

OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

THE summer in retrospect points unerringly to the future of war propaganda via radio which appears to be the most effective medium for this psychological weapon. The highest peak yet taken in that direction was the streamlined launching of Shostakovich's *Seventh*, subtitled *The Symphony of Our Times*. Its initial broadcast by the N.B.C. orchestra under Toscanini was one of the most publicized events in all radio history. Riotous applause by the studio audience apparently was offered as proof of the goal achieved. The piece runs an interminable ninety minutes and is of such acutely uneven musical interest that hardly anyone still doubts it would, in normal times, evoke anything but innocuous tedium at best. How potent it may be as a stimulus to the patriotism of Russian fighters, or to the instincts of comradeship among Americans for their allies, this writer is not prepared to estimate. C.B.S. offered a second performance of this aural spectacle, with Raymond Massey reading an introductory poem by Carl Sandburg in appropriately fervent but slightly unctuous accents. Rodzinski and the Cleveland Orchestra achieved a more authentic interpretation, somewhat heavy-handed but more correct to the style and spirit of the work than the thinner and precise treatment of the Italian maestro. For the plan and purpose of this score, sensitive control and delicate balance appear irrelevant.

The Murder of Lidice, a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, with music by

Frank Black, was another highly exploited N.B.C. gesture along the same United Nations line. Both score and poem seem to have been turned out with hasty and superficial zest, but the performance was well managed and, from the point of view of immediate effect, successful.

Another propaganda effort was the Russian-American Festival series featured during the summer by Columbia. The inevitable Shostakovich was represented by his overture to *The Nose*, a piece in the composer's earlier and less pretentious style of slapstick claptrap, unfortunately representative of the somewhat disappointing level in choice of material to which the series was generally gauged. Works like the *Orchestra at the Inspector-General's Ball* by Michael Gniessin are hardly a worthy symbol of Soviet might in the arts, while *The Country Fair* of British-born Laurence Powell is no less than a downright insult to American standards of musical craftsmanship. But the program did present Piston's excellent and distinguished *Sinfonietta*, a finely chiseled and impeccably wrought work, notable for its clarity and freshness. Here wit is tempered by a convincing sobriety, and the scoring throughout marked by a gratifying and entertaining maturity. Why should not music of this quality have set the standard for these programs? Available are important works by men like Copland, Porter, Harris and Sessions, to name only a few. Most of the Russian material was the

product of such masters as Liadov, Miaskowsky and Kalinnikov. In all fairness to the series, some pleasant exceptions can be mentioned — Berezowsky's youthful and elegant *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, some slight but polished pieces of Prokofiev, and Arthur Farnwell's *Dawn and War Dance*, which, in spite of an indifferent performance, revealed a subtle harmonic choice and bold, straightforward melodic delivery. On the final program there was a better than usual presentation of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* with Orson Welles as narrator.

In future columns, I will try to report on the considerable musical elements in other propaganda series — N.B.C.'s *This Nation at War*, and *Men, Machines and Victory*, as well as Mutual's *This is Our Enemy*.

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Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, performed by the Kostelanetz orchestra with Carl Sandburg as poet-narrator, was among the best of Columbia's summer offerings. With great economy, the score projects a conception of its subject that is noble but tempered with reason and minus the pomp and bombast generally associated with musical pictures of that great statesman. Carl Sandburg's simple, unpretentious reading was gratifyingly effective; it contributed to the success of this short but memorable moment on the air.

Ravel's *Trois Poèmes de Mallarmé* (C.B.S.) make a splendid radio item. The composer's finely drawn vocal line is exquisitely balanced by the sensitive orchestral arabesque. In a similar medium, Tibor Serly's *Three Songs from James Joyce* (also C.B.S.) give us an interesting though less satisfying accom-

plishment. There are some fine musical points in these pieces, but one often feels that the simple eloquence of Joyce has been forsaken in the vigorous but unrestrained invention of the musician's imagination. Bartok's *Three Roumanian Dances*, also from Columbia, do not make good radio music, nor do they represent a fair exhibition of this composer's great gifts. The dances are scored with a somewhat excessive treatment of cymbals and crashing percussion; these effects either were poorly handled by the sound engineer, or they may be a specifically bad case for microphone transmission.

The N.B.C. orchestra under Erich Leinsdorf played Copland's *Music for Radio*, a popular and amusing score, commonly supposed to be a concession to mass appeal, but which seems to me to be a completely honest and natural expression of the composer. The strong unisonal writing, jolted about with an authoritative rhythmic jerk, makes a striking effect on the air. Jascha Heifetz, over N.B.C., performed Villa-Lobos' *Moth Circling Around the Light*, a miniature piece, brilliant in a perpetual motion style, and typical of the cosmic flow of insignificant morsels that drip from this over-loaded pen. Heifetz also played Gershwin's *Prelude Number 1*, in his own transcriptive abortion of that jazz trifle. WOR continues to offer occasional items of interest through Wallenstein's Symphonic Strings and Morton Gould sometimes rises above the general level of corny jazz arrangements which, slick as they may be, seldom have the drive or strident guts of work by any one of the better Negro dance bands. As a whole, during the summer, Mutual proved to be the most backward of the networks in presenting modern music.