

Trauermusik for viola and string orchestra by Paul Hindemith (Schott-Associated Music Corp.). A *piece d'occasion* written the day following the death of George V.

Suite for Violin and Orchestra by Jean Françaix (Schott-Associated Music Corp.). Light music even for Francaix.

Ballades Françaises for voice and piano—Silvester Hippmann (Hudebni Matice). Four serious songs, uneven in quality, by a name new to us.

In a Winter Garden, Suite for Orchestra by S. A. Lieberson (C. C. Birchard). Four light movements: I Backstage, II The Musical Clown, III The Dancing Prima Ballerina, IV The Juggler. The titles indicate the genre of the piece.

IN THE THEATRE

—By VIRGIL THOMSON—

HIGH-BROWS WOW LOCAL PUBLIC

THREE successful premieres (cheers and bravos and everything) are to be chalked up for April. Gian-Carlo Menotti's *Amelia al Ballo*, Aaron Copland and Edwin Denby's *The Second Hurricane*, and Stravinsky's *The Card Party*.

Menotti's *opera buffa* was the more applauded half of an evening that contained also *Le Pauvre Matelot* by Darius Milhaud and Jean Cocteau. A student chorus and orchestra from the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia performed both works with hired conductor (Reiner) hired stage-director (Lert) and hired soloists. All very fine indeed and a ship-shape professional job.

The Milhaud (its American first-time) is a good work, not the best Milhaud, but better than most of his operas, which have a tendency to over-amplify the action by moments, to go muggy-symphonic, and to wander. It is soundly conceived and sensibly written, at least within the limits of the convention that allows such a disproportion of musical weight as one hundred musicians in the pit to three soloists on the stage.

The Curtis performance suffered from a heavy and insensitive translation (the *fausse naïveté* of Cocteau's language is not easy

to render) which, when combined with Madame Leskaya's leaden voice and impossible accent, ended by sinking the whole opera well below the navigation-line. The score deserves better, I must say. Donald Oenslager's setting was an added encumbrance. Believe it or not, his idea of a French water-side cafe turned out to be that same old dark-brown Fidelio pub that every opera house and stock company in America has an attic full of and that doesn't look like anything in France anyway. I should like here to remark that Mr. Oenslager has never added anything but vulgarity to any play or opera I have ever seen decorated by him. Let me palliate that unpleasant remark by admitting that his set for *Amelia al Ballo*, though visually tawdry (for high-class opera), was at least playable.

The score of *Amelia* has vivacity, theatrical sense, and good tunes. As in the case of Milhaud's *Matelot*, there were four times too many men in the pit. It was admirably played and sung and the audience liked it. Translation was O.K., the stage-direction ditto. A good time was had by one and all. Need I go further? Mr. Menotti obviously will.

Before going on to the Copland-Denby, I should like to mention the operettas (styled "chamber operas") at the WPA Theatre of Music, a double-bill of Pergolesi's *Serva Padrona* and Frederic Hart's *Romance of a Robot* (pronounced Robo for some reason). Direction, lighting, costumes, scenery were adequate and professional, even luxurious. Hart's operetta is scarcely a professional piece at all. The subject is silly, the music pretentious and vain. Mr. Venucci's direction of *La Serva Padrona* was extremely distinguished. Mrs. Farquhar's English version (omitting, please, a rather school-teacherish prolog) is straight *chef d'oeuvre*. It should be the definitive English version from now on. This is not the first proof of her unique skill at musical translation. Her version of Toch's *Princess and the Pea* last year was, I am told, impeccable. The obvious next step would be to put her at work on a twenty-year schedule making English versions of all the *grand repertoire*. The Federal Music Project (or any private foundation) could make no sounder contribution to art.

The Copland-Denby "opera-oratorio" was paired temporarily (i.e., they opened on the same night at opposite ends of the town)

with Vaughan-Williams' *Poisoned Kiss*. To Copland's advantage, if visitors to both can be believed. *The Second Hurricane* is a high-school cantata with lots of seated chorus-work and some simple speaking-and-singing-action for two grown-ups and six child principals. The music is vigorous and noble. The libretto is fresh and is permeated with a great sweetness. Linguistically it is the finest English libretto in some years. It has the same racy purity about common speech that I called (a little unfairly) *fausse naïveté* in speaking of Cocteau and that is the very special quality of Bert Brecht's German librettos. Unfortunately the show peters out before the end, the plot falling to pieces at the very moment when our anxiety is greatest about the fate of the characters. At this point, roughly three-fourths of the way through, there has been interpolated, completely inapropos, a bit of early Americana about General Burgoyne, whereupon somebody announces briefly that an airplane has arrived and rescued them all and so the whole cast and chorus join up in a big finale about Cooperation. A fine piece of music is the Cooperation number but hardly the moral of the tale. Cooperation being the principle thing that nobody had shown any signs of previous to the General Burgoyne specialty, and anyway it wasn't cooperation on the specialty-number (if unison singing can be called cooperation at all) that got them all out of their plight. It was our old friend the *deus ex machina* that did the job.

