

RECENT BOOKS

MUSIC IN THE SETTING OF WORLD HISTORY

IT IS WITHIN memory that music history used to be taught as a growth quite apart from the history of the human race. The picture drawn was that of a succession of great composers, each influenced almost entirely by his predecessors and each in his turn handing on his contributed improvements with the inherited tradition. Influences outside of music itself were mentioned only when unavoidable and within the world of music only the accepted great were considered worthy links in the chain.

Discard of the doctrine of progress, in the sense of improvement, in favor of an appreciation of the simple fact of continuous change, was doubtless facilitated in our time by the undisputed realization that our contemporary composers are noticeably less "great" than Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. But it remained for a more enlightened approach to the study of music history to point out that composers, like other personalities, are shaped by all kinds of forces, often of the greatest complexity and coming from the most unforeseen sources.

All this seems distant and primitive considering the almost revolutionary developments in the field of musicology in this country during the last two decades. Several recent books have contributed particularly valuable studies. Among these Paul Láng's *Music in Western Civilization*, published by W. W. Norton and Company (1941), is beyond doubt the

most important. It is a monumental work of over a thousand pages, covering all periods beginning with that of Ancient Greece, excepting the present. The difficult task of setting the art of music in its true relation to all the significant movements, political, philosophical, economic, literary, religious, or other, seems here to have been accomplished with success and outstanding brilliance.

This book could only have been written by a born and trained historian. On the other hand it is inconceivable that it could even be attempted without a deep knowledge of music of every type and period, hardly to be found in any but a specialist. The obvious completeness of the author's mastery of world history together with the comprehensive quality of his musical erudition suggest a combined background rare in the field of music.

A new perspective is revealed for the chief periods in music history and emphasis is laid on the overlapping nature of these arbitrary divisions. Renaissance and Baroque, Rococo and Classic, make their appearance at different moments in different places and may even exist contemporaneously in the same environment. In any case they merge imperceptibly one into the other.

Most space is devoted to the period of the Renaissance, "not one mighty, sudden change in man's civilization. It is a long process." The early chapters are necessarily short, as only fragments of antique

music are known, but on the basis of a vast documentation from every possible source a concise account is given of music in Ancient Greece, Byzantium, and Rome. The treatment of the Middle Ages, Gregorian and Gothic, is especially absorbing, with its insistence that this period is not to be underrated or regarded merely as a decline or as a prelude to the Renaissance.

In the later epochs, where individual figures stand out, Professor Láng's evaluations of the leading composers have a freshness and a stimulating atmosphere which add greatly to the remarkably readable quality of the book. There is plenty of room for disagreement with many of his conclusions but these for the most part are presented in a manner to command respect. His disavowal of the common belief in Beethoven's romanticism and Verdi's Wagnerian conversion are convincing. More provocative is his treatment of Berlioz, which approaches what we call "debunking," and his exaltation of Liszt, the composer of absolute music, of whom he writes, "most of our accomplishments in the field of harmony, orchestration, and construction originated in his inquisitive and inspired mind."

Thus it is seen that the author does not deny himself the privilege of critical appraisal. The work is not a mere dispassionate historical chronicle of events and facts. It offers a sincere, skilful and, to a very great degree, successful critical estimate and interpretation of the intent and achievement of each composer.

The scope of the volume is so broad that it seems unreasonable to complain that it is not broad enough. The twentieth century, already forty-one years old, receives very little recognition, and that inadequate and deprecatory. Leave

is taken of the reader on the note sounded by the final topical heading, "The Decline of the West?", with a question mark, it is true, but with almost no evidence of musical developments offered to support the question. None but passing mention is made of Stravinsky and no report of his contributions is vouchsafed. A considerable list of outstanding figures does not find a place in the index. Some of these men are no longer living, as for instance Gustav Holst and Albert Roussel.

There is no doubt that the author has excellent reasons for this limitation of scope. But much good and no harm would have been done by explaining these. The public, and even many scholars and musicians are inclined to regard music as one of the dead languages, used for expressive purposes only by men of the past, and this curious attitude is innocently corroborated by the fact that musicologists show almost no interest in contemporary music. As Professor Láng himself writes, musicology is "still in the early stages of its modern orientation." Considering the eagerness with which one seeks the writings of the most obscure observer in say the fourteenth century, why is not the chronicling of history in the making an extremely valuable and fascinating musicological project?

For all interested in research this history will prove a mine of material. It is rich in suggestions of unexplored paths or fields in which organizing is needed. A comprehensive bibliography is appended.

Comparative studies of the treatment of similar problems by different composers form one of the excellent features of the book, as for example the illuminating remarks on the *Missa Solemnis* as compared with the *B-minor Mass*. These

relationships are continually stressed in the field of opera, which is given much more attention than is usual in a history of music. Indeed the amount of space allotted to the discussion of opera is a true indication of the enormous importance of this form of music in human life.

One cannot help adding a word of admiration for the literary style of the

work. The clarity and ease of Professor Láng's handling of our language is little short of miraculous in view of the fact that English is not his native tongue and that it is an acquisition of fairly recent date. His history of music is good reading as well as a deep and informative study of the participation of music in the making of western civilization.

Walter Piston

THE NEW ROMANTICISM

OUR *New Music*, by Aaron Copland (Whittlesey House, 1941) is designed primarily as a layman's guide to contemporary music. But the author's critical acumen, as well as his impartial way of presenting points of view divergent from his own (a divergence that often can only be inferred) should recommend much of it to musicians.

Copland begins with a brief sketch of the nineteenth century background, laying especial stress upon the figure of Moussorgsky. In the realism of *Boris* he finds the first seed of the new "objectivism" that was developed by Debussy in *Pelléas* and by Stravinsky in *Petrushka* and that has reached its fullest growth to date in neo-classicism. He does not of course try to fit all twentieth century music into this scheme. Sibelius he regards as a nineteenth century survival, whose music, he remarks rather vaguely, "does not grapple with the problems of our own world." Mahler and Strauss he places in the same category; also Fauré. Why he should choose to lump Fauré with these three is not clear, especially since he gives him credit for "classic restraint," "love of clear lines and well-made proportions," "directness and simplicity" — all traits that he would like to

find in the music of tomorrow.

There are other contemporary trends that diverge from the line of realism and objectivity as it may be traced from Moussorgsky to Stravinsky. Copland gives a just and clear account of the Viennese school and its aims and technical contributions. But he expresses his belief that the twelve-tone system is the artificial product of an "over-cultured" society, and that it lies outside the main current of musical evolution.

Covering so extensive a field it is natural that this survey should prove broad rather than deep. Its importance lies in the fact that the author's comments and evaluations are not only shrewd but "personal" in the real right sense. Gifted with a keen sensibility, he has disciplined himself to judge every variety of modern music with his ears open, his mind alert, and without prejudice of any kind — truly a remarkable achievement for a man of creative talent. He is too modest to claim the last word when a point of doubt remains in his mind. At such times his attitude is one of half-diffident charitableness. Phrases like "whatever else may be said about this music" occur frequently, betraying a certain softness of critical fibre. Elsewhere adverse opinions are