

SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

COLUMBIA and RCA Victor apparently have undertaken a definite program to record American music. This season they have begun with a list ranging from John Knowles Paine to Kent Kennan, who is the present holder of the Prix de Rome. It is all very promising, and if the policy continues we may hope soon to have an excellent reference library, in which we can trace the slow growth of individuality in American music.

The long awaited recordings of the *Indian Symphony* and *Antigona* of Chavez have at last been made by Victor, in an album which also includes the arrangement of the Buxtehude *Chaconne*. I wrote enthusiastically about these pieces here some four years ago, and though I had not heard them since, I find my opinion has not changed. Chavez is a superb orchestrator, and his clear, luminous scoring makes the music ideal for recording. As music the *Indian Symphony* is a masterpiece, moving and exhilarating. The form of *Antigona* still remains for me something of an enigma, although the beautiful sonority has lost none of its magic in recording. And perhaps Chavez reveals himself more in the scoring of the Buxtehude than in anything else; it is simple, full-bodied, eloquent, and worth comparing with the overgilded Bach arrangements of Stokowski. This album is something of which Victor can be proud.

The Rochester Symphony album of American music (Victor) is exceedingly

pallid by comparison. It includes the *Jubilee* of Chadwick, the *Dirge* from the *Indian Suite* of MacDowell, the *Prelude to Oedipus Tyrannus* of Paine, the *Night Soliloquy* of Kennan, and the *White Peacock* of Griffes — a stuffy collection of what, I suppose, are to be known as American classics. Its value relates to history more than to art. The piece by Kennan, for flute and strings, stands out as something quite fresh and alive. This is a charming little movement, admirably written for the flute, and marvelously played, although the orchestra sounds rather too loud in spots.

Columbia has released MacDowell's *Indian Symphony* in toto. This work is about as Indian as Rousseau's noble savage. Despite the fact that MacDowell, in his *Critical and Historical Essays*, calls attention to the falseness of harmonizing (in that case) a Chinese melody, he repeats the same kind of naiveté again and again in this symphony, destroying all modal feeling, and giving a false, romantic emphasis to any motif that might possibly have Indian derivation. In the *Two Sketches for String Quartet* based on Indian themes, by Griffes (Victor) we find the same attitude. The romantic approach is especially noticeable in the first piece, where the theme, after being heard in simple unison, is given a chromatic and sentimental harmonization. There is much to be said on the subject and this is not the moment. But as a perfect example of the right way to utilize exotic material, I refer you to the finale

of the *Indian Symphony* of Chavez.

Griffes' *White Peacock* played by the Columbia Broadcasting Symphony, is also recorded by Columbia, but the Rochester Symphony seems to me to give a more musical interpretation of this gaudy and unimportant piece. Gaudy and unimportant also is the *Concerto for Two Pianos* of Harl MacDonald, (Victor) which turns out to be mere watered Rachmaninoff, cheap, bombastic and unimaginative. Stokowski conducts it as though it were a mighty work. As though one work by MacDonald were not enough, we have also the *Cakewalk* from his *Third Symphony* (Victor), played by Ormandy, which is even worse for noise and vulgarity. On the other side is Gian-Carlo Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball*.

The recording of Ives' *Sixty-Seventh Psalm* by the Madrigal Singers (Columbia) provides three minutes of the most horrible sound it has ever been my lot to hear. This is clearly not the fault of the singers but of the music itself. Ives' procedure is to split up his chorus for most of the time into eight parts, the upper four in one key, the lower in another. The result is a complete mess of sound. Lourié, in his concerto for piano and chorus of ten years ago experimented in this way with certain success. Nevertheless at best the result is always a definite weakening of the sonority. In the case of Ives, who has here done it badly, it is impossible to distinguish any harmonic progression whatsoever. On the other side of the record is a short *Choral Etude* by William Schuman, which is not only effective, but proves that the Madrigal Singers can sing when given a chance.

