

## RECORDS and SCORES

By COLIN McPHEE

THE Victor Company continues its large-scale recording of American music. In the past two months Harris' *Third Symphony*, Hanson's *Romantic Symphony*, and Piston's *Suite* from his ballet, *The Incredible Flutist*, are the big events, but short orchestral works by Sowerby, McBride, Still, Valbert Coffey and Charles Vardell are also on the list.

There is no doubt that Harris' vigorous and moving piece marks an important point in the history of American music. So many works by serious American composers have receded and disappeared in the last twenty years; one feels little danger that this will happen to the Harris symphony. It is less experimental, more personal, more concerned with purely musical values. I won't go so far as to find in Harris' music, as Paul Rosenfeld does, "the limitless feeling of the plains, the fierce impulses and frustrations of the American migrations, the long patience of the poor . . ." For me the music is quite good enough without nationalistic interpretations or innuendos. I am satisfied with the indefinable geography of the heart.

Hanson's *Romantic Symphony* is quite another matter. In violent contrast to Harris' thematic material, which consists of long, very personal melodic lines, Hanson builds his symphony for the most part on short motifs, which all too frequently turn out to be empty fanfares. The orchestration is rich, brilliant; emotionally the music is pathetic and noble

in turn but like twentieth century romanticism in general, seems always to evade real issues. You might call Piston's ballet, *The Incredible Flutist*, romantic, but it is the deliberate and artificial romanticism of the stage and footlights. The plot of the ballet is extremely thin and does not read very well, but the music is delightful, gay, witty and sparkling. I mean only tribute when I say that the time to play these records is before dinner, when a few young and attractive people come in for a cocktail. The orchestration is full of surprises, including the bark of a dog (ironic echo of Respighi) which terminates the wild circus-band episode in a highly satisfactory manner.

Turning to the lesser personalities one is less enthusiastic. Sowerby's *Come Autumn Time* (was it twenty years ago?) is musically and acoustically as subtle as a military march. Still has written much better music than the *Scherzo* from the *Afro-American* suite, which is simply noisy and pointless. It has, however, a very good tune in it, which is known among Gershwin fans as "*I've got rhythm.*" If I'm not mistaken, however, the *Scherzo* was played at an International Composer's Guild concert in 1926. McBride's arrangement of the *Tiger Rag* is for undergraduates after the game. To quote the Victor publicity sheet, "It is played by a superb orchestra of ninety instrumentalists and furthermore an orchestra that understands jazz as well as

it does Debussy." This turns out to be the Boston "Pops" ensemble. They do get their teeth into it, but the result seems a bit futile. Both Vardell's *Joe Clarke Steps Out* and Coffey's *Virginia Reel* continue this craze for amplified sound. Wouldn't mirrors and a microphone be more economical?

I should like to be able to comment favorably on new firms that go in for recording American composers. I have in mind at the moment an ill-advised recording by Timely, of a quintet for string quartet and voice by Delmar Molarsky. The text, "How strange, I can't remember why I've come into this forest," is by the composer, and also sung by him. The music is as vague and pallid as one feared from the title. Nevertheless Timely has in its catalogue two Shostakovich items which are worth noting. One record contains *Three Fantastic Dances*, Opus one, for piano. These have all the Shostakovich impertinence and irresponsibility. The *Octet* for strings is more interesting; it is a short work (two sides of one record) consisting of a slow prelude and a scherzo. Comparing the two contrasting movements it is clear that Shostakovich is more himself when going at high speed, where the melodic curve is fantastic and capricious.

Turning to music by more orderly minds the first to be mentioned is the *Piano Concerto* for the left hand alone by Ravel (Victor). This is a delicious work—over-refined if you will, and perhaps containing nothing that we have not heard in earlier Ravel. But the carefully filtered orchestration and the scientific approach in his art always give me a special pleasure. Here the sonority of the orchestra definitely takes its character from the immediate problem, the peculiar

technic of the left hand, more flexible and versatile perhaps than the right, but relying on pedal, arpeggio passages and the lower register of the piano for its general effect. Perhaps the most fascinating part of the work is from the beginning of the second record on, where Africanisms enter, ostensibly derived from *le jazz hot*, but sounding much more like one of Laura Boulton's recordings. The work is given a typically French and brilliant performance by Cortot and the Paris Conservatory orchestra.

*Der Schwanendreher* (concerto for viola and small orchestra, 1935) of Hindemith is another of Victor's new releases. This work is based on German folksongs, but unattractive as the idea sounds it makes very attractive music. You may be sure that Hindemith handles his material with intelligence and virtuosity, and creates a very satisfactory work. German folksong is treated with all the awareness of its modal implications; there is no smug and sugary Hänsel-and-Gretel atmosphere here. The viola takes on at times the character of a wild Kentucky fiddler with his strange intonations. One is constantly reminded of Europe in the middle-ages; the melodies do not reflect nationality so much as a point in time.

