

has heard before. Suddenly the chorus enters, chanting barbaric syllables to a wild, dynamic rhythm. The tension is so great that one wonders how it can possibly be maintained. Bit by bit a Portuguese folk-song creeps in, sugary and banal beyond words. The rhythmic pattern, so forceful and exciting at the beginning, suddenly loses its vitality, becomes automatic, a mere guitar-strumming. There is a terrific let-down and the energy appears so suspect that we feel perhaps we were deceived from the beginning. The ending of the work on a super-brilliant, strident chord from the chorus only confirms this.

What is the matter with all this music? Why are we not satisfied? Here is a wealth of material, here are personalities vivid and sympathetic. Perhaps a little more restraint, a little more logic, quite a bit more constructive imagination would turn the tide. Yet with all its weaknesses, I infinitely prefer such works to those of other South Americans who seek salvation in the dreary Esperanto of the twelve-tone system.

*Colin McPhee*

## DANCE OF DEATH, IN BASLE

*April 15*

THE great event of the music season in Switzerland was undoubtedly the premiere at Basle of Honegger's new choral work, *La Danse des Morts*, written in collaboration with Paul Claudel. In the spring of 1938, after the first hearing of *Jeanne d'Arc au Bucher*, their earlier joint effort, Claudel, in his wanderings about Basle had been fascinated by various pictures of Death, especially by the famous woodcuts of Holbein the Younger. Deeply moved by the *Invitation to the Dance* which seemed to him the more striking because it celebrated the release from life's burdens rather than any aspect of the macabre, he conceived the idea of a great new poem and immediately visualized Honegger as composer of the music. In a few days after his return to Paris, he wrote the whole text which is a merging of excerpts from the Old Testament (Ezekial, 37, and the Book of Job), words from the New Testament, and his own mystic and religious thoughts. The essence of the poem may be summed up by the three exhortations of the chorus:

"Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es poussière et que tu retourneras en poussière!"

"Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es esprit, et la chair est plus que le vêtement, et l'esprit est plus que la chair, et l'oeil est plus que le visage et l'amour est plus que la mort!"

"Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es pierre, et sur cette pierre, je bâtirai mon église!"

The work is divided into seven parts – each taking its keynote from a section of the above passage – which follow each other without pause. Prolonged thunderclaps (nineteen measures and fortissimo) precede the first exhortation and the *Dialogue* of the prophet and God; a march macabre, opening pianissimo, announces the awakening of the dead and leads with a resounding fortissimo to the apparition of a great army. Sotto voce, the small chorus intones the second exhortation, repeated several times, even when the large chorus is singing *La Danse des Morts*, central part of the work. The cries of the declaimer, "The Pope! . . . The Bishop! . . . The King! . . . The Chevalier! . . . The Philosopher! . . ." recall the Holbein pictures and are a poetic counterpoint. The rhythms of the old popular song, *Sur le pont d'Avignon*, and of the *Carmagnole*, inspire the dance. United and opposed, they create an orgy which is finally interrupted by the theme of *Dies Irae*. It was not Claudel's intention to develop the subject of the dance but rather the religious idea of purification of the soul. A *Lamento*, an over-long monologue by the baritone over a transparent orchestra, represents repentance. Then follow the *Sanglots*, a strange choral song in which the men's and women's voices exchange vocalizations on a Latin text; this is an extremely original composition but a bit artificial and precious. New thunderclaps (a theatrical effect which should not have been repeated) announce the *Réponse de Dieu*, a prophecy of the Resurrection and the return of the people of Israel to the Promised Land. Anticipating the "promise theme," the music develops in an ecstatic and mystic movement, *Espérance dans la Croix*, related in its parables and solo parts to the Passion. Meanwhile the chorus prophesies that Israel shall be chosen, and then, in a powerful declamation by the voices in unison, comes the Revelation of the Lord (also recited in Latin). The epilogue, *L'Affirmation*, underscores the Christian element of the poem; stressing each syllable and shouting the word "Pierre," the whole chorus sings the last exhortation. After a sudden decrescendo, the work ends with vocalizations by the solo soprano to evoke the *rire céleste*.

Although great beauty of thought and word distinguishes the text of this cantata, it lacks cohesion; the *Lamento* does not represent, as the author intended, release from tension and religious reflection; it is a fault in the structure of the work, made worse by the vocalizations and Latin words of the *Sanglots*. Furthermore, the mingling of Jewish, Christian, Biblical,

medieval and modern elements often obscures the intelligibility of the text.

Honegger reacted as one might expect to the qualities and defects of the poem; the intensity of his music, which gives a great power to the first two movements, weakens in the parts which follow and does not again reach a peak until the great choruses at the end. Writing for the theatre, Claudel has inspired a dramatic music, living and plastic. As a writer of obscure and mystic poems, his language hampers the composer, whose music, deviating from the text, sometimes makes us forget it, or becomes too "material." Claudel, so rumor has it, has influenced the musical conception; it is doubtful whether always to its benefit. Fortunately Honegger had vitality enough to throw off some of these shackles. His amazing use of different mediums – the speaker, soloists, choruses, orchestra and organ – as well as his sureness of form, again prove his great mastery. No matter how various the form elements, they are all incorporated into one entity, subordinated to a dramatic will and used for dramatic effect. The dance of the dead and the final choruses have sweeping expressive power, the air is surcharged with emotion. As a stylistic achievement, the work belongs with Honegger's oratorios, *Le Roi David* and *Jeanne d'Arc*. Despite certain reservations, particularly about some too theatrical effects, this cantata stands as one of his greatest works; it is certainly one of the most interesting contemporary products.

