

FORECAST AND REVIEW

HINDEMITH AND THE COOLIDGE FESTIVAL

THE eighth festival of chamber music at the Library of Congress under the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge foundation took place on April 9, 10, and 11. While the valuable precedent of inviting a European chamber group to participate was broken, there were, nevertheless, two distinguished visitors from overseas—the noted composer Paul Hindemith and Mme. Alice Ehlers, a very accomplished harpsichordist. More familiar participants included Carlos Chavez, who conducted a chamber orchestra at the final concert; the Coolidge string quartet; the South Mountain string quartet; Georges Barrère, flutist; Jesus Maria Sanromà and Gunnar Johansen, pianists; Frederick Jagel, tenor; and the motet group of the Dessoff choir, conducted by Paul Boepple.

Four of the works presented in the five-concert series were played for the first time—string quartets by Roger Sessions and Jerzy Fitelberg (the latter the winner of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge prize for 1936); a concerto for four horns and small orchestra by Mr. Chavez; and an *Introduction* and *Allegro* for chamber orchestra by Nicolai Berezowsky. A number of others were performed for the first time in America.

The keenest interest of the festival centered upon the public debut in America of Mr. Hindemith. He was heard twice as a soloist upon the viola, first in his *Sonata No. 1*, Opus 25, for viola alone, and later with Mr. Chavez and the orchestra in the solo part of the concerto entitled *Der Schwanendreher*.

In an all-Hindemith program five works of greatly varied genre were presented. The concert opened with a matchless per-

formance of the *Sonata for Flute and Piano* by Mr. Barrère and Mr. Sanromà. This was its American premiere. Although it was dated 1936 in the printed program, Mr. Hans Rosenwald of Chicago, a former pupil of Hindemith, assures me that the composer showed it to him in 1924 as a work which had already been composed some time earlier. After I found this explanation for its character I was no longer surprised at the ease with which it had been possible to trace the composer's lineage directly from the later romantic period in Germany. For this sonata's goal is a familiar beauty and geniality, which separates it sharply from the four other works played on the same program. It is written with admirable succinctness; the slow movement is eloquently developed, with a sense of long line and lofty mood, and the finale closes with a sprightly march, quite devoid of irony, yet crisp, sparkling and witty.

The sonata for unaccompanied viola, composed in 1922 and not a complete novelty in this country, gave rise to less spontaneous admiration. It was one of the opening guns of Hindemith's middle period, in which he set out somewhat belligerently in search of musical unbeauty of his own devising. In the first movement particularly, the figurations still seem repellent, the structure unduly improvisatory, and both harmonic and melodic outlines unyielding and bleak. This apparently willful ugliness of idiom is perhaps partly explained by the absence of motivating polyphony. In all four movements, in fact, I was impressed by the unimportance of the counterpoint, when there was any. The last three, however, are more concise in form than the opening section, and for this reason they carry more force. The second, *sehr langsam*, gives an inkling of the eloquent melos which vitalizes some of Hindemith's later works. A portion of the finale, consisting of an animated rhythmic figure over a drone bass, is genuinely exciting.

Because of its appalling technical difficulty the third piano sonata (1936) may never become popular with pianists. Mr. Sanromà was brilliantly equal to the occasion of its American premiere, however, and delivered the closing fugue in breathtaking style. This fugue is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of recent polyphony, with a good subject. The development is as

much in the vein of virtuoso composition as the most complex fugue of Reger, yet it is not marred by Reger's purely academic orthodoxy. The use of dissonance is always organic, each dissonance explaining itself instantly as a functioning part of an impressive linear element. No serious student of modern music can afford to overlook this spectacular fugue.

Frederick Jagel lent his rather too resonant tenor voice to the first American performance of four songs to poems by Friedrich Hölderlin (1935). While the seriousness of Hindemith's aim was fully apparent, I should like to evade judgment of their merit without further study of the scores. I found the melodic expression suave and agreeable. But the music and the text seemed to occupy separate and even disparate planes of interest. I felt either that Hindemith had an insufficient sense of the duty of a musical setting to its text, or that I should have to revise my criteria considerably in order to include these in my list of good songs.

This sharp criticism does not apply at all to the four part-songs to old texts (a 1937 revision of four of the pieces published in 1925 as Opus 33, *Sechs Lieder nach alten Texten*). These songs were not sung for the first time in America, although the program book gave no hint of this fact. In their unrevised version they have been given in public by the University Singers of Western Reserve University, directed by Melville Smith. In the new version, however, they have undergone a good deal of revision.

