

FORECAST AND REVIEW

COPLAND'S HEAR YE, HEAR YE!; IBERT'S BALLET

A SUDDEN spurt of interest in the art of the dance led the Chicago Grand Opera Company to present, on November 30, 1934, a quadruple-header ballet program under the direction of the indefatigable Ruth Page. In addition to two works from her standard repertoire, the world premieres were given of *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* by Aaron Copland, and *Gold Standard* by Jacques Ibert. Both were conducted by Rudolph Ganz and danced by Miss Page and her company.

The opening curtain of *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* (scenario by Miss Page and Nicholas Remisoff, scene designer) was preceded by an orchestral introduction in the course of which a series of tabloid scare-heads, flashed upon the steel curtain by a movie projection machine, outlined the plot of the performance and indicated the satiric nature of the subject matter. The curtain rose on a background of careening skyscrapers in front of which were ranged a judge on a grotesquely high bench; to his right a jury of six, impanelled upon an ascending ramp; to his left a compact baker's dozen spectators, these latter dummies who rose and sat from time to time with apparently superhuman unanimity.

A night club dancer has been murdered. The judge and the jurors, with debonair disregard of the conventions of jurisprudence, are setting out to convict somebody, no matter whom, for the murder. In three successive episodes different people tell their versions of the shooting—a night club hostess, a honeymooning couple, and a negro waiter. In each episode a different murderer is accused, and in each episode he is summarily convicted by judge and jury, and led off to punishment. So with the

implication that "many hearts, though broken, are beating, beating as the hammer strikes, calling the next case," the final curtain descends.

The three scenes are introduced and separated by an introduction, and interludes in which the prosecuting and defending attorneys carry on the usual altercations. The score is framed at the beginning and at the end by a parody of *The Star Spangled Banner*, representing a distortion of American justice, which forms the theme of the ballet. While the music is largely a running commentary upon the action, it does make use of two bits of material which might be termed leading motives: first, a "motive of accusation," appearing each time a new victim is accused of the murder; second, a playful, polytonal episode which gives to the interludes of the debating attorneys a character reminiscent of the "promenade" in Moussorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition*.

The first scene, recounting the story as told by the hostess, introduces some of the most delightfully bromidic night club music I have heard. An adagio dance of painful variety is succeeded by a chorus girls' routine for which Copland has written characteristic jazz of a piquancy any George Gershwin or Cole Porter might envy. The second scene is sharply contrasted, for now the music sees things through the rose-colored glasses of the honeymooning couple. A parody of the Mendelssohn Wedding March once more introduces the chorus girls this time carrying white doves and moving with all the prettiness they can summon. A particularly juicy passage occurs here, with the flutes in thirds repeatedly making an undulating descent of devastating gracefulness. The music of this scene is on the whole the wittiest of the entire ballet, and at the same time the most subdued. With the entrance of the negro waiter there are thematic references to the earlier scene of the night club hostess, but there is a quality of sinister abandon in keeping with the frenzy of the negro's recollection of everything leading up to the shooting. The chorus girls now dance as though they, too, had not much longer to live, and the music seems nearly ready to drop from exhaustion by the time the shooting actually occurs. At the close of this third enactment of the story, the polytonal "promenade" reappears in the orchestra, the opposing lawyers

depart from the scene arm in arm, the parodied version of *The Star Spangled Banner* is repeated, the judge raps with his gavel calling the next case, and the curtain falls.



In passing judgment on Copland's music I must limit my comment to a comparison with his *Music for the Theatre* and the *Symphony* (the only scores with which I am quite familiar). To me the thematic material of *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* appeared stronger and more vital than that of the *Symphony*. The principal shortcoming of this earlier work, however, lies less in its thematic material than in the variety and subtlety of rhythmic development. The score of the *Symphony* gave an impression of a somewhat fragmentary and reiterative treatment of rhythms. In the various episodes of *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* shorter than symphonic movements though they are, Mr. Copland has gone a considerable distance toward overcoming this particular defect, for in spite of the highly punctuated and often percussive character of the rhythms involved, their development is sufficiently logical to give an impression of much greater fluidity.

On the whole, *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* offers a mode of expression in which its composer is quite completely at home. The *Symphony* often sounded tentative, as though Mr. Copland were rather carefully measuring the hurdles over which he would have to leap. *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* on the other hand, like *Music for the Theatre*, gives the impression of a race well run, in which an easy stride and familiarity with the track make the runner feel secure of victory from the start. Certainly the music is thoroughly representative of the American scene, and makes no obsequious bows toward any foreign authority.

A brief word may be appended here about the score of Ibert's *Gold Standard*. The ballet is a street scene strongly reminiscent in incident, though not in actual setting or costume, of the Ballet Russe, *Beau Danube*. Neither the score nor the choreography, however, bears a trace of the delicious nostalgia of the Strauss-Massine work. Where *Beau Danube* sparkles and glitters, *Gold Standard* snickers and guffaws. The hero is not a sleek Hussar, but a young artisan who might have been borrowed for the oc-

casian from one of René Clair's moving pictures, and his partner is of the same station in life. The story skips blithely from a mock wedding to assault and battery, and after all difficulties have been straightened out, winds up in an athletic cancan. From start to finish the music is saucy, brash, and ironic, bubbling with that particular variety of music-hall wit Ibert has made so especially his own. At the end Ibert adds to the general hilarity of the score by introducing what seems to be his favorite instrument, the policeman's whistle. While the score of *Gold Standard* sums up much that is entertaining about the musical tradition from which it springs, it requires an esoteric enthusiasm on the part of any reviewer who would choose to think it very important. It does not possess for me that quality which has made *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* stick in my mind, a quality some would call sincerity but which might more exactly be termed a conviction that music is no less entertaining because it is, whatever its outward aspect, fundamentally a serious matter to its composer.

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