

OVER THE AIR

By CONLON NANCARROW

RADIO's interest in the American composer seems to be in a state of at least partial eclipse. Although most of the contemporary music played by the Columbia Broadcasting System during the summer was by composers writing in an accepted idiom, and in several cases an "old-fashioned" idiom, the chain reports that it has received many protests about "this modern music." So for the time being it is taking a turn to the Right. This is in line, of course with the general radio attitude. Most stations, if they play any new music at all, give single performances of a few works, and then consider their duty to Art fulfilled.

The radio audience presents more difficulties than any other for the composer. In the theatre, at the movies or the ballet, visual associations induce people to go along with the music. The concert hall of course has a select public. But the average radio listener is a casual one, and the music opens up on him "cold."

At present CBS is trying to reach the high school audience through the "American School of the Air." The first program in its Tuesday morning folkmusic series consisted of Southwestern cowboy songs, done by Alan Lomax, and a short work by Roy Harris based on this material. The Harris piece was an arrangement more than anything else, a simple and well written demonstration of the songs in an orchestral piece. The second program was made up of songs of the '49ers; and an orchestral arrangement, much less competent, by Quinto Maga-

nini. For the whole series CBS has commissioned the following composers to write similar pieces: Brant, Converse, Crawford, Finney, Gion, James, Moross, Sielsk, Julia Smith and Wagenaar.

Eddy Brown, WQXR's music director, plans a much more extensive experiment in *Gebrauchsmusik*. He wants to reach the many thousands of school orchestras in the country with commissioned American music, written in the modern idiom without difficulties that would be insurmountable for such performers. These works are to be published and recorded, and then distributed to the schools by means of special groups, like music clubs. It is an ambitious project; if it goes through it may do much to promote an understanding and appreciation of modern music. Brown is enthusiastic about contemporary American music, but makes a justifiable complaint that there are not sufficient recordings, and that many of the existing ones fail to do justice to the composer. Frequent repetitions of recorded music by men like Villa-Lobos, for example, have built up quite a following at WQXR.

CBS's campaign to "promote American music" has given us the premiere of Victor Giannini's opera *Blennerhassett*, which is all about boy meeting girl during the American Revolution. It had a good performance by the Columbia Workshop, but there was nothing to recommend it except intelligibility of text. A dull, stuffy work, using the old operatic clichés ad nauseam.