The four part-songs are a glorious addition to contemporary choral literature. Their musical speech cannot be understood without reference to the German part-songs and madrigals of the seventeenth and later sixteenth centuries. The gusty, forthright, good-natured directness of Hans Leo Hassler and his fellows is here recreated in modern terms. The influence of German Hausmusik is everywhere apparent—the modern enthusiasm for melodic word-settings unhampered by trivialities of metrical restriction. In their robust, free rhythms Hindemith has discovered an approach to the common mind, and at the same time has written something more spontaneously musical than the antagonizing first movement of the viola sonata.

The Hindemith climax, and the real climax of the festival as

well, was reserved until the very close of the very closing program, in the first American presentation of *Der Schwanendreher*, a concerto on old folk-songs for viola and orchestra, composed in 1935.

Der Schwanendreher is a translation into orchestral terms of the reawakened antiquarian interest in Germany, all themes of the three movements being folk-songs from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The formal nature of each movement seems to grow naturally out of the expressive nature of the song employed. Thus the second movement opens with a delicately sentimental, somewhat modal melody given to the viola accompanied chiefly by the harp alone; while the middle section of the same movement is a merry fugato built upon an active little tune which, one might say, was born to be a fugal subject without possessing enough depth to warrant much fugal development. Thus the concerto is not a sequence of folk-song arrangements. Rather the whole tonal structure, instrumental as well as formal, takes its cue from the expressive qualities and the potentialities of development suggested by the several tunes.

The orchestral color is extremely happy and varied, although the orchestra excludes the upper strings, à la Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. The balance between the solo instrument and the orchestra is infallibly calculated, and the viola is usually more a part of the orchestra than an isolated solo instrument. Mr. Hindemith himself is a superbly qualified violist, albeit he is not likely to care whether his playing carries as much sensuous beauty of tone as we are wont to expect.



Of the two new string quartets—those of Roger Sessions and Jerzy Fitelberg—that of Mr. Sessions was by far the better. Without fully understanding the intellectual basis of this composer's counterpoint, I was impressed at once with its high-mindedness and its command of a consistent style. I shall have to hear much more of Mr. Sessions' particular linear polytonality before I find it restful, especially at points of cadence.

While the purely melodic gift displayed in the quartet does not seem one of high inspiration, the long continuity of its me-

