

FORECAST AND REVIEW

WINTER SEASON, NEW YORK, 1936

IN making up his programs, Hans Lange shows little flair for picking winners in the field of contemporary music. His last concert contained two works by American composers which, while opposed to each other in the highest degree so far as emotional content was concerned, were nevertheless united by the fact that they were two perfect examples of utter futility. The first, the *Portrait of a Lady*, by Deems Taylor, was one of those oh-so-sweet-smiling-through-tears poems, done in his best manner, while the *Workout* of Robert McBride was inclined to be sour and a trifle hard-boiled. Let us leave Deems Taylor's Lady to her chocolate-nut-marshmallow sundae, and discuss the music of McBride, which demands some serious attention, since it comes from one of the younger composers who have aroused certain interest in the last year. I don't know exactly why I expected something, or what it was that I expected, but at the end of the performance I was conscious of a strong feeling that the title *Workout* should be changed to *Letdown*. Certain features in earlier music of McBride, his urbane humor, and the ease with which he wrote effectively, not only fail to show any signs of development in this new work, but appear to have suffered a relapse. *Workout* is in three movements, bravely based on jazz. But the jazz is stale, and its working out mechanical. Harmonically and acoustically the music is dull and uninteresting. If brevity be the soul of wit, then I am afraid Mr. McBride's reputation as a musical humorist must be more imagined than real. I have already found a tendency in him—one which here has reached considerable proportions—to wring a joke dry. He does

not want you to miss the point; he is afraid you may not see it. . . . Some definite change, I feel, must take place in McBride's approach (and he is still young enough for that to happen) before his music will lose its aridity.

Another endless procession of notes went to make up the Vaughan Williams Masque for Dancing, *Job*. Here, of course, we have to do with a very different type of music. Vaughan Williams is always sincere; his approach always musical. This particular work is serious and imposing—perhaps too much so. The slow sarabands, pavanés, minuets, are grave and impressive. The faster ones are sometimes inclined to be a bit helter-skelter. Undoubtedly this music should be heard only with the pageant. There it is surely adequate and effective for the rather static pantomiming of a masque, but I do not think it would greatly stimulate a dancer.

Stokowski gave us a Hollywood tone-poem by Victor Young. This opus, entitled *Arizona*, has a definite program, which would do very nicely for one of those de luxe pantomimes that serve as intermezzo from time to time in the larger movie houses. "An old prospector, with his burro, is seeking gold in the desert. He stops to camp for the night, lights his fire, *winds up his music-box*, and falls asleep to dream of the desert, its sand storms and valleys, sundowns and shadows. The music seeks to suggest something of these dreams and visions and realities—the desert itself, the winding of the music-box, dawn over the sand dunes, deep shadows . . . sandstorm . . . sundown. The fire dies down. The old prospector gathers up his music-box, and, with his burro, continues on his way." Doesn't this contain all the elements for the Great American Symphony? It sounded lush and elegant, and was as complete as a dollar-and-a-quarter dinner. The possibilities of the music-box, you may be sure, were not neglected.

■

There were, however, a few brighter moments in the last two months. The *Two American Frescoes for Large Orchestra*, by Bernard Rogers, definitely contribute to this feeling. There are certain things, perhaps, that disturb one. The term *Fresco*, with all its implications, is not improved by the addition "for Large Orchestra." This over-emphasis of scale in the title finds its se-

quel in the second movement, the Ojibway Battle Dance, where the orchestra is far too elaborate, too loud, too flowery, and negates any primitive feeling instead of stressing it. On the other hand, I found the first movement, *The Mississippi*, successfully realized, and fully justifying the title of *Fresco*. It can either be listened to purely for the pictorial image which it creates through title and sonority, or else it is perfectly satisfying as a piece of music. It is confined to the chord of C-major, but differs from another famous river in E-flat, since, as it is not impressionistic, the logical development of a motif occupies the foreground.

The significance of titles raises the same questions as always. A work by Olivier Messiaen, one of the youngest French composers (1908) was done recently by Koussevitzky, for the first time in New York. It was entitled *Les Offrandes oubliées* and its three parts labored under the appellations, *The Cross*; *The Sin*; *The Eucharist*. The composer stated that it aims primarily to express with sincerity and to the best of his ability (I do not quote exactly) the truth of the Catholic faith. A high-sounding program. Fake humility has received quite enough publicity in recent times, and in this case one was slightly suspicious, perhaps on account of the composer's years. Then there was the irritation of having to bear in mind the anemic mysticism of the three titles while listening to the music. As for the music itself, it turned out to be quite beautiful. The first and last movements are decidedly the best. *The Sin* has a sort of panting excitement and incoherence which seems pure program music. By that I do not mean the painting of a concrete idea, but the transforming of a psychological state into sound. Perhaps the other movements did this also. But the last one, independent of any emotions implied in its title, was most moving in its serenity and timbre, and in the purely musical atmosphere which prevailed. The titles had been forgotten. The self-conscious devotion of the composer, too, had been forgotten. As usual, in the case of all music which springs from the true desire to create, issues disappeared; one listened and was satisfied.

Colin McPhee