphony throughout. It was also a pleasure to see a concert pianist abandon the keyboard and bravely perform one of Cowell's beautiful pieces for the strings themselves. Foldes did well with the *Aeolian Harp* and it is evident that this field may yet enliven other pianists' programs. Also played were a strange and interesting *Prelude* by Foldes using some new and moving distortions of fairly familiar romantic materials; an undistinguished *Prelude and Dance* by Paul Creston, a *Sonatina* by Abraham Binder and a *Novelette* by Leroy Robertson.

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This brings us to the two experimental concerts. The League of Composers presented Harry Partch in a program of his own compositions for instruments of his own devising. These latter all play a forty-three-tone

scale. As Mr. Partch uses them, they seem never to do much but decorate a comparatively simple basis, much in the same way that Ives uses the twelve tones to decorate a fairly simple scheme. One is also reminded of Ives by Partch's use of bardic material for his compositions, mostly about and by hoboes; but missing is the transcendence of Ives' conceptions. The mannerisms of using the instruments were too often repeated. A chord would be struck and then suddenly swoop up to heaven via sliding tones and perhaps down again. The actual music was on the whole negligible, but the special sounds were often interesting. I wondered what a composition really involving an integral use of the forty-three tones would sound like. *U. S. Highball* (a musical account of Slim's Transcontinental Hobo Trip) I found several miles too long. *San Francisco* (setting of the cries of two newsboys) was the best and shortest piece. Around these cries Mr. Partch has woven a spell of about the foggiest and dampest music I have ever heard. I got homesick.

John Cage, another Californian, presented with dancer Merce Cunningham a program of original works at the Studio Theatre. Mr. Cage's music ran all the way from dance accompaniments to self-sufficient pieces, and most of it was written for the altered piano. This means that many objects and materials were pre-set into the strings on special notes, to produce, for each selected tone, any one of uncounted tone colors. The result is a highly sensitive and easily coordinated percussion orchestra immediately under the fingertips of the pianist, in this case Mr. Cage himself. *The perilous night*: six solos, is a set of whispers about some unknown plot in some other-worldly bedchamber. Each piece has some special almost etude-like characteristic and the final one, set up for high and low sounds only, sounded like a nervous and exposed Brandenburg Concerto. The volume-scale is low, and because of this and the shivering delicacy of the expression, one is strongly reminded of Anton von Webern. Junita Hall sang splendidly two difficult songs with the muted piano. The first, *she is asleep*, bore a curious resemblance to American Indian love songs because of the tender graces given to the voice. The piano mutes here reached such an extreme of quietude as to make one hope Cage would not mute himself into silence. The second, *the wonderful widow of eighteen springs*, was more immediately normal in vocal line but the accompaniment was for hand tappings on the body of the piano. A performance of the beautiful *amores* concluded the musical portion of the program. Cage's music strikes perhaps the last note in the romantic era;

it reaches a maximum of personalization in every one of its elements. He has mastered a curious and convincing form of rhapsodic rhythm, intimate and free; what might be called baroque rhythm.

Lou Harrison

BERNSTEIN, BALLET, AND CHAMBER MUSIC

LEONARD Bernstein has conducted premieres here of two of his own works, the *Symphony, "Jeremiab"* with the New York Philharmonic and, with Ballet Theatre, his score for the new *Fancy Free*. Both reveal a pleasing lack of inhibitions. An unrestricted emotional drive carries Bernstein along. He is not worried about stylistic propriety, about just what category his music will fall into. In the symphony the resulting eclecticism is rather well absorbed. For me, the tense austerity of the first movement, the fresh charm of the Chassidic theme which opens the scherzo, and the expressive simplicity of the final Lamentation stand out above it. In the ballet score he is much more extroverted about his varied indebtedness. The jazz method is Copland's, and *Scheherezade* and the Stravinsky *Capriccio*, among others, lend a helping hand. The music fits the action beautifully, with apt underlining. It enlarges upon a plain and down-to-earth story without over-dramatizing it. A composer more conscious of obligations to his own distinction would have done a less satisfactory job. Yet the very appropriateness of Bernstein's work makes it more a task professionally accomplished than a creation of loving care, while at the same time it fills the bill, exposes a very real personality. The symphony, though nicely planned, proceeds on definitely set programmatic lines. The theatre, with its exterior inspiration, its prescribed forms and need for flair, seems the place for Bernstein. There is much emotion in his music, but I am not sure it is always his own. In an abstract work the eclecticism would show to disadvantage, the lack of distinct profile would be felt. For certain technical crudities, now subservient to a point made, there would be no justification without dramatic demands. The orchestration in both works, if not highly original, is knowing, sharp, and brilliant.

Besides *Fancy Free*, the only musical novelty offered by Ballet Theatre was Paul Nordoff's arrangement of some Gluck music for Agnes DeMille's *Tally-Ho*. As with the Bellini score arranged by Antal Dorati for *The Romantic Age*, the music is converted into more obvious theatre by a spicy orchestration and ends by seeming only slightly less suitable than Offenbach. A trumpet, for instance, is used on what Gluck would