

INTER-AMERICAN REVIEW

THE MUSICAL TEMPER OF RIO

THE Brazilian public needs to hear much more modern music, well played, in order to overcome what often seems an aversion to it. When Aaron Copland's *Outdoor Overture* was given recently in Rio de Janeiro there was great enthusiasm. But in general Debussy currently passes for modern in Brazil. Though Prokofiev and Shostakovitch are occasionally heard, Hindemith, Bartok, Stravinsky and Milhaud are virtually unknown. The press shows little concern for bringing modern music and the public closer together; indeed musical criticism is at a very low ebb. The only first class critic in Brazil, Mario de Andrade, died early in 1945 and there is no one to replace him, either in his native Sao Paulo, or in Rio. As a result modern music has no champion before the public.

Even native modern music goes its way in the midst of general indifference. Following a sold-out series of all-Beethoven and all-Wagner programs in the Teatro Municipal, Erich Kleiber did a Brazilian concert which included only big names: the late Francisco Braga, Villa-Lobos, Oscar Lorenzo Fernandez and Francisco Mignone. The auditorium was half full, and of that half fifty per cent of the seats were "paper." Villa-Lobos' *Symphony of War* (1923) is a long score for large orchestra, supplemented by military band. Some original and highly expressive pages, full of strange and interesting effects, alternate with passages of sheer banality. Mignone's symphonic poem *Babaloxá* (1934) is a highly rhythmic, extremely colorful picture of a Brazilian Negro *macumba*. It portrays this delirious religious rite in a very sophisticated way, with savage but never primitive music. Particularly remarkable is the virtuosic treatment of the orchestra.

Fernandez' *Violin Concerto* (Oscar Borgerth, soloist) was given its premiere by the Orquestra Sinfonica Brasileira which is directed by Hungarian-born Eugen Szenkar, now a Brazilian citizen. The work is slight; it employs folk melodies in a naive way, with a certain charm, but is generally weak in ideas and ordinary in expression. Its unpretentiousness and clarity are not very positive virtues; the result is innocuous. Earlier in the season Mignone, possibly the most competent all-round musician of Brazil, conducted the premiere of his *Quadros Amazonicas* (Amazon Pictures). His fabulous gift for orchestration produced some highly interesting sounds of a purely descriptive character. The coloristic effects, however, were offset by a lack of real substance. After too much of the same thing the work began to pall.

Contemporary music, in the season beginning in May and ending in early December, figured chiefly in two series of programs. One was given by the Brazilian Society of Chamber Music, a new organization, which offered the first audition of Villa-Lobos' *Seventh String Quartet* (1942). This beautifully written work, in contrast to many of Villa-Lobos' other compositions, makes no conscious attempt to be Brazilian. The ideas are clearly presented and nicely worked out. The quartet has both energy and sentiment, without a surfeit of either. It is compact, neat, formally coherent. Not so his *Second Trio*, performed elsewhere, an early work (1916) which is vague, overlong and confused. Radames Gnattali's *Quarteto Popular* was another high spot on this series. Though not profound, it is distinguished and shows clearly this young composer's talents: fine feeling for form and medium, a brilliant sense of color, excellent technique and contrapuntal ability, the power to create memorable melodies, lucidity and clarity of texture, and a remarkable sense of rhythm. Gnattali's style is precise but not precious. It avoids cliché, sometimes at the expense of naturalness. Whether it will in time become more profound remains to be seen.

A series entitled "Chamber Music of the Americas" was devoted to contemporary American (i.e., Pan-American) music. This special project was sponsored by the American Embassy and the National School of Music and administered in its details by Francisco Curt Lange, director of the Inter-American Institute of Musicology (Montevideo). The series was only partially successful and it must be stated candidly that the public showed judgment in rejecting much of the music performed. Works by Juan Carlos Paz, the Argentine twelve-toner, Manuel Ponce (Mexico) and Tosar Errecart (Uruguay), among others, were not up to par. Errecart's long and diffuse *String Quartet* was particularly disappointing in view of the other really fine pieces this twenty-three-year-old composer has written.

The *Second String Quartet* of Camargo Guarnieri, which won the recent Chamber Music Guild prize for Latin America, received its first performance. Though not Guarnieri's best, it is a good work, comparatively light in style and texture – Mozart with Brazilian overtones. Technically it leaves nothing to be desired; Guarnieri is master of his craft. The quartet is treated in an idiomatic but not virtuosic manner. Folk music, though used incidentally, is not the basis of the composition. The charges of superficiality made by the local press are hardly justified. Claudio Santoro's *String Quartet*, which received honorable mention in the competition, is written in the twelve-tone technique. Difficult to appraise on one hearing, it gives the impression of being well constructed within the limitations of the system and conveys relatively little in an expressive way. Other works

of this young Brazilian demonstrate considerable talent, by no means fully matured as yet.

Fernandez' *Invenções Serestrals* for wind instruments were also heard for the first time. They are interesting short two- and three-part pieces, which combine folk idiom with a traditional, almost academic, contrapuntal style, and use more dissonance than is usual in his works. I was unable to hear a new piece by Luiz Cosme, but do not wish to omit his name from the register of top-ranking Brazilian composers. His music is consistently well-written, sensitive without sacrificing virility. Cosme deserves more notice than has been taken of him, both at home and abroad.

Much was promised and little delivered by the group Musica Viva, which exists ostensibly for the propagation of contemporary music. Its potential usefulness and influence are minimized by its remarkable facility for antagonizing both public and musicians in Rio. Although Musica Viva professes to be neutral in its outlook, its leaders are militant atonalists, whose attitude is one of intolerance toward anything but twelve-tone music. As there are only three or four such composers in all Brazil, their minority position boils down to one of ineffective isolation. During the past year Musica Viva produced a weekly program of new music on the government radio. But because of the esoteric viewpoint and the poor quality of performance the avowed purpose of the series, to stimulate public interest in modern music, was not achieved.

Everett Helm