

## RECORDS and SCORES

By COLIN McPHEE

THERE are unmistakable signs of a rapidly increasing interest in exotic music—the art-musics of the Far East, the more primitive “tribal” music of Africa, to say nothing of the popular, quasi-folkmusic of Central America. Recording companies are turning more and more to this practically unexplored field; the fan-mail addressed to Station WNYC which is running a series devoted to exotic programs includes many requests for analysis of the music broadcast. There are various reasons for this newly-awakened interest. First you have the tremendous increase in travel in the last decade, with dull old ladies poking their noses into circumcision ceremonies and cannibal cooking-pots, and bright young men going native for a month in Bali or Lapland. Then again there are the stay-at-homes, fated to remain fixed in a far too familiar pattern of life, for whom recorded exotic music is a sort of travel-book, a vague evocation of some romantically primitive life. But for a growing number of intelligent musicians it is becoming clear that the study of exotic musics represents no mere idle and superficial desire for something different; these musics are as important in broadening their conceptions of the nature of music, as the temples of Angkor or Chichen Itza are for the architect, or African plastic art for the sculptor. There are lessons to be learned, not too remote or unrelated to the present time and scene.

The latest addition to the number of exotic records is an album of African music recorded by Laura Boulton (Victor). This is really an excellent collection, containing much material of the greatest interest to both musicologist and musician. There is a great variety of instrumental combinations and technics in the different records. Esthetic estimates of exotic music are impertinent, nevertheless I feel sure that musicians will be fascinated most of all by the drum-patterns. The last record of the series, “Secret Society Drums,” is truly sensational for its complicated poly-rhythmic texture. The rhythm of each drum is first heard separately; one by one they join in, until an amazing ensemble results. Needless to say, this short record is a condensation of drum-playing that may go on indefinitely. An informative little booklet goes with the album.

Playing the album of English Folk Dances (Columbia) after the African records is like drinking weak tea after a bottle of ripe Armagnac. These mincing little tunes have none of the wild flavor of Celtic folkmusic; all is ordered and matter-of-fact, in spite of the occasional modal character of the tune, or certain metric irregularities. The pieces are given a stiff and pedantic “treatment” in the arrangement for a mixed octet of strings and wind. This album will probably be welcome to members of the May-pole cult.

Schirmer having recently decided to extend its activities and go in for a little recording, has just put out the A-minor string quartet of Carpenter (1927). This mild and well-bred music is put together gracefully enough, and has an agreeable sound. It seems a curiously limp work for the period in American music when Varese and Ruggles were raising their fists to the skies. Let us hope that the Schirmer project meets with success, for it can be a definite addition in the dissemination of contemporary music.

Columbia has released the string quartet of Bloch, a major work in his most characteristic style, written a quarter of a century ago when the composer first came to America. There is no denying the moments of great beauty in this piece which is warm, sincere, and highly original in mood and sonority. But, as is usual with Bloch, it is also an emotional orgy, over-dramatic, a tempest of lamentation and rhapsodic utterance. The texture of the writing is rich and sensuous, and has in this recording an incredible volume of sound. It is hard to believe that here is a quartet and not a large orchestra playing (more acoustic tricks of the recording department). In spite of the elaborate working-out, there are always certain formulae in Bloch that disturb me as being too automatic—for instance, the far too frequent use of the diminished seventh as a basis for cadenzas, developments and extended passages. Climax after climax is built up of the transposition of a phrase to the minor third above, and then once again, to terminate in a wild leap to a high and poignant note. One finds this even in the recent *Violin Concerto*, and aside from the

familiarity of this procedure, it helps create a decided harmonic monotony. Details such as these mark off Bloch as an earnest creator of earnest and eloquent music which is somehow not quite interesting enough.

Still another quartet, this time by Berezowsky (Opus 16, 1932) is recorded by Victor. This work makes no appeal to me whatsoever. It is dry, brilliant and impersonal and has a curious volatile quality, so that when the piece is over you feel that it has evaporated completely.

Listening to the Hindemith *Sonata for Piano*, four hands, is a refreshing experience in the midst of all this music. It is a Victor recording, played by Sanromá and Hindemith, and has an enchanting sound. This seems to me an ideal medium for Hindemith's contrapuntal style. The early piano pieces were always not only somewhat thin and monotonous in sound but far too difficult rhythmically for a single player to perform with real pleasure. With two players the opposing rhythms take on more character, are played more fluidly, while it is possible to obtain great variety of timbre. This piece states with conviction that the piano is not yet dead.

*Swing Stuff* and *Jingle-Jangle* by McBride, played by the Boston "Pops" orchestra are among Victor's recent releases. Of the two I prefer the first, which is elaborately and effectively orchestrated, although a little too streamlined. The second to my mind is pretty awful; it is a sort of *Nola* rewritten to glorify the vibraphone, that insipid American version of a lovely Javanese instrument. The music expresses with elegance the beloved vacuum between

newsreel and feature picture in a large theatre.

A double-sided record devoted to Walton contains music for orchestra, *Siesta*, and two numbers from *Façade*. This disc, also from the Victor catalog, may perhaps seem a desirable item to admirers of Walton, but to me it is a sheer waste of time.

Otto Luening's *Suite* for soprano and flute is among the recent recordings of New Music, and, although a little thin in musical content, is so charmingly performed that it is very agreeable to listen to.

#### SCORES

Turning to the publications, one finds that this is rather a lean month. Nothing from abroad, of course, and only Schirmer active at the moment in America. This firm is in the midst of publishing Harris' *Folk-Song Symphony* for orchestra and chorus, which consists of five choral movements and two orchestral interludes; so far, only four of the choral movements have appeared. Naturally it is still impossible to form an estimate of the work, which promises to be an eloquent projection of the American folk-idiom on a big scale. A more detailed review must be deferred until the next issue. William Schuman's *Prelude for Women's Voices* (Schirmer) is obviously a very singable and effective short piece for a capella chorus. The part writing is extremely

simple, the tonality well-defined, both virtues whose absence sends most contemporary choral music on the rocks at a performance. Personally I don't care for the middle section, with its solo and whispered accompaniment; it seems to me a little false and melodramatic.

Schirmer also has just published *Ten Preludes For Piano* by Chavez. At first glance these pieces, written for the most part in two voices, have a disarming simplicity about them, which however is soon dispelled on closer acquaintance. All Chavez' qualities appear here in concentrated form, the intensity, the diatonic melodic line, the carefully chosen dissonance, the determined drive towards the objective of the piece. In these pieces Chavez achieves a very individual sonority in the piano, intensely strident and resonant at times, at others sharp and clear as the stratosphere. One is constantly referring the timbres to Chavez' very personal orchestration. In spite of the technical difficulties in some of them, the preludes seem to belong to the realm of chamber music rather than the concert hall. Pianists are sure to find them too uncompromising.

Schirmer has added Schönberg's *Fourth Quartet* (Opus 37) to the series of study scores; this, however, is among works that have arrived too late for review.

## THEATRE MUSIC

—By MARC BLITZSTEIN—

IF it is all right with you, I shall tackle theatre-music-of-the-quarter without that paragraph's-worth of initial theory

with which I should like to launch, tie up and generally belles-lettrify this type of review. The items on my list, which