

SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

AMERICAN music goes on being recorded; Columbia has just issued an album of music for string quartet by Piston and Cowell, while Victor gives us a series of Early American Ballads. Piston's quartet, his first, is excellently performed by the Dorian quartet. It is always a pleasure to listen to his satisfying, well-composed music, although I find the slow movement of this work a little too involved contrapuntally. Certain procedures in the last part recall Stravinsky of the early twenties; one does not feel that the real Piston has completely emerged. Nevertheless it does form a most effective close to the quartet, whose recording is a definite contribution to the library of American music. The piece by Cowell consists of a single, rather short movement, written in a simple, vigorous style. It is one of his less experimental, more musical works; its only fault is that in its isolation, it seems rather ambiguous. A contrasting movement before or after would throw it more into relief, give it more positive value.

The album of Early American Ballads will be most welcome to those interested in Americana. They are collected and arranged by John Jacob Niles, "mountain-eer tenor," who sings them in a perhaps too charming voice to the accompaniment of the dulcimer. This material has definite positive and negative qualities; to begin with, the accompaniment is all that could be desired, for it never destroys the modal character of the melody by introducing inappropriate harmonies.

It remains a discreet, purely sonorous background, serving to *scan* the stanzas more than anything else. This is not only the way it should be, but highly commendable; so many composers, including Brahms, have gone astray on that point, and have been tempted to sentimentalize modal melody with romantic or impressionistic harmonization. Where Niles errs in taste is in the singing. Each ballad is a narrative, and the traditional way is to sing each verse in practically the same manner, regardless of emotional content. Niles dramatizes the verses, sings with sophisticated "expression" and Irish-tenorisms which impair the simple folk-character of these ballads. Nevertheless the collection is valuable, for the melodies are all very beautiful. I should like to see the album followed by many more, with the same good taste in the accompaniments, and with purer style in delivery.

Bach and Daquin may seem hardly to belong in this column. Nevertheless I can assure you that the organ music of Bach becomes an entirely new experience when heard on the newly constructed baroque organ at Harvard. Installed in 1937, it was built in the manner of the baroque German instruments that Bach had at his disposal. This one has a very limited number of stops and only two manuals, while the wind-pressure is very light. For one who has never heard such an instrument it is as though he listened to Bach for the first time. Here everything becomes well-defined and abstract.

Gone are the dismal echoes and the confusion of sound. The colors are bright and pure; there are no fancy registrations – it is the complete antithesis to present-day organ technic, which in both church and theatre has become so incredibly vulgar. I wish every young composer could hear the records Victor has made of this organ; also the Album of *Choral Preludes* of Bach and the Daquin *Noëls*, played by E. Power Biggs. I can't imagine a more perfect performance than, for example, the *Wachet Auf!* prelude; the chorale, in precise, slightly acid tones, floats above or clashes with the more suavely sounding accompaniment, impersonal, ethereal, while every note of the whole composition is heard with the utmost clarity. The Handel concertos, previously recorded with this organ, are also of decided interest, for we can hear at last the right balance between organ and orchestra. Whether composers will feel like writing for this organ is a matter of individual reaction. Yet here is a "new" musical instrument, with a wide range of charming, fresh sonorities, unlike those commonly associated with organ music.

Two Hindemith works have just come out, the *Kleine Kammermusik*, Opus 24, (Columbia) and the recent *Funeral Music* (Victor) written for the death of George V. Most musicians, I imagine, know the first work, one of Hindemith's most spontaneous; the music is light and intriguing – a sheer delight from beginning to end. The transparent score (five winds) is beautifully played, and sounds as though it were written for recording. The latter work presents the reverse side of the picture; perhaps the occasion was too tempting to miss. Such a title in one's catalog of *Gebrauchs-*

musik carries enigmatic prestige; not much can be said for the music, except that it is adequate. *Old Hundredth*, which forms the choral ending, does not gain by *louche* harmonies and cadenzas. A tired piece.

The *Fifth Symphony* of Shostakovich is another of Victor's latest. Here Stokowski the intrepid mounts a proud and mettlesome steed, and dashes across the firmament like young Phaeton. Need it be said that the performance is sensational, with all the fire, brilliance, etc. that one could possibly want. Nevertheless this reviewer remains unimpressed; the orchestral fabric of the work is both glittering and familiar, and the music gives in the end the impression of an empty tale, told by a fervid but ancient mariner. Those looking for new, moving musical experience will find little here.

A thick album of Bax, issued by the English Music Society (Columbia release) contains a *Sonata* for viola and piano, a *Nonett* for strings, wind and harp, and a shortish choral work, *Mater Ora Filium*. A maximum of worthy and soporific music is compressed between the two covers. The sonata is as dull and devious as a British foreign policy; for the *Nonett*, see Ravel's early *Septet*; the mood is identical, the technic similar but less adept. The voices blend in agreeable harmonies rather than give any dimensional perspective; the climaxes are symphonic in conception; this is no, no *Nonett*. The choral work comes off by far the best; here it is a matter of technic rather than musical content, and Bax really knows how to make the chorus sound. The singing arouses longing for a similar choral tradition in America.

