

THE I. S. C. M. AT FLORENCE

A SOCIETY which commits suicide annually but which nevertheless survives—that is the International Society for Contemporary Music. Unworthy works, chosen for political reasons (perhaps because to refuse them might mean the death-blow for a particular festival), are at least partially atoned for by more interesting works and ones more worthy of being heard. And there is an inner flame which, in spite of all, does animate the group. Its ideal is one of those which we abandon with the greatest reluctance and only when we feel that there is no longer even a ray of hope. With the I.S.C.M. it has not yet come to that and the festivals continue.

Florence, 1934, has been no exception. The festival was inaugurated by a *Symphony* by Franco Alfano who, as is well known, was chosen to write the closing pages for the opera, *Turandot*, which his more gifted friend and colleague, Puccini, had left incomplete. Only the fact that the festival was under the high patronage of the head of the Italian government could explain the presence of this work on the program.

Of the orchestral works by far the most interesting was the *Psalm*, for soprano and orchestra, by Igor Markevitch (admirably sung by Vera Janacopulos). Even granting a certain

amount of affectation and artificiality, the work is extraordinary in its vitality, its originality and finally, its singular effectiveness. It is as though the illuminated angels on some old Russian ikon, those strange creatures with sad faces and wings of variegated colors, had suddenly been shot through with life and with the frantic necessity of praising their God before sinking back into their eternal immobility. There are reminiscences, to be sure, of Stravinsky and Moussorgsky; the closing pages of Markevitch's work, with its ostinato of triangle and little cymbals, recall the end of *Noces* which, in its turn, derives (in spirit, at least) from the Kremlin scene in *Boris Godunov*. But on the whole, the work has its own and decidedly personal character. So little is one prepared, in these gatherings, for works of this calibre—works which have a breath of inner compulsion and which have the power to move one (even unpleasantly)—that there must have been some in the audience who failed to react as they might have done, had they heard the work in other surroundings. To the present writer this work is like a ray of light in an overcast sky! Remains to be noted that the larger Italian audience greeted it with booings, laughter and whistlings which, it must be admitted, were admirably timed to strike the risibilities of those not under the spell.

A comparative study of the works of the two leaders of the contemporary Italian school, Malipiero and Casella, would be instructive. If Malipiero follows too easily the dictates of his own essentially musical nature and is, perhaps, complacent in repeating formulæ which he himself has made known to us (though some years ago!), Casella is too restless in his search for new styles, too intellectual, too non-musical in the sources of his inspiration. Though there is never a trace of banality, the melodic line of Malipiero seems at times too Italianate, too facile. And we follow with difficulty Casella's constantly changing point of view or, indeed, the fact that, to write music, one must have a "point of view" at all. A few years ago he was all for Scarlattian brilliance and Rossinian cheerfulness; now he leans toward the grandiose, the baroque, the "Roman."

In their new works, heard at this festival—Malipiero's *Sinfonia* (inquattro tempi come le quattro stagioni, 1933) and

Casella's *Introduzione Aria e Toccata, per Orchestra* (also 1933)—we have the familiar aspects of the two maestri. What one admires always is the probity and dignity of Malipiero, as a figure and as a composer. And one is always charmed by the freshness, the greenness of his thought and, above all, of his tonal palette. In Casella there is, from a point of view different from the one expressed above, the admirable side of an intellect always searching for a new expression, an expression which may allow him to reveal himself to us more fully or more closely. And there is always in his works a sense of musical construction and of musical continuity which is rare among composers of our day. The writer does not believe that the new works will appreciably add to the stature of Malipiero or Casella; but they fully uphold the standards and traditions which these composers have set for themselves.

The *Mouvement Symphonique* by Honegger is known in America and need not be reviewed here; it seems to be one of the best works of Honegger's recent years with a sort of acrid quality which is refreshing—like wine which is new. The *Concerto* for pianoforte (left hand alone) and orchestra by Ravel, however, seems to be one of that composer's least successful. There is little proportion between the pompousness of the thematic material and the heaviness of the orchestral sonorities, on the one hand, and the "left hand alone" on the other; even when the solo part is played with the brilliance of Paul Wittgenstein. In structure the work also appears to be loosely made (though one's impressions in this respect may easily be wrong). Its most ear-tickling moments are those of a sort of perfumed Blues such as the admirers of Ravel already know from *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* and the *Sonata for Piano and Violin*: an emasculated jazz which must be particularly distasteful to all true lovers of Gershwin and the American variety.

Bartok's *Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra*, admirably played by Szigeti, is scarcely an original composition, in the more inward sense of the word; but as an arrangement of folk-material it is highly diverting and attractive, bearing many of the characteristics of the usual Bartok procedure. The U.S.S.R. presented one work: Boris Schechter's *Turkmenia Suite* for orchestra. It

is in the vein made familiar to us by *Scheherezade* and the *Prince Igor*: the orientalism which sounds so well and which rings so untrue. There was no sign of this work's having emanated from a civilization which claims to be so different from our own.

The writer was unable to stay in Florence for the whole festival and of the chamber-music concerts heard only the first. Of the works performed at this concert the best was the *Sonata* for violin, viola and violoncello by Jean Françaix; though its charm is too facile and its intrinsic merit slight it is neatly made and skilfully written for the combination of instruments. *Four Lyrics* for contralto and string-quartet by the Yugoslav composer, Osteric, made an impression because of a certain warmth and folk-quality. The jury for the festival included Hilding Rosenberg, conductor at the Stockholm opera, and for that reason, probably, several Scandinavian works were to be found on this year's program. Of these the writer heard only the *Piano Sonata* by Knudoge Riisager, sympathetic by reason of its youthful and serious character. Other works on this program were a *String Quartet* by the French composer, Henri Martelli, in which a discrepancy was felt between the thematic material and its handling, though here too there was lightness and skill in the string-writing; a *Suite for Piano, Trumpet, Saxophone and Bass Clarinet* by Rudolph Holzmänn (German independent) which, from the standpoint of sonority, in any event, was a failure; and, finally, the *Lyric Suite* by Alban Berg.

At the first of the orchestral concerts there were also works by Luigi Dalla Piccola and Guiseppe Mulé. This program, all Italian, had not been chosen by the international jury but was, more or less, a gift of the Italian Section. It seemed to the present writer that, as a bit of Italian propaganda, the program might have been considerably better. Mulé's *Three Sicilian Lyrics* were charming in their way but they, still more than Bartók's *Rhapsody*, were arrangements of folk material. Dalla Piccola's *Partita* belongs to that category of Italian music which makes one wish that the Italians would either stay in the theatre or get out of it completely. One wishes they might remember that they have had a Palestrina or, if that seems too remote for them, a

magnificent school of pure music headed by Vivaldi, Corelli, Veracini: musicians who occupied themselves less with exterior things (visual, tactile and even emotional and intellectual) and more with the pure ponderables of their art.

Works which the writer did not hear were by: Benjamin Britten, Henrik Neugeboren, Richard Struzenegger, Leopold Spinner, Jaroslav Jezek, H. E. Apostel, Lars Erik Larsson, Mario Labroca, Gino Gorini, M. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Riccardo Nielsen and Ildebrando Pizzetti.

The next festival of the I.S.C.M. is to take place in Karlsbad in September, 1935; the international jury to consist of Scherchen, Dufauw, Talich, Edward Clark (of the British Broadcasting Company) and Koffler. It must be added that the performances at this year's festival were, on the whole, excellent; particularly the orchestral ones.

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