

FORECAST AND REVIEW

JACOBI'S QUARTET AND SESSIONS' SONATA

THE League of Composers concert at the French Institute on the evening of February eighteenth presented the Pro Arte Quartet, who played Bela Bartok's *Quartet No. 4* and Frederick Jacobi's *Quartet No. 2*; Anna Leskaya, accompanied by Harrison Potter, in five songs by Nicholas Nabokoff; and John Duke, who played the *Piano Sonata* of Roger Sessions. All the performances were admirable, notably so John Duke's for its incisiveness and insight.

The formal patterns of the five movements of the Bartok *Quartet* and their arrangement in the work as a whole are conventional: a violent *Allegro*, a gossamer *Prestissimo*, a declamatory slow movement, a pizzicato scherzo, and a short frenzied finale. Within this conventional arrangement the harmonic and rhythmic manipulation is far from conventional. Harmonically tortured, the work appears on a single hearing to move, within the range of audibility, with reference more to register than to system. The resulting dissonances, stimulating for a time, soon lose their force and become wearisome. Rhythmically involved, much of the writing relies more on unpredictable accents than on pulse. The result is sometimes bombast. Yet the work has moments of poignancy and eloquence, and is written throughout with a brilliance of instrumentation often dazzling.

The five songs of Nabokoff are less like *Lieder* than like short operatic fragments. They are not in the accepted sense "operatic," but they make one feel that the composer of *Union Pacific* would be thoroughly at home in opera. Their wordiness, or better their avoidance of purely musical line reveals a dramatic rather than a lyric tendency. Two of the songs—the laconic

lullaby (*Gulenki*) and the second of the two prayers of Gretchen—were instantly appealing.

The general spirit of Frederick Jacobi's *String Quartet No. 2* is noticeably different from that of previous compositions of his which have been heard in this country. The mood and the approach are far removed from those which characterized his first quartet. Here are no extra-musical considerations, no translation of thoughts or emotions other than those specifically his own. He has approached the task with sobriety and reverence. The energy and warmth of his style, the deeply personal qualities of his work have gained mature expression. Those whose enjoyment of contemporary music depends on the degree to which it shocks or astonishes them will find little in this quartet to tickle their palate. At first hearing the work may even seem to them singularly indifferent to the opportunities which the medium offers for jolting the listener. Yet the quartet is very daring in one way: Jacobi has dared to write, without inhibitions, what comes into his head, cost him what it may.

The best moments in the quartet are the result of this daring. So, it may be, are other moments less patently successful. Opinions will differ on the validity of various passages; but impartial judgment cannot belittle the salutary effect which his decision to attach little importance to the tyranny of fashion has had on his style in general. Most apparent is this effect in the middle movement, *Andante elegiaco*. Here the result is intimately poetic and tender. The first and last movements are direct and vigorous. The first, though perhaps somewhat sectional in its working out, is skillfully planned. The last combines elements of a scherzo with those of a finale. It seems on short acquaintance slightly repetitious, but once under way, it rises to a pitch of carefree excitement and ends sonorously and brilliantly. The shortcomings of the quartet are mainly those of a transitional work, which this gives some evidence of being. There is an occasional pre-occupation with the delectable qualities of the medium for their own sake. The formal proportions seem sometimes to over-balance the musical ideas for which they are established. The freedom newly felt has produced in many if not all of the pages a stylistic uniformity which goes far toward binding the work together

as a whole. It contains much that is not transitional, much that is a mature development and refinement of characteristics which the composer has shown in his previous works. For these as well as for the qualities which distinguish it from his earlier compositions, the quartet is an important entry in the catalog of Frederick Jacobi's works, and one would like to hear it again.

In spite of its almost legendary fame, the *Piano Sonata* of Roger Sessions had here its first public performance in New York. Its reputation is well-deserved. It is a work of elegance, nobility, and passion; and the inner compulsion of it is at one with the technical means which give it expression. Its structure is organic and presents no detail that is superfluous, none that does not contribute to the image of the whole. It is lean but not short-winded; it succeeds in being polished without being precious, and it is strong without display of strength or recourse to the last ounce of reserve energy. The movements are short, but they are so proportioned and so arranged in relation to each other that the work in its entirety is monumental.

To find fault with such a work is to grumble at Mt. Washington or to complain that the Connecticut is not the Kennebec. Perhaps the worst one can say of it is that it is so enormously difficult to play that we shall not hear it so often as we should like. There are three other characteristics of the *Sonata* which, while integrally bound up with the nature of the present work, might perhaps be transcended in subsequent ones. In spite of the predominantly contrapuntal conception, the right hand is in the saddle most of the time, somewhat to the detriment of the left. Such melodies as the left hand plays are, as a rule, intermingled with accompanimental figures, of which the left hand performs many and the right hand very few. The effect is somewhat one-sided—more so than usually in a piano work. It is the more noticeable because the range of the right-hand part lies quite insistently in the upper register of the piano. In fact, only about a fifth of its measures lies wholly below the top of the staff. The sound at any given moment is not to be criticized; in the last movement indeed the high tessitura contributes directly to the afflatus which the movement achieves. But the effect of the higher registers in general might have gained by less insistent use.

Such technical considerations are so intimately related to the entire work that they can scarcely be considered separately. As in the case of the difficulty of the work, the defect—if such it be—is one of initial conception, rationale.

The *Sonata* is disciplined even at moments of intense feeling. It seems inspired by the very concept of disciplined musical thought and feeling. Discipline is at once its meaning and its mode of expression. This is good, and to this extent one can agree with the statement of Aaron Copland that the *Sonata* is "a cornerstone upon which to base an American music."* Discipline and integrity, both of which so characterize the *Sonata*, are indispensable qualities. In this case they have caused some others to be sacrificed. The work is, if anything, overcharged with thought, tightened beyond the point of freedom in its own expression, condensed in its incisiveness to a point where its communicativeness is hampered rather than helped. If a short story is condensed to a day letter, the day letter may contain all the essentials but the short story is bound to contain something—perhaps even an irrepressible irrelevancy—that makes it better reading and heightens its powers of communication.

"The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." To a musician of any stature the price is not exorbitant; but it is not an end in itself. If a musician pays the price, he may justly claim the liberty. Sessions has paid it fourfold: he is entitled to fourfold liberty.

All of which must not obscure one's admiration for the *Sonata*: the elegance and tenderness of the *cantabile*; the fire of the *allegro*; the recurring moments of Platonic melancholy; the gentle colloquy of the voices in the middle section; the self-possession in the presence of musical realities; the emergence toward the close into a region of ethereal gaiety. The work gives so much and is prophetic of so much more to come.

Randall Thompson

LES BALLETS AMÉRICAINS

CALLING the new dance organization the American Ballet is much the same thing as speaking of American crêpes suzettes or American borscht. There is this advantage, however:

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