

in for more dirty work at Oscar's hands; another mean story (bad) or none at all (worse).

I liked best the sections on Harpo Marx and the Hollywood music-factory. I am delighted to learn that Harpo is not just a character, but is really Harpo, which is almost too good to be true. In the movie-music chapter, there is a wealth of enjoyable new information about why not to go West. It is largely written at the expense of the feeble-minded producers – and who am I to resent that? I didn't care for "Music in Aspic" which is about orchestras and conductors; I knew most of the stories. I was a little chilled by "The Boys are Marching" (this is the part where I get taken over the hurdles, so my sense of chill is logical). I'm glad to know Oscar is willing to come out publicly for American music; I only wish he were less condescending about it. It occurs to me that a pupil of Schönberg (he studied with S. off and on) has no business to speak with sar-

casm of "something light and gay for viola, harp, bass flute and contralto." How does Oscar know it can't be done? That kind of lapse into Mencken-Nathan isn't much fun; I'm glad that in general the wit is more lively and more expansive. The piece on Gershwin I found too close to Levant's emotions for comfort. He is inconsolable; and it is no accident (just as it is no help) that this part is accompanied by the most abject self-castigation and the most furious wise-cracking.

With this book, and with his weekly performances on the "Information Please" radio-hour, Oscar has become a Glamor-Boy. He has now made the grade, he can give orders as well as Bronx cheers. Of course the book is a bestseller. Going everywhere, meeting everybody, being in on everything in his slightly-mocking company is a real pleasure, whether you fancy him as a musical expert, as a teller of tall tales, or simply as Oscar the Second.

Marc Blitzstein

TAYLOR-MADE TOPICS

DEEMS TAYLOR has written about a great many things in his new book *The Well-Tempered Listener* (Simon & Schuster). In this diversity of interest lies the strength as well as the weakness of his work. The average music lover in search of more culture than he can painlessly imbibe will surely get his money's worth. Whether it will increase his enjoyment of music is questionable. Here one can find everything explained – from the composer's art to the life of Wagner, an appreciation of Heifetz, the probable lives of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven,

Berlioz, and Wagner were they contemporary Americans, the functions and qualifications of the music critic, radio music, propaganda and music, the art of program building, women instrumentalists, absolute and program music, and sundry esthetic and social topics. All this is fluently presented in a pleasant folksy vernacular calculated (by an expert) to charm. Much of the material is excellent, but an attempt to cover so many things in a single volume takes its toll of superficiality, most unfortunately in the discussion of the more controversial

issues.

The position of the American composer and conductor today, a matter of burning concern to many of us, gets a very slight treatment and not much more than lip service. After tracing the origins of sixteen foreign conductors now actively engaged here and recalling their early pre-conductor days as orchestral performers, Taylor writes: "The plain truth is that the average young American who wants to be a conductor is far too willing to begin at the top. It is beneath his dignity to start as a common, ordinary, union orchestra player. No. If he studies any instrument at all, he does so in the expectation of becoming a successful concert artist. If he discovers that that ambition has no probability of being realized, he either gets out of music altogether, or tries to become a conductor because he knows how to beat time. But get a job in an orchestra? In most cases, no, thank you." This is an unfair attack because it is not generally true. Perhaps a successful radio commentator does not come in contact with the number of serious young American conductors who make their living through playing in orchestras, by teaching or in some other branch of music practice. What Taylor fails to mention is the well-known fact that the majority of the boards of trustees and managements for our major symphony orchestras are snobbish towards the American as a conductor. For where is the glamor of home grown fruit in season when it is so simple to acquire an exotic import—even if it is slightly decayed? The American conductor has been neglected because so many of our symphonic organizations consider extra-music qualifications. Give him the same break and he will go just as far as the foreign-born.

Aside from the author himself, few other American composers are mentioned. There is a quotation from *What to Listen for in Music* by Copland, "a brilliant contemporary composer." Harris is cited for his least significant orchestral work, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*. American music, it seems, did come near having a composer of first rank. "If he had lived, I am sure that Charles Griffes, today, in his middle fifties, would be world-famous, and his music would be a sign admitted by all the world, that American music had at last produced a composer of the first rank." And so it follows that American music has no such composer. "The dismayed musician of 2039 will remark with despair the flood of mediocrity in which he seems to be engulfed, and will lament the brave old days of the early twentieth century, when music was still vital, when Strauss and Pizzetti and Respighi and Bax and De-Falla and Ravel and Stravinsky and all the other old masters of the golden age were making musical history." Well we don't have to call on our best boys to keep company with at least four of this group!

Taylor's general discussion of modern music also appears dated. "So many contemporary composers seem bent on proving that there is no chord so discordant and ugly at first hearing that it cannot eventually be heard without discomfort." This may be apt as a partial description of activities in the early twenties but today when there exists a modern language of music composition that is no longer purely experimental but functional, such a statement is just as outmoded as Taylor's later discussion of melody.

The radio audience is presented as

more conservative than that of the concert hall because the fan mail demanding modern music adds up to less than the requests for the classics. "Think of trying to make sense of the *Rite of Spring* when you haven't yet digested Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*." There is no evidence to prove that the appreciation of music progresses with the chronology of musical composition, and indeed much to the contrary, witness the present popularity of the music of the Renaissance as compared with the output of the nineteenth century. The radio public if it gets the chance to hear fresh music is less likely to display the deadly cliché ear-habits of our concert hall audiences. So far as the fan mail for new music is concerned, why expect the general public to request music by composers of whose existence they are not even aware? As for the exotic appeal and rhythmic vitality of Stravinsky's *Sacre*, it's even possible that this would have a great deal of meaning for many new American radio listeners, who might not be up to the *E-Minor Symphony*! Most works, as we all know, must be frequently heard to reach a wide audience, and it's also true that there's always a new audience for the classics. But if we

present the standard repertory ad infinitum — how is contemporary music to work its way?

There are many other statements in this book which could certainly be challenged. The problems of music and propaganda and program music, however, are expertly presented for the layman. Here the author writes clearly and with conviction. However hackneyed the discussion may be for the professional, the amateur is often confused by being misled in music through literary and philosophic baggage.

The Well-Tempered Listener will be read by all those many admirers of Deems Taylor, who, as general consumers of music, now regard him as their undisputed authority. With all due respect for his sincerity and lucid style, the book, despite its many virtues, is disappointing for one general reason — it creates the feeling that everything in American musical life is healthy. Some of the most badly atrophied sections of our musical organism are discussed as though they were still in their glowing hey-day. Most of us know now that anemia cannot be cured by a discreet scattering of euphemisms.

William Schuman

Correction

In the January issue of MODERN MUSIC, Ernst Krennek's *Music Here and Now*, was reviewed as the translation of a work which had already ap-

peared in German. The publishers, W. W. Norton & Co., advise us that this is an error, since the book is new in both material and form.—Ed.