

## OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

FOLLOWING the more progressive lead taken by Columbia and Mutual in exploiting our native art, the National Broadcasting System has at long last fallen into line with a weekly series, *New American Music*. This is presented over WJZ with Frank Black conducting the orchestra, and Samuel Chotzinoff wise-cracking about the fan-mail, which seems to be abundant, avid, and full of complaint about "modern stuff." Most of the numbers are, however, comparatively obvious and simple. Maybe the great radio public is still afraid of hearing anything labeled "new," by which it generally means cacophonous, or maybe Chotzinoff just thinks that kind of letter sounds more entertaining over the air than any other. The general interest is healthy and some of the more unrestrained reactions show positive critical temper. One listener gave Meredith Willson's so-called symphony one of the fiercest beatings I've ever heard a work take anywhere. Another rather tactless fellow said he never did think Chotzinoff had any musicianship and that the choice of works for this program was rotten and completely unrepresentative of the best America had to offer. Chotzinoff makes capital out of taking the brickbats with the bouquets, and himself adds considerably to the entertainment value of the program, which is not always musically gratifying.

Boris Koutzen's *Concerto for Five Solo Instruments and String Orchestra* was probably the finest work given in

the series. The writing for solo instruments is a joy to hear, the balance with strings no less skillful. Its texture, too, is unusually grateful and alive, with a very distinctive harmony that manages to hold up and sustain tension throughout.

David Diamond's *Aria and Hymn for Orchestra* also made a very interesting radio piece. It is a tribute to this composer's deep love and reverence for the late Stravinsky. That is not necessarily a criticism for if the work is not original it is surely well-wrought. Its religious feeling has more objective than inward quality. From the point of view of interesting sonorities and imaginative orchestration it is certainly one of the most exciting works that have been broadcast on this or any other radio program.

Gardner Read's *Prelude and Toccata for Orchestra*, although not very fresh, is nevertheless a fairly well-made piece of obvious and external writing; good in its own vigorous way. However, it would stand up better if it had more wallop, since its obvious intent is to create strong, direct excitement. Alan Shulman's *Seven Variations on an Original Theme for Viola and Orchestra* was so popular that the listening audience asked for a repeat performance. Of all the works heard on these programs Shulman's was surely the most conventional and least imaginative. Some of its motion and spirit is lively in a very superficial way. The total impression however is unsatisfying. It is a soft,

fairly competently manufactured study "in ye olden style," not altogether lacking in promise, as is apparent from its admirable orchestral restraint and classic economy. But it fails to achieve anything significant or important and certainly makes no fresh addition to the already large body of imposing and beautiful modern concertos.

The first of Herbert Haufrecht's *Three Fantastic Marches for Orchestra* was heavy-handed and loud; not at all frightening or hair-raising. Just loud. The second achieved a moment or two of actual musicality, and of a strange quality besides, like an authentic throb of deep pity, a rare sound these days. This was definitely the best of the marches. The third was coarse and harsh, without excitement. Walter Mourant's *Overture for Orchestra* is a bit too complex in color and lacks clarity. Strangely enough, considering Dr. Black's experience in radio, too much prominence was given to cymbal fortes throughout for microphone reception. The work has interesting texture, a rather strong and rich prevailing harmony. The multiplicity of dissonance weakened it, however, creating too many mood qualities and driving no single one home. Its melodic and rhythmic features do nevertheless, give unity to the form, at least from the thematic standpoint. Carleton Cooley's *Caponsacchi*, pretentiously called an epic poem for orchestra, was neither epic nor poetic but merely noisy, banal, and intensely presumptuous. To whom it is directed, or what the nature of its entertainment, is beyond me. Bernard Hermann's *Currier and Ives Suite* was only slightly better but at least its loud vulgarity is an internationally recognized artistic device, used here, I

presume, all in fun. Considering Hermann's experience, this was curiously poor writing for radio entertainment. As music, it is a complete farce; without pretence, it is true, but very mediocre and certainly no better than its models, Shostakovitch's *The Bolt*, *The Golden Age* and his symphony finales.

*Three Dances for Orchestra* by Edmund Haines, a young Rochester student, may not, let us hope, show his talent in the best light. The dominant traits are excessive extravagance in timbre colors and overexuberant rhythmic designs. More contrast in mood would have been a help, since the general spirit is a bit flip and not quite convincingly funny. Gail Kubik was represented by his *Variations on a Thirteenth Century Troubadour's Song for Orchestra*. Although it was colorful, even expert in spots, as a whole it is definitely too long to sustain interest; nor is the material in most of the variations fresh in quality or treatment. The *Overture to Twelfth Night* by Joseph Wood proved to be very conventional, mediocre and ordinary, even though it showed competent scoring and a sort of post-Mendelssohnish good taste. Eding Shure's *Flax Spinners* was put together out of stale materials with tame, impressionistic methods. Pieces like this make a mockery of the title "New American Music." But there is a still lower rung to the ladder. *Symphony Number 2 in G-Minor*, by Meredith Willson, subtitled *The Missions of California* was given an entire program as of course its length required. But why was it played at all? What possible purpose can a work like this serve? It is certainly the most lush and bombastic hodge-podge yet foisted on a program devoted to new music. The badly organized sections,

slung together or repeated, do not even remotely suggest a form; the orchestration, color and feeling are always extravagant, plugged continually for cheap effects. It sounded like nothing but background music for a sentimental, western movie, where it might perhaps be less offensive.

