

FORECAST AND REVIEW

NEW YORK—JANUARY, FEBRUARY, 1936

THE year 1936 opened in New York with the arrival of Sir Thomas Beecham who, devoting himself to the cause of Britain, gave us in a series of Philharmonic programs a thorough cross section of British music from Elgar to Walton. The composers represented included Bantock, Bax, Berners, Delius, Elgar, Holst, Dame Ethel Smyth, Vaughn Williams, Walton—a group who, in spite of all differences of temperament and technic, were curiously inter-related, complementing each other in such a way that British musical taste was exposed in all its aspects.

The impression left upon this writer was of a vast amount of music little of which had any import. It is strangely lacking in character and strength. There is, however, a definite superficial national idiom, a sort of trademark "made in Britain." One cannot mistake the familiar emotional motifs—the nobility, the pride of empire, the tender note of the first cuckoo (too often, alas, lost in a mist), the eternal recourse to "modal" tonalities, the cheery good humor of a bracing walk through the countryside. We find the picturesque and the impressionistic always taking precedence over the purely musical. Dvorak and Grieg have held long sway. But when it comes to getting down to the development of musical ideas for their own sake, we are left thoroughly unsatisfied. A clear example of this is revealed in the two symphonies of Vaughn Williams, the *London* (1912-13) and the *F-minor* (1931-34). The first owes its life and vitality to a definite program, joyously and spontaneously realized by the composer. The second (played last month by Hans Lange) is a dreary waste land, aridly dissonant throughout, built upon two four-note motifs,

F-E-G \flat -F and F-B \flat -E \flat -G \flat . The result was a symphony in four movements—but only the scaffolding was there.

To attempt to sum up in a paragraph the musical essence of this series would be an act of temerity. One can do no more than hint at the most salient features of such a sequence of works. The two suites of Berners and Walton, *The Triumph of Neptune* and *Facade*, did not brighten matters much. The continental derivations were only too clear, the orchestra a bargain counter of unassorted sonorities. The spectacle of the British tongue in the British cheek is not amusing; too lacking are the deftness and wit of the Slavs and Latins.

We should, however, be grateful to Beecham for the festival, giving as it did a concise history of the development of British music during this century.



Three new works from Mexico were introduced by Carlos Chavez conducting his first broadcast from Columbia. They were *U Kayil Chaac* (a song with Mayan text to induce rain) by Daniel Ayala, *El Venado* (The Stag), built on Yaqui motifs, by Luis Sandi, and a very recent work by Chavez, the *Indian Symphony* (in one movement). All three were built upon Indian motifs, and conceived in direct and simple forms. One feels on hearing this music first of all a primitive energy that has nothing of the exotic but is a clear and forceful expression of racial vitality both youthful and healthy. Here one will find none of the Europeanisms or French impressionism still lingering in the works of so many Latin-American composers, or the fictitious barbarity of a work like Caturla's *Bembé* (recently performed in Town Hall at a League of Composers' Concert). In each case the music reveals a new and fresh individuality. The orchestration is done in primary colors; the sonorities are hard and penetrating, superimposed upon a resilient percussive base composed of those Indian instruments which Chavez introduced here as far back as 1926. The *Indian Symphony* stands out far above the other works. It is admirable music, sharp and clear in outline. A physical tension prevails from the first note to the last. There are no tricks in the workmanship,—no preoccupations with "problems." It races along like a runner happy in his strength and

with energy to spare at the end. We need such music as we need fresh air and exercise.



The last two months have given New York a large number of first performances of works by American composers. A feeling of music-festival exists as one goes night after night to concerts in which these new works are performed. One of the most satisfying was the *Concerto for Orchestra* by Walter Piston, presented last month by Koussevitzky. This work, which had its first performance in Cambridge in 1934, is a concerto in the eighteenth century sense, and is in three movements. The workmanship is sure and distinguished; logic prevails and the musical idea is always developed with a clear realization of its intrinsic possibilities. A remarkable energy pervades the work, an energy which is not only the result of rhythm and tempo, but is also due to the directness with which each movement, like an arrow released from a bow, proceeds without hindrance to its ultimate note. The peculiar incisiveness and brilliance of the orchestra owe much to the clarity of the contrapuntal texture of the music. The symphony was beautifully played, a musical event to which I keep looking back with pleasure.

In January the Juillard School gave the first New York performance of Frederick Jacobi's *Concerto for Violincello and Orchestra*. This quiet and intimate work is based upon the 90th, 91st and 92nd psalms, and contains little which is of a virtuoso nature. It is in reality a chamber piece, both in scale and texture. The orchestra is reduced to an octet of winds, and strings; the cello is treated throughout as a lyrical voice. The result is a work of three movements which, while complementing each other, do not afford quite sufficient contrast, either in mood or treatment. The effect at the end is one of having heard a work whose musical integrity there is no denying, but which presents a somewhat one-sided aspect of the cello.

Saminsky's *Three Shadows*, played last month by Hans Lange, are orchestral poems based on passages from verses by Pitts Sanborn, Edward Arlington Robinson and Carl Sandburg. Entitled *Omen, A Poet, Grass—a Dirge*, their first preoccupation is to establish a mood, primarily through orchestral color. This is

achieved at times with decided success through the strange and mystic sonorities produced by an elaborate percussion group. The effect, at the opening of the first poem, of combining the lowest basses of the piano, gong, side drum *and* thirty-two-foot organ pedals was sensational, rocking Carnegie Hall with vibrations which threatened its downfall. The percussive element was predominant throughout the three pieces, and was handled with great variety and flexibility.