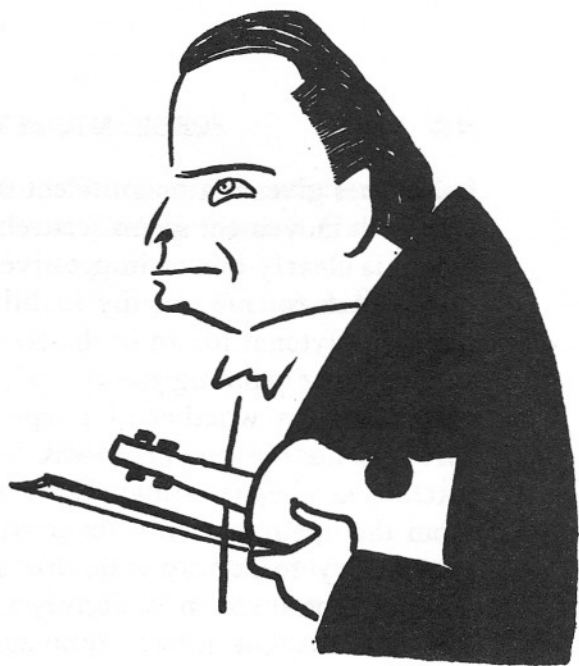
COMPOSERS VISITING AMERICA

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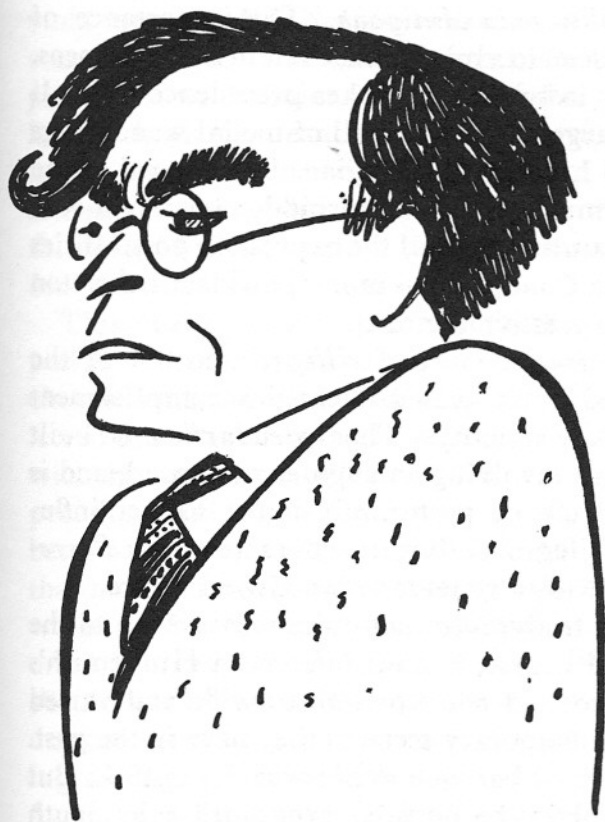
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lodic lines gives it a magnificent sense of direction. As a formal unit each movement seems securely organized, and the work as a whole is clearly one of impressive intellectual value. The stumbling block for me was my inability to feel at home in its completely polytonal idiom in the short space of forty minutes.

The prize-winning quartet of Jerzy Fitelberg displayed no such integrity, whether of purpose, structure or style. A single forty-minute movement, it was full of stopping and starting, of hitching and ejaculating. Even a return at the end to material from the opening could not persuade us that its essentially improvisatory form was valid for so long a chamber movement. The harmonic idiom is slightly more conventional than that of Mr. Sessions, but not nearly so consistent. The music is likewise weak on the polyphonic side. The selection of this quartet for the Coolidge prize remains a baffling mystery.

Mr. Chavez' *Concerto for Four Horns* is in an idiom already made familiar by the *Sinfonia Antigona*. The importance of chordal harmony is reduced to a minimum, even in the solo horns. Linear melody, usually in two voices, takes precedence over all else. The themes are largely diatonic, full of modal wanderings from major to minor to Locrian to Phrygian. The second of the two movements makes much use of the forbidden medieval conflict between F and B natural. For all the expressive possibilities of so lyrical a system, the *Concerto* was more the didactic skeleton of an idiom than the expressive use of it.

Mr. Berezowsky's *Introduction* and *Allegro*, the last of the novelties to be reported upon, was a talented accomplishment without much individual identity. The *Introduction* is built upon a descending figure involving an augmented second, and is developed through the use of post-impressionist French-influenced harmony. The *Allegro* derives its character from *Sacre*-like chords alternating with a reiterative woodwind figure.

All in all, this year's festival did not quite measure up to the last two. There was, of course, a great interest in Hindemith's music. But the programs did not represent so wide and varied an outlook upon the contemporary scene as they have in the past. The preliminary concert of baroque music was delightful. But somebody has yet to explain the peculiar program by the South

Mountain quartet which offered mediocre performances of works by Beethoven and Brahms, and the Kodaly Opus 2 *Quartet* of long and unexciting history.

Cecil Michener Smith

SEASON'S END IN NEW YORK

THE season has just come to a good end with new works by Stravinsky, Hindemith, Chavez, Copland and Sessions, in short by the best composers of today.

Hindemith's fourth and least successful quartet, introduced at the League of Composers' concert, showed a complexity that he has since fortunately abandoned. The work, nevertheless, has great musical interest. Later his third and best quartet was played by the Pro-Arte, but being well-known it needs no comment here. With the Philharmonic this composer played his viola concerto, *Der Schwanendreher*, which is in his new, fairly consonant style. The clarity of this latest work is an astonishing phenomenon. Eliminating many of the poses of modern music, he gets down to an exact expression of what he wants to say. This is true also of the madrigals, which were first published in a dissonant and unsingable style, but have now been rewritten with a thinning of texture, and a use of consonant chords that is easier for choruses to sing.

This healthy attitude, so refreshing in Hindemith, is the opposite of Stravinsky's who is constantly seeking out more *récherché* embroideries on the obvious. Hearing Stravinsky's ballets in the afternoon and Hindemith's school works at the Greenwich House Music School in the evening made the contrast especially striking. At the former the Philharmonic players were beset with complications, subtleties and perversities, from which the music emerged in a tortured form, whereas in the evening, works fresh and frank were rendered by students of twelve years or so, with evident delight and little difficulty. (However this should not minimize the importance of Stravinsky, who to this day continues to exert influence, even on Hindemith.) Outstanding among the Hindemith works at Greenwich House were the five pieces for string orchestra, especially the Brandenburg-