

ican composition. Two other gifted composers are worth watching, Jan Kok, a young emigré of Dutch extraction and John Angus Campbell. Mention should also be made of Leroy Wren, who has drawn directly from the dance orchestra. In my opinion, he has produced the most interesting results from this source since Gershwin.

*George Frederick McKay*

## ROBERT PALMER AND CHARLES MILLS

**P**ALMER and Mills are fertile members of a group of composers bound to attract ever-increasing attention. It is the group of talented, sincere Americans now in their third decade who, having received lessons from Copland, or Harris, or Sessions, or from two or even all three of these, uncompromisingly are battling in behalf of civilized values, amid the billows of simplicism to the point of innocuousness and of passionateness for front-page publicity. What exactly the wave of simplicism betokens one doesn't quite know. But that of the hunger for publicity certainly represents an increase of the opportunism we have ever with us. Because of the proud attitude of the members of this young group, we look to it for the addition of stable and simultaneously expanding forms to all which already has been, is being contributed by their forerunners.

The two composers form a contrast. Palmer writes what really are suites: possibly for the reason that his awareness predominantly is extroverted. Mills on the contrary composes indubitable sonatas: one feels much more of the introvert and the subjectivist in him. The first is what the theosophists would call a "young" soul; the other what they would term an "old" one. They are a tiny replica of the heroic antithesis, Handel-Bach. Still they have traits in common, other than those of age, of idealism and a derivation mainly from Harris. One is their common possession of what without condescension must be called the "small-town" background. Palmer was born in Syracuse, N. Y. of parents hailing from Poughkeepsie and Newpaltz. Mills is a Carolinian, born at Asheville, reared at Spartanburg. Both moreover have been represented in former seasons, at concerts of the League, by pieces which now must be considered imperfectly characteristic of their output — Palmer by his *Piano Sonata*, Mills by his maiden *Sonata* for the instrument and his first *Piano and Violin Sonata*.

This year, both have enjoyed public performances of new, impressive, distinctive works. Palmer's took place February 22nd at the University of Kansas, where he teaches. The writer was not present but has played non-

commercial records of the new pieces – the second movement of a *Trio for Strings*, (1942) and a *Violin and Piano Sonata* of the same vintage. An impression of robustness and maturity flowed from the latter. Its three movements are characteristically toccata-like, minimally subjective, primitivistic in essence. As on a line, each releases an obsessive rhythm. There are contrasts of agitated first subjects and song-like second ones but the whole inevitably resembles a suite rathermore than a sonata. Unpleasing alone is the rigidity of the counterpoint in the middle of the interior movement, a quiet aria with variations. The rhythms are strong, irregular, fresh – related in the jocund finale to American popular music; and in both the external sections one finds glamorously sonorous passages of a polytonal cast, the product of the opposition of the violin and the piano's figures in delicately contrasted registers. Still, the impression of growing power was not unfamiliar. One had received it, though possibly not quite as intensely, from other of the composer's more recent pieces, the initial movement of the *Concerto for Small Orchestra*, for instance. Palmer's earlier compositions, the *Piano Sonata* and the *Preludes* performed seasons ago by John Kirkpatrick, had been lyrical, liquid, touching, but musically unaccomplished and, as expressions, almost embarrassingly virginal. And even in the *Concerto* (1940) the slow movement had seemed a bit meager. The fugal finale was better; it was brilliant – only a trifle too patently the kinsman of Harris' scherzando fugues, and too abruptly conclusive. But in the quite original opening movement, the clash of melodies in contrary motion was magnificent and fierce, and the whole of the section indicative of necessity, and of a new composer to be watched with happy expectation.

As for Mills' recent work: four items of it were held at the font in Detroit on April 29th, by the violin and piano team, Morris and Sylvia Hochberg, assisted by several other disinterested musicians, including the conductor and violist, Walter Poole. These pieces were his *Second Violin and Piano Sonata* (1941), his *Piano Sonatine* and *Second String Quartet* (1942) and the even more recent *Sonata for Oboe and Piano*. The performances were expert. There was exactly one noticeable and one scarce-evident slip; and from the severe test of the one-man exhibit Mills' music emerged in its originality. It is plainly a thing of deep moods and of aristocratic, reticent, even dry subjective sentiment; finely melodic, with frequently recitative-like textures achieved by continuous melodic outgrowths. It is definitely diatonic, but sharpened by bold transcendences in

chord-progressions, and exquisitely idiomatic, exacting – refreshingly so – particularly at a period like this one, when composers suavely are avoiding the creation of fresh demands on instrumental technics. The *Oboe Sonata*, for example – so pastoral and relatively uncontrapuntal – requires an heroic breath of the performer. Real music: one had known it such without taking thought, during the performance of the elusive oboe sonata as during that of the relatively simple one for violin. Another composer definitely to be watched with happy expectancy! That the ingenuity of the four fiddlers alone had kept the double-fugue in the *Quartet* from giving the feeling of protraction, was plain. Yet the exhibits all in all gave evidence of steady organic developments of mood. There were climaxes, flooding ones such as that in the adagio cantabile of the *Violin Sonata*, over the fanfares of the piano. There was a quantity of poetry; unpredictable magic twists in the melodic line; sudden jubilant and waltzing sallies. While the fantastically sparkling finales wanted the weight of the preceding movements, thoroughly nonetheless they acquitted themselves of their function, releasing the gradually accumulated tensions.

Mills' music is further distinguished by a quality which, in all reverence, causes one to associate pages of it with music by the mighty Bach. This is the trait of piety, religiosity, devotion. Again and again the song has a spirit "in the world but not of it." Rapturous, unearthly, it expresses something like cosmic emotions of gratitude and humility, reverent attachment and reference to the source of being. As in Bach, this piety seems no feminine sensibility but tenderness ennobled by its impersonal object, and vigorously conveyed. Only in a single connection, the larghetto of the *Piano Sonatine*, is it couched in tones disagreeably close to the great cantor's. But one scarcely can be contrapuntal without sometimes echoing John Sebastian. In all others it finds personal symbols. Besides it is distinguished from kindred traits in Bach and even César Franck and Bruckner by the complete divorcement from ritual and cult. Other sorts of feelings, less prayerful states, also transpire. The finales are filled with a capriciousness, a mischievous frolic – like that of a Puck in some new midsummer night's dream – whose closest parallels are in Debussy and Ravel. Yet this revelry is related to other-worldliness and merely reemphasizes it. The movements seem to have the meaning of the possession of life by an elfish spirit of earthly delight, all-bewitching but unsubstantiated as a dream and momentary before the reality of death and of eternity.

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