

SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

THE Chavez *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, written in 1941, heard last season, and now published by G. Schirmer and Co., is a vigorous work of broad dimensions, mature, lofty, with moments of real grandeur. It stems spiritually from the *Antigona*, recalling it in the diatonic and modal melodic lines, in the austere and personal harmonic texture, in the clear, ultra-resonant orchestra. All the unmistakable elements of Chavez are here, but assembled and developed with a new force.

The piano is less a solo instrument than an integral part of the orchestra. The writing is severe, uncompromising, never striving for individual effect. Technically I find it less interesting than the orchestra; it seems to demand a wider variety of patterns, and for my ear is in places too thin for the intensity of the music. It must be played throughout with a curious combination of cantando and martellato, percussive, but never dry. But it is always interesting in acoustic relation to the orchestra. At times there are unforgettable acoustic effects, as, for instance, at the opening of the slow movement, where low, gong-like tones from the piano are opposed to harp-notes in the same register. Or, at the close of the movement, where the piano expands, and is kept vibrating in all its registers against acid harmonics sustained in the orchestra.

Musically the work has great power, gives a sense of space and infinity; the

prolonged transition before the reprise in the first movement is real "symphonic" writing, absolutely magnificent, and for me the finest pages Chavez has written.

Music Press has brought out an attractive edition of Virgil Thomson's *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. This orchestral suite, written for a United States Government film, makes use of American folk-material with distinction. The orchestra is ingenious and fresh; the music has simplicity and nostalgic charm, and is perfectly able to stand alone. Preceding each movement is a still from the film, with text, giving an extraneous eloquence to the music as one looks through the score.

Schirmer also publishes the study-score of William Schuman's robust and brilliantly orchestrated *Third Symphony*, the work that won the first annual award of the Music Critics' Circle of New York last season. From the same house comes an album of *Latin-American Art Music for the Piano*, which, alas, is an utter disappointment. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela are all represented, but from these provocative-sounding locales we are given nothing more than a series of pretty-sounding salon-pieces, nicely polished, with echoes of Granados, Debussy and Casella. Not one single note in the book is born of the new world. There simply *must* be more vigorous music than this south of Panama. *Six Animal Fables* for piano by Jacobo Ficher of Argentina

(Axelrod) are more contemporary, but lack distinction. Far better piano pieces are the three Chopinesque *Polish Dances* by Karol Rathaus (Boosey and Hawkes), which are a deliberate return to the idiom of another day, and have charm and spontaneity. But you will find no charm or spontaneity in either Milhaud's *Pastorale* or Krenek's *Sonata*, both short organ pieces published in the Contemporary Organ Series by H. W. Gray. These are automatic works "to order," simply "signed pieces." Gail Kubik's *Sonatina for Piano* (Mercury Music Corporation) is concise and deft, a pleasure to play

Boosey and Hawkes publish Bartok's *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet and piano, written and recorded two years ago. Bartok's constant search for mysterious resonance, for carefully opposed sonorities can be seen in every page of this work. And yet, much as I admire the craftsmanship of this music I am not moved by it. I still find it remote and shrill, setting my nerves on edge. It seems keyed at too high a pitch for the length of the work — a good quarter of an hour.

Las Agachadas (The Shake-Down Song) is a short *a capella* chorus which Copland wrote last season for the Schola Cantorum concert in commemoration of the Schola's first conductor, Kurt Schindler. It is based on Melody Number 202 in Kurt Schindler's beautiful collection: "Folk Music and Poetry of Spain and Portugal." It is an effective working out, brilliant and sonorous, a perfect little example of fine manipulation of folk material.

The Music Division of the Pan American Union publishes the melody and text to *Fourteen Traditional Spanish*

Songs from Texas. These are transcribed from recordings made by John and Alan Lomax, and the material is of definite interest. *American Folk Song and Folk Lore*, a regional bibliography compiled by Alan Lomax and Sydney Robertson Cowell is a valuable and comprehensive survey, the first of its kind, published by the Service Center of the Progressive Education Association. An amazing amount of material has been covered, and the booklet is a must for the library of every musician interested in the folk-material to be found in this country.

RECORDS

In times of crisis, when materials grow scarce, nothing seems so essential to the big companies as one more recording of a Brahms or Beethoven symphony. You can search recent lists in vain for any title that carries with it the slightest taint of risk. New Music Recordings, however, has just released its first album, a selection of numbers from the music-play *A Tree on the Plains*, with music by Ernest Bacon. This work, commissioned by The League of Composers, had its premiere at the Spartanburg Music Festival last May, and is concerned with "the people and the hours of one of those little pine-board houses that you may see on the plains of the Southwest . . ." The music is simple and direct, on the pallid side. Use is made of humble styles, the church anthem, the popular ballad, the white spiritual, which is white indeed. It is hard to get an impression of the opera as a whole, since the numbers were chosen to represent the different characters of the play in characteristic songs rather than to project the story. A piano also substitutes for orchestra in most of the pieces.