The *Five Fairy Tales* by Bernard Rogers, (played recently by Hans Lange) proved a definite disappointment. The musical content was too slight, even for children, and the whole conception seemed deliberate and forced, without a really spontaneous humor. In spite of the elaborate percussive background, the orchestra lacked interesting sonority, and sounded thin and empty. The most successful timbres were those achieved by a minimum of instruments. The thin shrillness of the Darning Needle was the most effective moment in the suite, and accurately portrayed the steely self-centredness of the heroine. But this is an unnecessarily extravagant work for an orchestra such as the Philharmonic,—there is too much waste of expensive material. Reduce the music to its proper scale, and it might appear in a more convincing light.

The program presented by the Composers' Forum-Laboratory (Feb. 12th) of the music of David Diamond revealed once more the definite talent of this young composer, whose works are already growing familiar. Diamond has always a clear idea of what he wants to achieve in each work. His music is delivered in sharp and concise terms,—perhaps a little too concentrated at times for my personal taste. This program would have been improved if it had included fewer brevities. I did not feel the inability of the composer to develop his musical idea; it was simply that nearly all the pieces were cast in tiny molds, and that a prolonged sequence of such works left me not quite satisfied. This musical concentration was at its happiest in the *Eight Piano Pieces for Children*, a charming series of lilliputian dimensions. I liked best the more robust *Partita for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano*. In it the component qualities of Diamond's music are more clearly revealed; the musical outline, always firm and sure, describes

wider curves. One awaits with interest what will follow.

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The January orchestral concert of the League of Composers included first performances of *Der Wein* by Alban Berg, the Hindemith *Viola Concerto*, and the new version of Roger Sessions' *Black Maskers' Suite*, which is now scored for large orchestra.

The Berg work is a setting for voice and orchestra of three poems by Baudelaire—*The Soul of Wine*, *The Wine of Love*, and *The Wine of Loneliness*—translated into German by Stefan George. It was extensively reviewed in this magazine in 1930, and there is little for me to add. The texture of Berg's music is always of too rich and complicated a weave for my own ultimate enjoyment; there is too much to admire, too much to be asked to digest. I find the atmosphere rather suffocating. The clean-cut lines of the Hindemith work seem to me far more eloquent. This brilliant *Viola Concerto* is Hindemith at his very best. The impetus of the first movement, where the viola is set in perpetual motion against a relentless staccato accompaniment, animates the whole work, and relaxes only during the slow movement. A brief "variant of a military march" terminates this piece in an ironic key. The viola part is written with virtuosity throughout, and the instrument plays admirably the double and paradoxical role of soloist and integral member of the orchestra.

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The only point in referring to the International Exchange Concerts projected at the New School is that the name sounds imposing enough to arouse expectations. Did the programs announced in the series bear this out? The answer is a sad no. The first concert under the direction of Hedi Katz was dedicated to Czechoslovakia. It was appallingly dull; the music chosen had no significance whatsoever. The French program directed by Varese, whose musical taste has heretofore been so discriminating, was little better,—an early work of Le Flem, whose resurrection could bring little credit to the composer, unconvincing works by Migot, Jolivet, etc., and—as a sop—the *Chansons Madécasses* of Ravel. The English program was on the same level. There is no justification in foisting these works upon an American public, even under banners. Let such music stay where it is, or

else let there be a high tariff. If music *must* be exchanged, through the mutual agreement of certain composers, it must be done with more discrimination and less politics.



There is not a great deal I can add to the review of Aaron Copland's *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* which appeared before in this magazine. But after seeing this ballet presented recently for the first time in New York, by Ruth Page, one cannot rest without alluding (repeating what is already well known) to its vitality, exhilaration and pungent orchestration, particular in the jazz parts. Not the least of Copland's many gifts is the ability to write the most exciting jazz I know, a jazz whose nervous energy could only be felt by a New Yorker, and by one who was thoroughly aware of his city's night life from Minsky's Burlesque to Harlem. This superb mastery of the jazz idiom was emphasized once more at the theatre the other night, in spite of the indifferent choreography.

Colin McPhee

THE NOBLEST ROMAN OF THEM ALL

THE current Italian season may be said to have begun under the sign of Malipiero. During the month of December we heard, at the Augusteo in Rome, his latest concert composition, *La Passione*, for soloists, chorus, and orchestra; in January the poem for baritone and orchestra, *Il Commiato*; and in February, at the Carlo Felice Theater in Genoa, the premiere of his opera, *Giulio Cesare*. What is more, the three works, and particularly the first and third, received the warmest approbation thus far given Malipiero in Italy.

This is a sign that the times have changed, but also that the composer has succeeded in playing upon the most sensitive chord in the public—sentiment. By this we do not mean that Malipiero has gone back on any of the "points" of his program, and even less that he has made concessions to the taste of the gallery. No one who has followed his creative activity for twenty years, can for a moment doubt his complete fidelity to the canons of his esthetic, already fixed in the first significant pages of his youth. But, by abandoning certain subjects steeped in an atmosphere of