Please, Messrs. Copland and Denby, please do that last part over at greater length and tell us the "real adventure" that you promised us in the beginning of your piece. As it is, your fine and moving composition is something of a sell-out. It is none the less, of course, a remarkable work, because of its clear and objective treatment of the subject and because of its idiomatic simplicity, both as music and as poetry.

The reduction of decoration to a functional minimum of set, and of costuming to just what everybody came to rehearsal in was due, as was the stage-direction, to Orson Welles. His solution of the difficult problem of where to put everybody was original and distinguished. Lehman Engel's handling of the resulting conductor problems was triumphant. Excepting for the single (and rather grave) reserve I made about the ending, both

the work and its presentation are a cardinal event in the American musical theater.

The Stravinsky festival billed the new *Card Party* ballet with two ten-year-old ones, *Apollon Musagète* and *Le Baiser de la Fée* (the latter an American first). Whatever one's musical preference may be among these scores, they are all certainly superb theatrical pieces. The labored and strained immobility of *Apollon*, the easy grace of *Le Baiser*, the movie-chase facility of *The Card Party* are all of them musico-muscular conceptions that marry themselves handsomely to choreographic motion once they are put on a stage with anything like Balanchine's musical exactitude. The American Ballet does well to offer itself the support of such masterly works for dancing. The performance of them in this case, incidentally, was more than adequate. That company is today something very close to a first-class ballet-troupe, far superior to any of their local toe-dancing rivals in grace and discipline, and broader in their range of human expression than all of the esthetico-expressionistic groups of the feet-flat-on-the-ground-and-stomach-sticking-out school.

Stewart Chaney's set for *Apollon* was muddy in color, and the costumes were neither especially original, expressive nor becoming. The décor was saved from inanity by a colossally beautiful stage-tree, the finest I ever remember seeing. Miss Sharoff's set and costumes for *The Card Party* were brilliant enough in first-effect, though drawn not at all to the scale Stravinsky asked for. Still they would have been all right for a five-minute revue-number. For a work twenty minutes long they were a little crude. The poisonous green of her card-table, the tawdriness of the entrance-holes "in one," and her monotonous insistence on the same red and the same rather pasty blue in all the costumes ended by dimming the luminosity she had so nearly achieved and rendered everything opaque and oppressive. Alice Halicka's four sets for *Le Baiser de la Fée* began with pale blue emptiness on a bare stage and went on through a whole gamut of Swiss mountain scenery and tinsel-wreathed log-cabin interiors to a triumphant bit of *féerie* at the end in which the entire stage represented the bottom of a lake as seen from under the water with Mr. William Dollar swimming slowly and painfully (really climbing up a

trapeze-net stretched at an angle) toward a species of Lady-of-the-Lake-femme-fatale-mermaid half way up to the flies in back. It was all very beautiful and the costumes were very becoming to everybody. Madame Halicka has a surer taste and a more courageous hand than any of the local chums. Their work on this occasion was, however, distinctly nice and far more striking than what one currently sees.

So much for the success-story. It would probably include Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (scheduled for June 1st at the Maxine Elliott by WPA Project 891) if this particular number of MODERN MUSIC did not go to press before then. Rather than postpone the record till fall, I take the liberty of speaking briefly anyway. My acquaintance with the score is pretty complete, I must add, and I have been to rehearsals.

The libretto (Blitzstein's own) is dramatically effective and verbally bright, the musical declamation is the season's best by far, and the orchestral accompaniment is of a rare finesse. The work is proletarian in subject-matter and popular U.S.A. in musical material. Blitzstein has profited by a sincere admiration for Weill's *Mahagonny*. His *sens du théâtre* is of the best, easily the equal of Menotti's, who wrote his own libretto too. Welles and Feder have thought up their usual novelties of lighting and of *mise-en-scène*. I predict a genuine success. The opera has passion and elegance.

WITH THE DANCERS

ELLIOTT CARTER

MORE ABOUT BALANCHINE

IN these last months we have had the good fortune to see three excellent examples of George Balanchine's choreography well rehearsed and well presented by the American Ballet troupe.

Most modern American and German dancers return directly to the gestures of primitive ritual or the miming of basic physio-