

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

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## FIRST-TIME FASHIONS, NEW YORK, 1944

CONTEMPORARY music is beginning to appear on programs now as a more or less fundamental part of concert giving. Last year a number of singers and pianists presented new works. This year, if the first part of the season is any indication, the gracious custom has been taken up by other instrumentalists and by the chamber orchestras. It is not to be implied that last year there was an actual omission of contemporary music. On the contrary, much was played. But this year's programs indicate an advance towards a natural and large-scale inclusion of new pieces by almost every performer. This is very commendable, but, although it is a help to reviewing, one could wish for less emphasis on precisely what kind of "first" the artist is giving. So far I have seen several kinds; first American performance, first New York performance, first public New York performance, just plain first performance, plus a few permutations of these. This is hair-splitting. It's desirable to establish a contemporary repertory in the minds of musicians, but too much emphasis on "firsts" is inimical to the repertory idea. Schnabel once remarked, during the fabulous between-wars period, that a first performance often served as both the cradle and the grave of the unfortunate work. It is also notable that the present splurge is not accompanied by a proportionate increase in the playing of classic moderns, which is essential to any understanding of twentieth century music.

While the modern music turnover is quite large, a great deal of it is badly played. Sufficient rehearsal is, of course, necessary in order to present any new piece intelligently and I suspect that a lot of new music isn't played at all because time to learn it can't be found. A campaign for adequate rehearsals is tantamount to asking for a revolution in the American music industry, since there is more and more a tendency not to rehearse a piece, but simply to "play" it, and in public at that.

Of the concerts I attended this month only one conductor revealed that he really understood the nature of rehearsal and his own responsibilities toward music. Several pianists showed an apparent understanding, but judging soloists is not as easy as judging conductors or orchestral spirit.

Daniel Saidenberg's enchanting concert with the Saidenberg Little Symphony (Town Hall) presented in beautiful and dignified musical surroundings two new American works, Henry Cowell's *Hymn and Fuguing Tune* for strings, and Samuel Barber's new *Capricorn Concerto* for flute, oboe, trumpet, and strings. Cowell's piece is fundamentally based on the English-Kentucky-mountain modal system as set forth in the shape-note hymns. However this is only the local color; the music itself indicates a new, serious and satisfying development in Cowell's long list of stylistic adventures. He has avoided the perils of folksong style and developed a pure and rich piece bearing a close relationship to the seventeenth century English Fancy. It is remarkable that this should happen in 1944 to a modern composer; for though the generating influence is largely the same, the temperament and technic of Cowell is most unlike, say, Jenkins' or Lawes'. The characteristic form in this work is also similar to that of a Fancy in two parts and indicates that some sort of law must operate during the cultivation of a polyphonic style out of just this kind of material. The string scoring is both adventurous and effective, occasionally leaving great spatial gaps between the top and bottom and then suddenly filling the vacant area with new entries.

Samuel Barber's new *Capricorn Concerto* is a brilliant work, and takes the cake for orchestration this month. The charming combinations he achieves with the wind concertino are very telling indeed and produce a bubbling opalescence. The music is well worked, although very Stravinskian, and makes intentional and persistent use of that old academic bugaboo, the general pause. Actually, Barber has done an obvious but seldom thought-of thing. When he comes to the end of a section of material, instead of making the fluid and highly professionalized transition into the next idea, he simply stops. Dead silence for a fraction of a second and then everything begins at once with the new material already in full action. The device is effective and frank. It is used over and over and becomes an integral stylistic feature. Except for this, though, the piece might have been signed by the Stravinsky of a few years back. Barber has a tremendous technical grasp and an essential

urge to expression, but he seems fascinated in turn by each of the famous masks and mantles. If he ever catches up with himself he certainly will be a composer of power and interest.

Saidenberg also played, from the modern string repertory, the *Sinfonietta Opus 32, Number 2* of Miaskowsky for which I have a distinct weakness, particularly when it is played so well. No apologies are offered since the work, although so romantically unfashionable and grand-manner, still has breadth of design, color and momentum, and really is wonderfully made for the strings.