And now to the cruel North, the rocks and icebergs of Sibelius. The Sibelius Society has produced, through Victor, Volume Six of the orchestral works of the master. This contains *En Saga*, Opus 9, *In Memoriam*, funeral march, Opus 59, *The Bard*, tone poem, part of the *Pelléas and Mélisande* suite, Opus 46, the *Valse Triste*, Opus 44 (!) and the *Prelude to The Tempest*, Opus 109. A mere listing of these works takes space, even as the

music takes time, and plenty of it. Any attempt at a serious critical estimate is perhaps out of place in this department, but in order to throw into relief the other works mentioned (from my own purely personal point of view) I must state that I find this a tedious album. I confess to being temperamentally incapable of appreciating Sibelius. His music I find for the most part dull and banal. There are always moments when it suddenly takes on a haunting beauty, but they disappear too soon in the general plan. He is an impressionist lost in the mazes of "classical form." *The Tempest* particularly well bears me out. Its eloquence lies in its formlessness. Anyone who has experienced a real North Atlantic hurricane in December will agree that here is a magic transmutation into the symphonic apparatus of a terrifying experience. One has heard identical sounds in the wind tearing across the rocking ship, whistling wild overtones through the rigging; one has felt the same surges as gigantic waves break alongside, sending everything crashing down the ship's corridors. In listening to this music of course the reaction is purely physical; musical values cease to exist. The result is a sensational and formless tone-poem, which miraculously establishes (through realism) the mood to the opening of the play. . . . The music to *Pelléas and Mélisande* seems strangely insensitive and unrelated, while the *Funeral March* simply magnifies the melodrama of the Siegfried funeral march to grandiose proportions. On the whole this album supplies one more explanation for the present popularity of Sibelius. A familiar, identifiable diatonic melos, colored at times with Slavic echoes, a satisfying, nineteenth-century harmonic background,

non-disturbing meters and rhythmic patterns, a classical orchestration, an impressive emphasis on the symphonic tradition – such music, coupled with picturesque stories of the composer and his remote environment preserve the right balance between the exotic and the all's-right-with-the-world facets of music. It's ideal.

The album of *Piano Music of the Twentieth Century*, played by Sanroma (Victor) sounds alluring but is a definite disappointment. It is devoted to heterogeneous scraps, an early *Nocturne* of Debussy, a few *Visions Fugitives* of Prokofieff, Copland's *Cat and Mouse*, a little suite by Krenek, and the famous Opus 19 (six little pieces) by Schönberg. If this is representative of modern piano music, then times are sad indeed. It is hardly fair to represent Debussy or Copland by such early works. Here is simply an album of outdated trivia.

Depressing note; Weinberger's *Chestnut Tree* appears simultaneously under Victor and Columbia. This ingratiating music properly comes under the heading of politics. The inspiration derives from the movies where the composer saw the King of England in a boy's camp, joining with the boys in a song with gestures. The tune is trite, the variations awful, but the work has unlimited publicity value for more than the composer.

#### SCORES

The enterprising firm of Boosey and Hawkes has just brought out the long-awaited *Mikrokosmos* of Bela Bartok. This consists of one hundred and fifty-three progressive piano pieces, starting from the very beginning, and bit by bit involving all the tonal and rhythmic intricacies of modern music. It is hard

to estimate the work without having put it to the test. In many ways it appears to be a most valuable series; each piece is the perfect presentation and solution of a certain technical problem, both from the standpoint of performer and composer. The pupil becomes aware from the outset of modal melody and scales that are unfamiliar and enticing. Folk-song plays a large role, and the absence of conventional harmonizations ought to create from the start a broader conception of music. But, admirable as they all are, many of the little pieces seem rather dry and abrupt and, in spite of their exotic color, as impersonal as a Euclidian theorem. The writing is consistently thin, hard, brittle. In some pieces the persistent dissonance becomes definitely *agaçant*. The pieces finally reach a stage

(in the sixth volume) of great rhythmic complexity, although from the standpoint of passage-work they are still around grade three. One likes to speculate on the possible psychological effect such a series, if persistently followed, might have on the pupil. It ought to be satisfactory, but there are dangers.

The only other published music to be noted for the present is the continuation of Hindemith's series of sonatas for solo instruments and piano. Two more have just been published, (by Schott of Mainz) one for clarinet and piano, the other for horn and piano. There is also a sonata for harp. For me the chief interest in all these works is the idiomatic treatment of the instrument in each case. Musically they cannot be said to contribute much that is new to Hindemith.

## OVER THE AIR

By CONLON NANCARROW

SWING, JAZZ, BOOGIE-WOOGIE

NOW that swing has come, gone, and left its mark on popular music, it may be in order to review the results. For several years the word "swing" has been used to denote almost everything outside the dreamy, Guy-Lombardo-school. Its characteristics are inclusively held to be a heightened individual and orchestral virtuosity, a certain freedom in solo work (*solo*, but not *collective* improvisation), rhythmical precision, faster tempi, more advanced harmonic progressions, slick orchestration (including the ability to get from one block of music to another with less stumbling) and a refinement of nuances and phrasing.

The best work done in jazz has very little in common with swing. Besides advancing the idiomatic technic, the main achievement of the swing fad has been to call attention to the existence of certain groups of players. Good jazzmen were summoned from their dives, clothed with respectability and allowed to play at being king. And now they must hang on the bandwagon or go back to the dives and pursue their art.

The outstanding characteristic of "hot jazz" has always been *collective* improvisation. This can be heard in certain recordings by Louis Armstrong's old "Hot Five" and "Hot Seven", Bix Beiderbecke and the "New Orleans Lucky