

opinion. This is very complicated music, and the piano score does not help over-much because the orchestration is integral to the piece. First impressions, however, have some value simply as first impressions, and on this assumption I should say that the Schönberg *Concerto* sounded very strange according to the criteria accepted as more or less as standard in the development of Western music. Certainly it does not seem to be music derived from the basic elements of song. There seemed to be little dramatic or emotional continuity to whatever there was of sustained melodic line. Presumably related fragments appear to be organized in a possibly mathematical fashion. Cerebral is the word usually employed to describe this phenomenon, and it may be the best word. There was, at any rate, no sense of emotion, even of a dispassionate or detached kind.

Beside Schönberg the Shostakovich symphony was about as complicated as *God Bless America*. But it was well received by all the Philadelphia audiences and this reviewer found it very stimulating Shostakovich. The first movement is probably the weakest structurally, but the looseness of structure seems to be part of its essential plan. In its breadth and in its reflective character there is sincerity and a sense of perspective. The other two movements are more effective and more easily assimilable, but they hardly seem as sincere. For all its monotony and its occasional mixtures of style, the slow movement is the best of the three and ranks with the best things the composer has given us.

Henry Pleasants

SWISS PREMIERE—HONEGGER'S NICOLAS DE FLUE

Geneva, December 25

THE most important European musical event this season has been the Swiss world premiere, at Soleure, of Arthur Honegger's dramatic legend, *Nicolas de Flue*. In the spring of 1939, five hundred singers, actors and musicians of Neuchatel had labored long and hard to prepare this work for the National Swiss Exposition. But the war and the mobilization prevented the Zurich performance. These determining facts still kept the same groups from participating, so what we had was not a stage but a concert version for mixed chorus, children's chorus, speaker and orchestra.

The form and style of the work are conceived as a popular and patriotic Festspiel, to be seen and heard in a vast auditorium before an audience of perhaps four thousand. The burden of the action falls less on the handful of singers and actors than on the crowds of supers and members of the

choruses. The text must of necessity skim the depths lightly, the composer is forced to speak a universally intelligible language. For the dramatic spectacle the stage was divided into three spheres, as in medieval mystery plays. Below, humanity, prompted and dominated by demons; above, the choir of angels; between, the "mediator," Nicolas de Flue, a glorious figure out of Swiss history.

Denis de Rougemont's poem was inspired by the political crisis of September 1938 which he used as a parallel to the situation in the fifteenth century when, also at the last moment, war was avoided. A series of scenes and visions evokes the life of Nicolas de Flue, who after being a soldier and a judge, retired to the hermitage of Ranft, where he preached against war and for peace and poverty, since "riches divide a people and the strength of Switzerland is in union." His warnings were futile, his prophecy swiftly came true, war and even victory brought misfortune. When, finally, civil war was imminent between the enriched cities and the poor rural cantons, almost by a miracle Nicolas reestablished the peace and saved his country from annihilation.

De Rougemont's story is rich in plot ideas and effects, but so banal and grandiloquent in form and language that it cannot be judged as a "poem" at all, but purely as the base and frame for a musical work. Honegger also has poured his inspiration into the dramatic action and the atmosphere, rather than into the words themselves. The necessity of being simple did not cramp this musician; his music, direct, vital and brilliantly colored, is aimed at the hearer with no ambiguities. It is the simplest passages that are the best; the charming song of the children, the prayer of Father Nicolas, the chorals, and above all, the chants of the celestial choir. With these are contrasted movements of a more "spectacular" character, the extremely rhythmic fanfares, the unbridled capers of youth dancing off to war and the pompous march of the ambassadors. Honegger's creative power is best revealed in the finales of the three acts, especially in the solemn and jubilant *Gloria* which completes the work in the manner of Händel's oratorios.

The choruses are used with amazing variety. They have several functions; to represent the mob, sometimes as pleading, sometimes in action; and to be the voices of women, of warriors, or pilgrims, of angels, or of demons.

Although the work has many moments of real beauty, it also makes more concessions than are warranted by the demands of a popular spectacle. Beside passages of power, one finds others that are purely banal "illustra-

tion." As in so many of his works, Honegger has mingled the most varied styles, archaic and modern, popular songs with delicate music, dramatic oratorio with film scoring. Despite his undeniable virtuosity, he tends to carry this polyglotism too far. The speaker talks too often and too much, divides the numbers by his monologues and distracts attention from the music. In a radio work, where words and music might be considered as of two different spheres, this could be justified; even in a stage performance where speech enables the spectator to follow and understand the action. In a concert, however, it seems essential to give music the preference and to entrust at least part of the spoken text to the voices of the singers. The modifications introduced into this concert version are not enough. The lack of a visual image continues to be felt; one would like to see the scenes which the speaker describes, the march of the ambassadors, the pilgrims, and above all, Father Nicolas, the central figure of the drama. This Festspiel is hardly, at least in its present form, a concert work.

The Swiss radio still gives contemporary music appreciable support. Most of the stations have announced programs of great interest, to be made up of representative modern works, many of them first hearings. Radio-Geneva has just broadcast a new radio version by Ernest Ansermet of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* which he conducted in masterful fashion. Encouraged by his previous success with *Rossignol* and the *Bôte à Joujou* of Debussy, he has so cleverly integrated descriptions of the scene and commentary on the choreographic action into the musical performance that the absence of the stage is hardly felt. Radio-Lausanne, whose efforts favor the radio theatre, has again commissioned famous composers and poets to write works for the microphone. Arthur Honegger is preparing the legend, *Saint-François d'Assise* in collaboration with William Aguet, a combination already well tested, and Igor Markevitch is setting to music a new work by the great Romansh poet, C. F. Ramuz.

Arno Huth