Rodzinski and the Philharmonic have been rather unadventurous in modern choices so far and this is lamentable since Rodzinski is a fine interpreter of contemporary music.

First, he chose a new version of John Carpenter's *Sea Drift*. This is regulation ocean music. Small waves and winds are gracefully conducted up and down on the clarinets and flutes. The lower strings rock back and forth like water in a deep shore pool and make general mystery. As usual, the heavy seas were ushered in on tamtams and trombones. I missed the passing pirate ship, though, and the mermaids. Unfortunately all sea pieces must now reckon with Debussy's *La Mer* from the moment of its composition on. This piece doesn't, though it takes a handy trick or so and as a result sounds vaguely like *La Mer* with the big tunes left out.

Walter Piston's *Fugue on a Victory Theme* must be some new-fangled kind of fugue because it starts right off with what seems like stretto stuff and furthermore with all voices at once being as busy as can be. The theme is, I presume, a bugle call of victory, and proceeds along a chattering and confetti-throwing course for a few brief moments to a gay ending. It is quite amusing and stunt-like, nothing more.

Villa-Lobos is as unpredictable a composer as can be imagined and I always anticipate hearing a work of his with fear and trembling. He seems to alternate between the most serious styles and a kind of music that in Hollywood might result in a travelogue on Beautiful Brazil. One of each kind of thing was played by Rodzinski. The *Bachianas Brasileiras Number 5*, for eight cellos and soprano, is lyrical and serious, and the most amazingly sincere, outright use of academic counterpoint possible, though occasionally it trips over the toes of Gounod and Massenet. But it is perfectly lovely and I would like to listen to it every afternoon at five. The idea of using just one orchestral section during a whole piece

as Villa-Lobos has done in several of these *Bachianas Brasileiras* is delightful and so obvious that one wonders why it hasn't been done more frequently, both to enliven the creative imagination and to embellish and enhance the variety of sound on an orchestra program. The scoring for soprano in conjunction with the 'celli is clever and effective, both when the soprano is vocalizing and when she sings words. The excerpt from *Bachianas Brasileiras Number 2* for the full orchestra is called a toccata and is about *The Little Train of Caipira*. It is good train music and clearly and beautifully scored. It is, of course, a genre piece and little else, but very amusing and brilliant, and if we must have novelties then this is a good kind to have.

A second performance of what William Schuman is pleased to call his *Symphony Number 3* was also presented. I do not respond to this kind of music. It seems to me formless and stuffy. The scoring I found muddy and the effect quite out of proportion to the large size of the means employed. There is also a perfectly good name for a composition involving a passaglia, chorale, fugue and toccata. It is a suite, not a symphony.

Leopold Stokowski, sworn to the policy of playing a new work on each of his City Symphony concerts has so far presented Franz Bornschein's *Moon Over Taos* and Shostakovich's *Symphony Number 8*. Under such a frightful title Bornschein has written what I consider to be one of the better Indian pieces. It consists of a long and rhapsodic flute solo accompanied by strings. I think the drum-like sound which punctuated the phrases was produced by the lower strings, *col legno battuto*, although I was unable to check. The nearer that Indian-like music gets to being a flute solo with an occasional polyphonic comment by a soft drum, the closer it comes to being beautiful and authentic. Bornschein has discovered this and only adds a sustained chord or so on the violins, unobtrusively and in keeping. The piece had a delicately dignified ritual character.

Oh that some conductor would discover the Ives' orchestral works! Fair warning is here given that sooner or later, someone is going to make his conductorial reputation on the strength of them. How soon, how late? The Philharmonic has by now sufficiently established the policy of playing modern music so that Ives' symphonies or suites would be a natural for the audience and might well be received with banners and flower-throwing on the part of almost everyone. It is sad that so important a composer should have reached his seventieth birthday and still be unperformed by the leading orchestra of his own city.