Two forgotten composers, Lekeu and Bruckner, are revived, to take their place

along with the rest. Lekeu's violin sonata is a work with so much promise that one must recognize the death of this young Belgian, at the age of twenty-four, as a real loss to French music. The sonata is given a sensitive performance by Menuhin. I am glad to see Bruckner being recorded. We know too little of this naive and rugged mystic whose work caused such bitter controversy in his time. Victor gives us two of his longest works, the *Mass*, for chorus and winds, and the *Ninth Symphony*. One must be in a special mood, where time is of no account, to listen to these. In the concert hall they are deadly; heard in the peace and quiet of one's home, with score in hand, all sorts of beauties come to light. The orchestration is simple but forceful, and with a brilliance and bite to it that is very personal. I prefer other Bruckner symphonies to this one, which is a bit *too* titanic, although the final adagio, where (to quote Coeuroy) grass grows between the notes, is very moving, in spite of, or perhaps because of its length.

SCORES

Another American publishing house, Axelrod, has appeared on the scene, offering a series devoted to contemporary Americans. It is a worthy project, but as yet not very exciting. There are strangely assorted fish in this net, which seems to have a very fine mesh. So far, the catalog consists of short piano pieces of moderate difficulty, which ought to be welcome to teachers. Two *Huapangos* (Mexican dances) by Paul Bowles stand out for their directness and authentic exoticism. The second is the better of the two, perhaps; it is more expanded, more interesting rhythmically. Both have that light touch and *allégresse* so characteristic of

Bowles. An *Amerind Suite* by Cowell is included in the series. This is in three movements, each consisting of a single musical statement, followed by several paraphrases of increasing difficulty. The thematic material is "original, but the style that of Indian music with its characteristic scales and rhythms." The working-out of each piece is marred by the inevitable appearance of those tone-clusters which Cowell seems to imagine have great cumulative power, but which I have always found noisy and childish. Were it not for this, the last piece would be very well done indeed.

The Arrow Press gives us *Eight Epitaphs for Voice and Piano* by Theodore Chanler, a suite of very sensitive, intimate music. I think these rank among the best American songs to appear in recent years. The approach is purely musical, the workmanship a delight. The only objection singers may have is the fact that they must share honors too evenly with the piano; the structural element is confined for the most part to that instrument, while the voice enters and breaks off in a most casual way. I can't help feeling that the last three songs are far too short (a page each) and too similar in mood to follow one another effectively. Among the many brief choral works issued by the Arrow Press I would like to indicate the piece by Elliott Carter, *Heart not so heavy as mine*, as outstanding, both for its excellent vocal writing and musical charm.

New Music has just published a *Sonata* by David Diamond for cello and piano. It is hard to estimate this work, which seems far too long — thirty-six pages in all — and lacks variety of texture. Diamond has gone in a lot for those vacant sonorities of the Beethoven last piano sonata. What with these, together with

a tension which never breaks during the whole piece, and the austere, diatonic contrapuntalism, it is a rather forbidding work. The *lento assai*, which forms the introduction to the second movement, appeals to me most; this is really a lovely section, an oasis. On the whole the sonata lacks light and shade.

Harris' *Three Variations on a Theme* for string quartet (Arrow) is a major work, put together with fine craftsmanship. These variations are really three developments of the theme which forms the introduction to the quartet. Each development constitutes a movement, and the resulting unity is highly satisfactory. In spite of the fact that the work is tightly woven, that each voice is constantly eloquent in its contribution to the thematic development, the music is never tedious, for there are plenty of points of repose which afford the ear the necessary rest before a new complicated section. Harris' contrapuntal writing becomes more and more natural and logical, more imaginative and personal as time goes on.

The *Symphonic Set* of Cowell (full score published by the Arrow Press) is rather uneven. The simplicity of the slow

movements seems to me trite and empty; the musical content and development of the faster ones are not very interesting. It is only in the finale that Cowell really seems to get going and become creative; here the orchestration takes on a more individual hue, although it never becomes really fluid or supple.

The very different score of Piston's ballet-suite, *The Incredible Flutist* (Arrow), presents the composer at first glance as far too clever, too much the wizard. This is real ballet music, music to be danced, not mimed, as has been the case of so many static ballets of the last few years. I have no idea what the plot to the alluring title might be; the music, which is a set of untitled dances, gives no clue. The score came too late for close examination, but it is provocative from the standpoint of orchestration. Piston has abandoned here his dexterous contrapuntal juggling for a music which is light, staccato, percussive.

No new works from abroad, nor, I suppose, need we expect more for some time to come, but I should think the time was about ripe for a new composer of military marches to appear in this country.

ON THE FILM FRONT

By PAUL BOWLES

IN the series of "non-fiction" films shown daily at the Museum of Modern Art, there have been a few with sound tracks of some interest. *The Song of Ceylon*, produced by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, claims to be a "dialectic treatment" of the "influence of

Western Civilization on native life." The subject matter called for a fancy score, which Walter Leigh, after consulting *El Amor Brujo* briefly, and the *Sacre* at greater length, successfully provided. There is masterly dubbing and blending of sounds throughout. The track is com-