Outside this series, other new music heard over WJZ included Erich Zeisl's *Little Symphony*, a pictorially descriptive work based on paintings. The first movement, which is about a wild lunatic, sounded clownish rather than mad; the second rambled on about some very dreary ghosts and goblins; the third was a corny, slapstick dialogue between two old men; the fourth told about faith destroying opposing forces — all this in the form of a theme and variations. A "student work," if ever there was one. Another piece heard over this station was William Parks Grant's *Concerto for Horn and Orchestra* (Rochester Symphony Orchestra under Howard Hanson). It opened with interesting melodic ideas that never quite developed in a convincing way; the harmony, too, lacked distinction in choice of color. The second movement just began to get under way nicely when it was cut off the air by some incompetent bungling by the management. (This chronic obtuseness to musical sensibilities which is the official hallmark of radio "efficiency" has got to be dealt with sooner or later. It's a disease that a minimum of strong-arm counter-measures can easily remedy.) WJZ also broadcast the Eastman Festival of American works, which is reviewed elsewhere, from Rochester.

### III

WEAF put on the air a Curtis Institute concert which included five songs for

voice and piano by Jean Behrend — simple and sensitive, and well performed. This same program gave us Carlos Salzedo's *Concerto for Harp and Seven Wind Instruments*, a very entertaining and amusing piece that uses all the instruments to good advantage. The over-colored harmonic texture is a weakness, somewhat skillfully disguised by instrumental adroitness. The sonorities are indeed interesting enough to make this good material for radio despite its extravagance.

### III

The Columbia Workshop gave us another good drama with music. This latest one, *Rocking Horse Winner*, was by the poet W. H. Auden, the musical setting by Benjamin Britten. It certainly ranks as one of the best-made shows yet presented over this or any other station. Auden's gift is not often exhibited to better advantage. The play has all those delicate qualities, the fine psychological twists that characterize his best early poetry. As a whole the musical background was successful. Unobtrusively and with impeccable timing, it pointed up all the lyric moments. The scoring too was more sensitive than in Britten's previous radio work. Particularly grateful and not yet overdone is his use of soft, deep flute tones close to the mike. The weakest element is a tendency towards obvious effects which depend largely on timbre colors and instrumental sonorities for a musical expressiveness that would be perhaps more distinguished with simpler and incisive treatments.

WABC also continues to broadcast the Philharmonic Concerts. These recently included works by Wagenaar, Harris, Van Vactor, Kurthy and Britten, all of

which are also reviewed elsewhere.

Over WOR came Anthony Donato's *Simfionietta*, with the orchestra conducted by Joseph Littau in Wallenstein's absence. Though this piece is extremely light it manages to stand up as a grateful musical fragment, pleasantly woven together with ornamental designs and attractive arabesques. Another program, this time conducted by Milton Katims, presented Hindemith's *Five Pieces for Strings*. This music the composer calls work-a-day, practical pieces for advanced students, "studies in the first position." There is an expressive slow movement but the rest remains mildly entertaining, always very professional and always a bit dull.

Russell Bennett's *Notebook* is back on this station too. His *Music Box Opera, Number Two* is called *The Man On the Flying Trapeze* and consists of an overture, prologue, two scenes and epilogue, all of which make for some very obvious fun. His *Theme and Variations*, suggested by Longfellow's poem, *My Lost Youth*, is far too long and too weak in interest to be successful as radio music. The device of reading the poem between the variations wears thin and becomes almost embarrassingly monotonous. A slightly better program of the *Notebook* was a demonstration of how a tune is prepared for musical comedy, from the composer's naive piano original to the elaborate orchestral dress of the final version. The build-up was interesting

enough; the rub came in the revelation of the long awaited orchestration which turned out to be simple Broadway corn played by pretty instruments. And that's the main trouble with Bennett's programs, they place altogether too much stock in the bass clarinet or a thirteenth chord; all we get is an overripe jazz sonority and rhythm. Francis Bueben-dorf's *Passacaglia for Orchestra* appears to be a student work modeled after Bach with nothing new or imaginative, an interesting and serious exercise, just the kind of thing to get a good mark in school. Less rigid was Bennett's own *Suite for Clarinet and Orchestra* - a prelude, allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue. This was more simple and clean than most of Bennett's fat, juicy writing and it was beautifully played by Ralph McLane. What more thinning out and concentration on line can do for Bennett is clear from his *Dance Scherzo for Woodwind Quintet*, a fairly amusing and clever work. The program that gave us this also offered settings of James Joyce's *Chamber Music* for voice and orchestra by Tibor Serly. They were not very fresh in material but showed some talent and a capacity to convey the expression of a mood.

WNYC and WQXR continue to be very liberal with their broadcasts of modern recordings. Occasionally their studio ensembles attempt contemporary works but much still remains to be done in this direction.