Kurt List's *Five Contrapuntal Pieces* for piano, played by Frederick Marantz at Town Hall are really new music, in the sense of being dissonant, interesting and exploratory. The suite is a dignified and heartening achievement and is a quite positive indication that the old skull and cross-bones raised above the supposedly sinking ark of new music flies either in wishful thinking or in make-believe. The *Five Contrapuntal Pieces* are contemplative, patient with themselves and with the instrument for which they are written. They ask to be lived with as one lives with a picture, and would I am sure repay one out of their occasionally intransigent texture with new pleasure. A Prelude, Passacaglia, Choral-Fantasy, Fugue and Toccata are neatly set off against one another in spirit, yet tightly bound together by thematic and other technical devices. The sharp and unusual fugue was interesting because of the static nature of its subject and the arabesques of the accompanying voices.

On this program Marantz also played Alban Berg's still fresh and fragrant *Sonata Opus 1*. One gets quite a shock on hearing the Berg *Sonata* now to realize how callously the movies live on what they borrow. If ever a Hollywood star made love or sighed on a solitary cliff this music is the unwilling grand-papa of her accompaniment. Commercial musicians ought to be assessed for every idea they take from a creative artist's works, since they tax the capacity of such composers to keep them supplied with ideas to imitate, exploit and, one might add, cheapen.

Janos Scholz played at Town Hall a *Duo Concertato for 'Cello and Piano* by Norman Dello Joio who is New York's most considerable lyric talent. The piece is in the form of a slowish introduction and epilogue with a fast main section. It is well-written for the instruments and succeeds in making that oil-and-water combination satisfactory and enjoyable. Clear and slightly cool, Dello Joio's delicate melodies proceeded at a regular and normal pace throughout. Another of his new pieces, *Prelude: To a Young Musician*, played by Sidney Foster at Carnegie Hall seemed to me not as well integrated and showed, through its occasional gaps, more of the workings of its French academic foundations than was needed.

On the same program, *Two Mexican Dances* by Paul Bowles sounded like musical patchwork quilts, gay and irresponsible, one of the many covers under which one goes to bed with the folk.

I was able to put together from the efforts of several pianists an impression of Prokofiev's Opus 95 and 96, which are dance music, the Opus 96 being arranged from the ballet in his new opera *The Age of Gold*.

This subject seems to be an endless source of inspiration to Soviet composers. Now, after the long running into the ground of Shostakovitch's *Polka*, we are due for a landslide of the same sort of thing by Prokofiev. Both Shostakovitch and Prokofiev have produced the clever and entertaining type of distortion-mirror stuff that seems to shine with malicious reflection on the age of poor Queen Victoria.

Leonard Bernstein was twice represented this month by his *Seven Anniversaries*. I heard Gordon Manley at Town Hall play five of them which were competent, smooth and Coplandesque. The one to the memory of Nathalie Koussevitsky was quite moving and spacious and has a little downward melodic sigh in thirds that seem to stick in one's head.

Harlod Kohon played at Town Hall a new *Sonata For Violin Alone* by Johan Franco which rather undid me. Though not lacking in interesting devices to improve the color of so ascetic a medium, I fail to see that the transposition downwards or upwards of principal chords by minor seconds does anything but produce in the lay mind some pleasant misapprehension that he is listening to modern music, or, in the trained mind, a slight annoyance at the wilfulness of the deception. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Neapolitan Sixth. The same recital also offered a playing of Eda Rapoport's new *Midrash*, a well-done rehash of Bloch's ultra-Hebraic style.

Lou Harrison

## SUMMER MUSIC: THE STADIUM

AT the Stadium the promised hearing of a new *Symphony* by Jerome Moross did not come off. There was rain one night, an unexplained omission the next. Thus the Stravinsky *Four Norwegian Moods*, in their first performance here, took the place of honor. The outdoor concert is certainly the proper setting for these sketches. Their wan scent carries best away from the stern concert hall. So little is here that Stravinsky has not attempted before — the vague overtones of Grieg barely justify the title — that the result is more like a faithful follower's tame reproduction than any new variation by the composer. This is definitely minor, and I don't mean minor masterpiece.

Marc Blitzstein's *Freedom Morning*, a kind of composite of Negro hopes and war aims, also had its premiere in this city. I hope that the day which has inspired Blitzstein is greeted with more faith, intensity, and convincing joy than he can muster up. A familiar slow-fast-slow arrangement offers good popular Copland to start with, more animated antics