

SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

SIGNS of the changing times can be noted in the recording of two outstanding works from the atonal period, *Pierrot Lunaire* and the Berg *Violin Concerto*, and also in the publication by the Edward Marks Music Corporation of an *Album of Stravinsky Masterpieces*, selected compositions for piano solo, price one dollar net.

The contents of the Stravinsky album lay emphasis, naturally enough, on the early and exotic note, but go so far as to include the *Devil's Dance* from *L'Histoire du soldat*. The new, not-too-difficult arrangements give a ten-fingered rationalization, and a linear continuity that flies from piccolo to tuba. A short episode from the *Sacre* looks like a guileless page from Poulenc. The dynamic force, the bite of the music would never be suspected from these pages, but at least they furnish a source of gratification for the amateur, and contain a store of rich hints for a thousand anonymous radio composers. Stravinsky hereby falls in line.

Other signs of change are indicated by the greatly increased activities in the publishing world. At no other time has there been such a varied list of music by American composers. G. Schirmer follows the *Third Symphony* of Roy Harris with William Schuman's *American Festival Overture* in its series of study scores, and two works by Samuel Barber — the *Essay for Orchestra* (1938), and the earlier *Overture to "The School for*

Scandal" (1932), vivacious and brilliant to a degree where thoughts of Sheridan pale and run to cover. Henry Cowell's *Celtic Set* (also G. Schirmer) is published in triplicate — piano solo, two pianos and band. The music is strongly colored by Celtic folk-idioms, but at the same time has a certain cold, abstract quality. In the version for two pianos there is no interesting interplay, no apparent attempt to explore the endless world of sound that lies waiting to be revealed by these two familiar instruments, but the three pieces produce a definite effect, partly through the simple and practical writing for the pianos, partly through the sober presentation of the exotic material.

Randall Thompson's *Suite for Oboe, Clarinet and Viola* (E. C. Schirmer) is a slight work, also based on exotica. The five brief movements give a sort of résumé of the pentatonic scale in its form containing no semitones. Two of the three animated movements have a definitely Siamese cast, while the others refer to the American Indian, or American and English folk music. The writing is transparent and deft, but, perhaps owing to the nature of its material, the music seems curiously impersonal. There is no mistaking the personal note in Aaron Copland's brief chorus *The Lark*, (again E. C. Schirmer) with words by Genevieve Taggard, no mistaking the use of triads, the recitative, the rhythmic displacements. The result is a short but

eloquent piece of music, continually pushing forward and rising to an ecstatic climax.

Boosey and Hawkes publishes the orchestral score to Copland's ballet suite, *Billy the Kid*. The warmth and poetry of this music, the perfect manipulation of the folk-material make it American in the way that *Petroushka* is Russian. It is tender, sardonic, gay, scored in colors that belong to the theatre as do spotlights, and permeated with an elusive nostalgia. Every note carries with it an impetus for bodily movement, and yet, as a suite, it makes highly satisfactory concert music. The same firm has just published Béla Bartók's *Violin Concerto* (1938), one of Bartók's finest works of his later period. Another concerto to appear in the same catalogue is that of Nicolai Berezowsky, for viola or clarinet and orchestra, sound, well-constructed music stemming from Hindemith. Two songs from Douglas Moore's opera, *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, conclude the list to be noted from this house.

Isadore Freed and Lazare Saminsky continue their excellent educational series of piano pieces for beginners. The collection (forty-odd numbers, published separately by Carl Fischer) includes various American composers, French such as Milhaud and Florent Schmitt, and appropriately, a number of Latin-Americans - Villa-Lobos, Revueltas, Caturla and others. Each piece offers some unusual feature, modal, harmonic or rhythmic, which is given a brief and simple analysis at the beginning. These pieces are less ingenious, present simpler problems than those in the graded books that go to make up Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, but to my mind they can accomplish more since not only is there a closer relation between

the musical development of the player and the nature of the technical problem to be mastered, but there is a wide range of musical personalities which gives an added interest to the series.