Giesecking has recorded Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* for Columbia. It is a

beautiful album; the playing is perfection — delicate and transparent, the difficulty of the pieces dispelled in the most charming and effortless way. San Roma's playing of *Alborada del Gracioso* (Victor) seems by comparison coarse; this sardonic work is done in far too virtuoso a manner to be really enjoyed. Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (Victor), by Koussevitzky, sounds delightful; it has a piquancy and wit that is most beguiling, the only flaw in the performance being the honeyed, Hollywood-bedtime style in which the narrative is delivered; it makes the simple text sound awfully silly. We conclude the list with Bloch's *Concerto Grosso* for piano and strings (Victor), which is well made, but not very arresting music.

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The more significant Bloch is to be found in the *Violin Concerto*, published by Boosey and Hawkes; since this is to be the subject later of a more extended treatment, I will merely call attention to it now as one of the more important works to appear recently. Boosey and Hawkes have also just published a *Piano Concerto* by the Young English composer, Benjamin Britten, a brilliant tour-de-force, highly effective for the piano. Britten is exceptionally gifted and his music is free of those emotional and technical clichés that have characterized so much of contemporary British music. This is not however, Britten's best; the piano-part is over-decorated, a bit too virtuoso, the mood too restless. Technically it derives from Liszt, but it seems to be a work in which Britten had a terribly good time writing *à la manière de*, rather than in saying anything intensely personal. The *Ballad for Heroes* (Winthrop Rogers) for chorus and or-

chestra is far more moving. Both music and text reflect those moments of suspense before the inevitable, when nothing remains but to fire the guns. Here Britten seems to be far more himself; the choral writing is simple and it should sound extremely well. The bitter text and the dramatic music convey to us a hint of what the young British poets and musicians have been feeling during the past few years.

The *Symphony for Voices* by Roy Harris (G. Schirmer) has already been reviewed in these pages. I find the choral writing truly imaginative, particularly in the first part, the *Song for all Seas*. There is a mystic, poetic atmosphere in this piece, especially in the latter half, that seems to me marvelously in harmony with the Whitman text. The conception of *Tears*, the second part, is equally original and poetic, but I am not convinced by the realization, (if I am to judge by the recording). The music seems to disappear as design, and becomes one long, far too realistic wail. It is hard to say how much of this is due to performance, and how much to the highly chromatic texture of the music itself. Nevertheless the work is an important addition to American choral music. The *Sanctus* of Harris, a very short chorus, and the *Four Piano Pieces* for children (both Schirmer) do not seem to me very representative or inspired. On the other hand this house has also just published the *Three Variations on a Theme*, which I have not yet examined closely, but which is undoubtedly Harris at his best. Schirmer has also taken to publishing modern Europeans, but neither the *Two-voiced Inventions* and *Grotesque Dance* of the gifted young Lukas Foss (now living here), nor the *Twelve Short Piano*

Pieces by Krenek (also in this country) written in the twelve-tone technic, can be considered significant.

An appalling *Florida* suite for piano by Leo Sowerby (Oxford University Press - Carl Fischer) makes one wonder once more at the many-sided aspect of the American creative spirit. Here is a work that in conception seems to date back to the amateur exoticism of Cyril Scott. It is a suite of tone poems, with texts (by the author) in which such phrases as "the pulsing of water-narcissus urged on by the warm wind," "here all is dank blackness, here is ooze and slime;" "the stark pines dream of a peace akin to death" seek to define the meandering music.

From Paris (Durand et Cie.) comes a cycle of songs by Olivier Messiaen, *Chants de Terre et de Ciel*. The chief burden is on the piano, whose part is written with surely the maximum of complexity; it is hard to estimate the quality of the songs, with their simple vocal line. An atmosphere of belated impressionism and mystic Catholicism imbues both the text (by the composer) and music.

The two latest issues of *New Music* are devoted to South Americans; three pieces for violin and piano by Domingo Santa Cruz, three pieces for children by Armando Carvajal, and a *Prelude* by Guillermo Uribe-Holgun. Every one is interested now in music coming from that part of the continent, but it is hard to find any enthusiasm for these pieces. All are musical, more or less well done, but, as with so much South American music, they seem, strangely enough, to be completely lacking in temperament or personality.