

SCORES and RECORDS

COLIN MCPHEE

THE important news of the month for American composers and musicians is the founding of a new publishing house, the Arrow Press, which promises to be of the utmost significance in the history of American music. According to its circular, the Press is a non-profit organization for the publication and distribution of contemporary music. Its directors are Marc Blitzstein, Aaron Copland, Lehman Engel and Virgil Thomson and it is run on a more or less cooperative basis. The composer of each work published contributes towards its cost, and in turn receives a really decent royalty. The paper and printing are excellent. Arrangements have been made to include the Cos Cob Press publications in the Arrow catalog, which thus has a handsome base whereon to build.

The Arrow Press has already been exceedingly active, having brought out a *Trio* and a *Concertino* for piano and chamber orchestra by Walter Piston, string quartets by Ross Lee Finney, George Schuman and Roger Sessions, piano pieces by Norman Cazden, and short choral works by Lehman Engel, Norman Lockwood, Douglas Moore and Charles Ives.

The Piston *Trio* seems to me to take precedence over the *Concertino*. It is a more personal work, although limited to the familiar sonorities of violin, cello and piano. Simplicity of form and a highly finished contrapuntal texture are its characteristics. The first movement might be described as a demonstration of the elements of "sonata form;" it proceeds through the different phases with an almost Mendelssohnian circumspection. In the last, the contrapuntal interplay of the three instruments gets a firm start with the theme in one voice, augmentation in the second, and inversion a bar later in the third. These devices, however, never become pedantic; the counterpoint of the last movement is fluid and energetic and dexterous to a degree. In the *Concertino*, Piston's relation to Hindemith is much more evident. This work is ingeniously constructed, scored in a bright, hard key; the piano part is crisp and transparent, in sharp relief against the orchestra;

nevertheless it seems less representative of Piston than the *Trio*.

It is impossible in this brief space to evaluate the three quartets without being unfair to the composers. Despite the difference in idiom, all three have a common approach, they say what they have to say with earnestness and in purely musical terms. (I think the Arrow Press might do well to include a musical analysis with its future chamber works, as has been done, for example, in the Philharmonia scores.) The Sessions quartet has many beautiful moments. I feel however that the earnestness of the composer, his desire to give each voice the maximum of significant import, to make each phrase intensely organic in its relation to the whole, defeats its own end. It seems involved, even long in some places; the texture is of too close a weave. As a whole the work demands much of the listener. *Music for Study*, by Norman Cazden, is the first of a series of piano pieces for beginners intended to supply a more modern and musical approach. The choral works are all written for a capella chorus, and should prove welcome additions to the American choral repertory.

David Diamond's *Three Madrigals*, published by Kalmus, suffer by their exceeding brevity; they no sooner get started than they are over. Diamond has shown elsewhere the ability to construct on much broader lines, and I, for one, should like to see him abandon this self-conscious miniature style. From his *Heroic Piece* for small orchestra, broadcast recently on a program selected by the League of Composers, (his first work to be heard since his return to America) it is clear that his style is growing increasingly personal. The music is planned on broad, simple lines, and the clear, primary colors of the orchestration make for a sonority both fresh and eloquent.

The two last issues of *New Music* are devoted, as usual, to determinedly modern works. Two sonatas for piano by George Tremblay follow the Schönberg tradition, and are not stamped with any particularly definite personality. A sonatina by Jacobo Ficher, for piano, trumpet and saxophone makes one wonder how the singularly banal and awkward melodic line of the two wind instruments might sound against so relentlessly dissonant a piano part. It is difficult to determine the standards of *New Music*.

From members of the Grupo Renovacion of Argentina comes

an assortment of songs and piano pieces. Of these the *Sonata* by José Mario Castro stands out for its pleasing melodic quality and its lack of ostentation. It is written in the usual two-part counterpoint, to which we must resign ourselves for the time, but is extremely agreeable to play, based on the technic of Scarlatti and Couperin. An album of Dutch piano music offers short works by unfamiliar composers, and contains surely the maximum number of notes in its forty-two pages, assembled in every way possible except to produce new and arresting music. A highly complicated, eleven page fugue by Piet Ketting, is given a thorough and even elaborate working-out, but I doubt if there are many pianists who will master its difficulties.

Three new chamber works by Hindemith (Schott Söhne) written in 1938, make their appearance—a sonata for bassoon and piano, a sonata for oboe and piano, and a quartet for clarinet, violin, cello and piano. These at least are significant additions to today's music. The bassoon sonata is marked by a graceful pastoral lyricism which opens and ends it. At the heart of the work, like the pit in a cherry, lies one of those neat, hard little marches so dear to Hindemith. The oboe sonata is very different in character; the impetus of the three movements depends upon a short motif with which the work begins, and which never becomes merely thematic; it pervades the whole sonata in a most natural way and serves as a continual starting-point for something else. In the middle of the slow movement it is harmonized to sound so much like a caricature of the opening to *Tristan* that one wonders. . . . The quartet is built on a much larger scale; one feels here that Hindemith has the most serious intentions and has brought all his resources into play. The familiar devices are clarified to a point where they seem to attain new significance. This work will surely be a high spot in Hindemith's prolific output.

THE STRAVINSKY MYSTERY

The musical mystery of the season is the *Dumbarton Oaks* concerto (Schott Söhne) of Stravinsky. Commissioned by Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss of Washington, and named after her home there, it was written a year ago and has had as yet no public performance in America. Few people are even aware of its

existence, and yet it is one of Stravinsky's best works in recent years. Scored for a chamber orchestra of wind quintet and reduced strings, it points back to the *Octuor* in conception and working out. It has a similar hard, incisive quality, the same compact form. How a work like this could wait so long (and be still waiting) for performance is surely a reflection on our many musical organizations. Such a situation would be unimaginable in Europe, even today.

NEW RECORDS

The Victor Company has just released Hindemith's *Sonata for Viola and Piano*, Opus 11. This is early Hindemith in a definitely romantic vein. It is beautifully played by William Primrose and Jesus Maria Sanróma; the only possible flaw in the recording is that the viola occupies too much of the foreground, so that the piano sounds at times too discreet, a little remote. Another important release of Victor's is *El Salon Mexico* of Aaron Copland, played by Koussevitzky. The sonority of this recording is amazing; all the richness and at times acid brilliance of Copland's scoring come out with the utmost clarity. The coupling of this exciting and virtuoso piece with an equally exciting and virtuoso performance makes one of the peaks in the recording of American music.

The Columbia release of the *G-major Mass* of Poulenc is not so stimulating. The work itself is none too interesting, and the intonation of the Chanteurs de Lyon at times far from certain. The *Agnus Dei*, however, has a certain acoustic poetry; soprano solo and unison chorus alternate in the continuation of the melodic line (with curious Javanese inflections) during which one can at times distinctly hear the chilly echos in the cathedral at Lyons where it was recorded. The Delius album (Columbia) contains orchestral works, conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham; *Appalachia*, a series of variations on an American slave-song in no less than five records, and several short, unimportant works. For Delius lovers this album will undoubtedly be a precious thing; for those of more critical musical taste the collection can well be passed by. Loeffler's *Music for Four Stringed Instruments* (Victor) is also music from a more romantic past, with a decided inexplicable Russian flavor.