Recent issues of New Music contain Richard Donovan's short *Serenade* for oboe and three strings (recorded last season and reviewed here), a *Study* for cello solo by Harrison Kerr, and a rather pallid *Second Movement of a Symphony* by Gerald Strang. Mills Music publishes new music by Roy Harris, including the symphonic overture *Cimarron*, a work of unusual interest, since it marks Harris' entrance into the field of band music. Also to be noted by the same composer are the settings of three of Whitman's *Songs of Democracy* for a capella chorus. These are a far too immediate translation of the text for into sound my taste, and you have to be a greater admirer of Whitman's rhetoric than I am to be moved by the music. Mills also has published Berezowsky's lively and energetic *Suite No. 2* for woodwind quintet, and Richard Goldman's *Sentimental Journey* for band, a slight but graceful piece which has a definitely popular appeal.

RECORDS

Columbia is to be thanked for the recent appearance of the Berg *Violin Concerto* and Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, the latter sponsored by the League of Composers. What a difference lies between these two works, so spiritually related by German romanticism, so closely allied through the use of the twelve-tone system. *Pierrot Lunaire* has lost none of its intensity with the years, none of its strange, sinister quality. You might call it the case-history of a schizophrenic

recorded in sound. The *Sprechstimme* is pathetic, sentimental, hysterical and vicious in turn, rising and falling in fantastic curves in a way that is strangely reminiscent of the voice of a Chinese actor. The instrumentation is an amazing web of uncanny and unexpected sounds, amplifying the hysteria of the voice to an almost unbearable degree. The appeal of this music is purely physical, a relentless and calculated sequence of assaults and caresses to the nervous system.

The *Berg Concerto*, on the other hand, speaks to us in the terms of pure music, in spite of the program and obsession with death that was its inspiration. The less we know of this the better; the warmth and mystic romanticism of the music, the beautifully organized form, the soft glow of the orchestral timbres carry us into a sphere that needs no definition. These two works complement each other to a remarkable degree, and their simultaneous appearance is an event.

The *Album of Brazilian Songs*, (Victor) sung by Elsie Houston, is definitely a disappointment. The collection is pale and uninteresting. Miss Houston has far better pieces than these in her repertoire, but alas, they belong perhaps to the realm of pleasure rather than the tedious task of furthering cultural relations. Victor also gives us an *Album of American Works* for solo wind instruments and string orchestra, which contains four brief (one side of a disc) pieces by Bernard Rogers, Wayne Barlow, Burrill Phillips and Homer Keller, with flute, oboe, bassoon and clarinet respectively the solo instruments. Perhaps because of their brevity, perhaps because of the similarity of timbre, perhaps be-

cause of their inclusion in one set, they seem to have no salient characteristics. All four pieces are serious and sensitive, quiet, gently romantic and nostalgic. They are four perfectly good, sincere utterances, like brief lyrics from a group of Lake poets. Victor released earlier in the year Frederick Jacobi's *Hagiographa: Three Biblical Narratives*. This is a set of pieces entitled *Job*, *Ruth* and *Joshua*, written for string quartet and piano. Definitely Hebraic in their warmth and sensuousness, these pieces have a more even norm, a less rhapsodic atmosphere than the music of Bloch, early pioneer of Jewish melody, and are given an excellent performance by the Coolidge quartet and Irene Jacobi.

Isolated discs by Victor are Walter Piston's *Carnival Song* (from Lorenzo de Medici) sung by the Harvard Glee Club with brass accompaniment, and Robert McBride's *Quintet for Oboe and Strings*. New Music Recordings releases a short *Scherzo* for wind quartet by Frederic Jacobi. On the other side is a *Prelude and Fugue* for piano by David Diamond; I should like to have seen others of the twenty-four recorded at the same time. I might also add that Schirmer has recently brought out an album of *Balinese Music*, which contains arrangements that I made of that music for two pianos, and also two melodies for flute, with a composed piano accompaniment; the album includes a brief analysis of Balinese scales, and photographs of musical instruments.

Taking it all in all, the season has had a good start, and there are indications that it will go on.