

## BLOCH, MILHAUD AND MARTINU

**A**N important premiere, Ernest Bloch's *Suite Symphonique*, was presented by Pierre Monteux when he conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra. Though far removed from the personal and gloomy earlier works, it is a serious and severe piece, of nobility and substance. It retains Bloch's youthful vigor and intensity without the hysterics. The broad and firm Overture is cast as a free fugato whose subject is so varied at each appearance that a constant sense of progress is achieved. In the exhaustively developed Passacaglia the classic form keeps Bloch driving straight to the point. A moto perpetuo figure slides clear through the sonata-allegro Finale with two second subject skids. These make mocking comment on the passing excitement. Bloch still has an attachment for repeated short motives that at times halt proceedings or seem mere hedgings.

The virtuoso *Suite* for violin and orchestra by Darius Milhaud was another premiere, with Ormandy conducting and Zino Francescatti as soloist. There is something fresh and suspiciously unpretentious about this strange work; no over-dramatized moments are to be found in the brilliant and fast-moving music. As in most late Milhaud pieces a complete calm sustains the darting, intricate writing. To this calm may be attributed the lack of definite climactic points or emotional breaths, a lack which imparts softness to the music's character. There are three complementary pieces: *Gigues*, whose savory rhythmic assortment is marked off by tasteless cadences; *Sailor Song*, in which hauntingly morose strains are given out in monotonous double stops; and the swift and agile *Hornpipes*, whose calculated elegance of construction is marred by awkward sequences. Probably the bewildering fact that this *Suite* is based on eighteenth century themes built up in nineteenth century fashion, with twentieth century harmonies, explains its strangeness.

The orchestra gave painstaking performances of two obviously weak works, *Song of the Marshes* by the Roman, Renzo Rossellini, and *Four Churches*, a symphonic poem by South America's Francisco Mignone. Both are held down by instrumental weight rather than supported by tonal logic. These are inconsequential impressionistic tone paintings, nostalgic in character. Rossellini tries in vain for an effect of gradual crescendo that tapers at the half-way mark. *Four Churches* reflects the mixture of religious and secular enthusiasm that characterizes the festivities of the Catholic Church in Brazil. Good points were the use of high organ registration against low strings, bell effects achieved by various choirs and the fusing of several chorales. But the orchestral color served mainly to conceal common stuff.

Since the *Concerto Grosso* and *Piano Quartet* we have been looking for an important work by Martinu. His productivity and equipment are impressive, on the other hand his output seems indiscriminate. The *Fourth Symphony*, written last summer, is uneven and watery, with thick scoring and grumpy changes of mood. In the first movement two germs travel in opposite directions and get together only at the careless final tonic. The Scherzo is forced into direction by its traditional form. But it moves daringly fast for one with such soft bones. Misplaced folk harmonies, below a melodic line too dull to have been a folksong, shape the slow movement. While Martinu desperately tries to sum up the entire symphony, a fresh sounding instrumentation suddenly appears, shimmering and translucent. Here is the touch of beauty that he can give us, when he relaxes his formulas and shuns over-elaborations so that we get it straight. In his *Second Cello Sonata* (Early Fall Chamber Series) there are also hints of something magical that he has not taken quite enough time to develop.

An unusual program of piano music was performed by Denoe Leedy for the Art Alliance, the contemporaries represented by Herbert Elwell and Robert Palmer. The first two movements of Elwell's *Piano Sonata* are either hurried while at the same time sluggish, or sleepy but ornamentally fussy. Better writing is found in the virile and straightforward opening of the Finale. Palmer's *Toccata Ostinato* skilfully manages virtuoso formulas to present high-powered and striking material. An extraordinary reading of Walter Piston's *Second Quartet* by the Budapest Quartet served to prepare Philadelphia's audiences for several coming Piston events.

Vincent Persichetti

## LOS ANGELES INTERPRETS GENESIS

IT must have been an act of faith that led Nathaniel Shilkret to commission a single work—the seven-part musical symposium, *Genesis*—from such a heterogeneous group of composers as Schönberg, Tansman, Milhaud, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Toch and Stravinsky, with Shilkret himself supplying the second of the pieces (premiere by Werner Janssen). For certainly *Genesis* was, from the very birth of the idea, doomed to be a hopelessly insoluble mixture of styles, techniques and attitudes, especially since part of the plan was that the composers should write independently, without reference to each other's work — colloiddally suspended in The Word. The catalytic agent, as if one were possible, was a narrator who declaimed the Biblical story according to a text arranged by Shilkret. Schönberg's *Prelude*, somewhat reminiscent of his *Kol Nidre*, was the most successful piece, partly because it alone did not have to compete with the narrator, whose insistent and amplified voice constantly fought the music. Milhaud's *Cain and Abel* presented that composer's charming