The premiere (preceded by Hindemith's concerto, *Der Schwanendreher* and some German popular songs which had inspired him) was given a remarkable performance by the Kammerchor, the Kammerorchester, the soloists and speaker, and the conductor, Paul Sacher, to whom Honegger and Claudel had dedicated the work.

### III

Honegger still remains the most representative and "international" of Swiss composers but the new Swiss "white-hope" of music is Willy Burkhard, today forty years old. Developed in Leipzig, Munich and Paris, he has been for sometime in the first rank of native composers. His *Hymnus* for orchestra (Opus 57) has just had its premiere in three cities, Winterthur, Berne and Geneva. The title refers to the source of inspiration, the famous first hymn of Novalis. A resplendent prelude exalts *Le Jour*; the second part, calm and mystic, *La Nuit*. Like all the scores of this musician, it is serious and impressive, although at times it does seem arbitrary and overloaded. Burkhard has distinguished himself as a composer of spiritual choral and string music, but the resources of the large

orchestra seem to handicap him rather than help. Like some others of his compatriots, he takes refuge in a romantic "isolation" and thus loses contact with modern music movements.

Important performances of contemporary music are now given in Switzerland every month, almost every week, by ensembles and soloists who specialize in modern music and can meet its exacting requirements. Few European cities offer such perfect performances of Debussy's and Stravinsky's scores as Geneva's Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and its conductor, Ernest Ansermet; and few cities can boast of such faithful and living renditions of Honegger's choral works and Bartok's music as those of the Kammerorchester and the Kammerchor under the direction of Paul Sacher.

Out of ten Geneva concerts, at least five have contained Debussy scores. This season, the Orchestre Romand gave the *Rhapsodie* for solo clarinet and orchestra, dreamy, poetic music; the *Danses* for harp and orchestra, of exotic charm and color, and a complete performance of the lyric poem, *La Demoiselle Elue*, for women's voices (soli and chorus) and orchestra, a work of his youth dated 1887 but first performed in 1893. These pages bear traces of the mystic currents that fully revealed themselves only later in *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*. Ansermet also broadcast a radio version of the exquisite ballet, *Le Boite à Joujou*, which has a quite special place in Debussy's work. To replace the visual impression, the principal characters were introduced, together with their musical themes, while the story and the settings were translated into announcements (spoken by two actors) and inserted between the numbers or "surprinted" on the music as the subtitles are in a foreign film. The action which takes place in a toy box, involves the Doll and her two lovers, Punch and The Little Soldier. André Hellé, author of the scenario, planned this ballet for children, but the music, burlesque, ironic, often even sarcastic, is for adults, connoisseurs. It is a delightful mosaic, conceived in the style of an impressionist, perhaps pointillist painting. The interpretation was masterly; fine, light and gracious.

Geneva devotes no less attention to Stravinsky's works, chiefly of his first, pre-neo-classic period. The recent broadcast of *Le Rossignol* was twice repeated and followed, soon after, by a performance over the air of *L'Histoire du Soldat* with the participation of the author, the great Swiss poet, C. F. Ramuz. In his radio adaptation, Ansermet gave the various roles to the speaker, who already has the function of explaining the action. The

performance had remarkable clarity and rhythmic vitality. But even more valuable than its precision and dash was the retention of its simplicity, the peasant and folk character, which is the fundamental aspect of the work. Ramuz, in contrast to his predecessors in the speaker's place, did not dramatize or sentimentalize his part but spoke in narrative fashion without being less dramatic or expressive. As rarely before, the secret links between the text out of Russian folklore and the music inspired by Russian folksong were revealed.

Several works by Martinu and Britten were given premieres in both Geneva and Basle on the same evening. Martinu, closely bound to his country in work and in feeling, emerges more and more clearly as the heir of the great Czech masters, Smetana, Dvorak and Janacek. His recent scores possess maturity and power of expression and reveal surprising progress. The *Tre Ricercari* for chamber orchestra which had its premiere at the Venice biennial was broadcast by Ansermet over the Swiss radio. The original instrumentation (flute, two oboes, two bassoons and two trumpets, two pianos and three groups of violins and violoncellos) is matched by the style of this splendid score, which combines balance of construction with dramatic force. Still more important seemed the *Concerto* for string orchestra, piano and kettledrums (manuscript) written for Paul Sacher and his orchestra which recorded another success for the composer in Basle. Benjamin Britten's two works have already been discussed in MODERN MUSIC; Geneva heard the *Sinfonietta* for small orchestra (1935), Basle, the new cycle, *Les Illuminations*.

Arno Huth

## NEW WORKS AT THE COOLIDGE FESTIVAL

THE ninth festival of chamber music of the Coolidge Foundation was held at the Library of Congress on April twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth last. Those who came to listen to the music bear with them fresh reminder that music patronage in the grand manner, increasingly rare in our day, still survives in this unique combination of Private Wealth and National Government.

With exception of the program of American works, which was a homogeneous and well-balanced whole, the theory of the "mixed" style of program-making ruled, i.e., works of living and dead composers about balanced each other in each concert.