

## RECENT BOOKS

### STAR-SPANGLED ORCHESTRAS

A JUBILANT press has hailed the announcement that there are now nearly three hundred symphony orchestras in the country. Half, it seems, were born since 1929 and of the sixteen with annual budgets of \$120,000 to \$750,000 not one died in the depression. These figures from *America's Symphony Orchestras* by Margaret Grant and Herman S. Hettinger (W. W. Norton and Company) are impressive for size and accelerating tempo. But to juggle them into a horoscope of the U. S. A. as a land of "promise for the future of symphonic music" is of the order of wishful thinking. After all, Hollywood issues statistics that are super-colossal; I suppose it has a future too.

Much more significant than the rate of multiplication is the gradual conversion of these orchestras into recognizable instruments of public service. The process has not been dramatized as in Europe by a transfer from semi-feudal possession to government control, for the typical American orchestra remains a strictly private business. But under pressure the appeal and the burden of expense are clearly being shifted from the classes to the masses. Miss Grant and Mr. Hettinger are perhaps a little too sold on bigger-and-better "merchandising" as the American Way to reconcile the conflicts in this set-up. Their research, though, has been thorough, and their book tells all – or nearly all (since it's strictly impersonal) – about where the money comes from, who

handles it, how it's spent. Now anyone can look at the facts and draw his own conclusions.

For instance, who do you think provides the major support for the great symphony orchestras? On March 1, the *New York Times* printed a Philharmonic announcement that prices would be lowered next season. "The increased deficit," read the statement, "will be met personally by the members of the board of the society. . . . Even under present price rates, tickets are sold at about half the cost of production." This routine type of publicity is designed, I presume, to pay a graceful tribute to benevolence. For a quite different approach to finances, let me refer to the Grant-Hettinger table on income and expense of various classes of orchestras. The Philharmonic, together with the Boston and Philadelphia, belongs to Group 1 – average annual income \$650,000. And of that sum not less than 87.2 percent is *earned*. The public contributes 75.6 percent directly by ticket purchase; indirectly, through the orchestra's sale of record, radio and advertising contracts, 10.6 per cent more. Which leaves just 12.8 percent to be met by subsidy. Of course the less spectacular organizations don't do so well. Five that are comparatively new even make less than half their keep. But those spending \$300,000 meet 53 percent of expense, and the secondary orchestras, from \$100,000 down, 58 to 76 percent. This may be merely a matter of emphasis, but with "self-help" at a premium in America, let

the laurels fall where they are due.

However debt, whether extensive or limited, appears to be chronic. Then who pulls the orchestras out? Here surely is the place for big-time philanthropy. But today endowments—trusts, bequests, concert-halls—are not what they used to be. It's chiefly the top-flight orchestras that still draw on such resources, and for a comparatively minor proportion of their total income—five percent in the case of Group 1, nearly 20 in the case of Group 2. Endowments for the rest are negligible or non-existent, although sizable gifts are still made in specific occasions, to meet temporary needs.

The characteristic modern way to pay off the deficit is to raise a maintenance fund. This method is familiar to everyone who has ever subscribed to an orchestra, for at the end of each season he's invited to contribute anything from five dollars to a thousand or more. Sometimes, as in depression years, the appeal reaches out for the nickels and dimes of the public at large. Maintenance funds bring as much as 50 percent of their total income to some orchestras.

All these sources combined are admittedly too fluctuating to assure financial "stability." Mention of this word nearly always evokes the mirage of government subsidy, which looms on the American horizon as a kind of sinister temptation. Leaving aside the large-scale experiment with the Federal Symphony Orchestras, astonishingly little money has come out of the public treasuries for orchestral support. There are two municipal organizations, and a little spotty, indirect subvention of a few well-established bodies in the Mid-

dle and Far West—notably in San Francisco. Miss Grant and Mr. Hettinger express appropriately the American fear of political control and state intervention. But instead of stock phrases about "bureaucracy", "red tape", "regimentation" and even "dictatorship," in this factual study I should have welcomed one authoritative chapter on the European system. Then we might see just what our groping American experiment appears to be running away from.

Certainly the democratic process has been slow to affect the control and management of the orchestras. Governing boards still tend to be small and self-perpetuating; a few are elected by larger, but again self-perpetuating bodies. Sometimes they do actually represent big fund-raising organizations. But the principle of responsibility to the public has not been articulately recognized, and no device exists to give a direct voice to that interest. How completely such a board may be insulated from the public was demonstrated a few years back when outraged protest forced the abrupt cancellation of Furtwängler's Philharmonic appointment.

There is no space here to discuss the details of orchestral expense. But I want to dedicate a postscript to one tiny item on that side of the ledger, since it involves an issue not raised in the book. Composers' royalties, even when lumped with "music fees" are so infinitesimal that they form the smallest charge in the entire budget—one percent for the major, five for the secondary orchestras. The first group pays more than half this sum for the rental of scores, the second pays much more than half for the purchase as well as the loan of music. But to make my point unmistakably clear,

let me illustrate with figures from the budgets of the great orchestras in Group 1, which spend about \$650,000 a year and pay their conductors, instrumentalists, executives, landlords, and advertising agents the highest fees in the world. From each of these same budgets, less than \$2500 annually will be divided between Strauss, Sibelius, Stravinsky, Ravel's heirs, Schönberg, De Falla, Carpenter, Bloch, Milhaud, Honegger, Hindemith, Copland, Harris, all the men of Europe and America lumped together,

whose works, written within the last fifty years, happen to be performed in any season. It is also well known that nowhere in the world are royalties so low as in America, that they have been depressed to this artificial level by the ruthless insistence of Boards of Trustees and their paid managers. Certainly this contribution by composers, however involuntary, should not be overlooked in any tribute to the bed-rock economies that help streamline America's symphony orchestras.

*Minna Lederman*

### PIERROT LUNAIRE IN LINDY'S

I WISH I could say wholeheartedly that *A Smattering of Ignorance* by Oscar Levant (published by Doubleday Doran, 1940) is a terrible book. For has it not already become a bestseller, and is not that an unmistakable mark of shoddiness? And is it not true that the writing is careless and hasty, so that, as the author himself might say with Woolcottian relish, his indifference to good writing borders on the enthusiastic? And even when the style is good, is it not merely journalese good, with hunks of lovely wit sandwiched in between slices of racontage so offhand, so slick and upto-date that the references may not last out the month? And above all, has he not taken a couple of wicked potshots at me (at once happy and embarrassed to be included in a book devoted to People who Currently Count)? Has he not delivered me over to the lions of snobism and the vultures of venality? I burn with a desire for vengeance.

But really this turns out to be a very nice book, written by a very nice fellow.

The very nice fellow comes over through a maze of well- and ill-written anecdotes about his friends and enemies. He is there in a kind of pointilism. Piece the parts together and you will have Oscar, with his lugubrious impudence, his boorish charm, his self-deprecation, his gift for hero-worship, his sizeable knowledge, and his sizeable vanity. The last attribute is pretty nearly psychopathic in Levant. He hates himself for it, it gets the better of him, he is torn in an agony of conflict. He cannot bear to be wrong on a point of information. On the other hand, he cannot bear to be right on a point of morality or character. In the company of Gershwin he becomes a lout; with Copland and Schönberg (there is an astonishing confession about how he played them one against the other) he is a heel; and so on. Actually he is so concerned with being a heel and a lout, there is so much penitence and confession, that I think he may be well on the way to becoming a beautiful moral character. I realize in saying this I am letting myself