

FORECAST AND REVIEW

PREMIERES AND EXPERIMENTS—1932

MUSIC FOR ORCHESTRA

PROKOFIEFF'S music for the *Fils Prodigue* ballet (Walter, Philharmonic, January 21) impresses vastly at first hearing, then disappoints steadily. The material in the original version is among his finest; the form appeared to be pretty bad piece-work, over-using the fateful pause, sometimes merely the abrupt bar-line for transition. But the lazy form might have been blamed on, and was in part obscured by, the scenario. Now he has made a concert version, and has changed and rearranged. He opens with the first four measures of the fifth number in the ballet (the love duet), switches to the second section of the original opening, then back to five, back to one. Another number is made partly of the fourth piece (*Les Danseurs*) and the second part of number two (*Rencontre avec des Camarades*). And so on. The piece is a hopeless scramble in comparison with which the original seems a model of logical sequence. Prokofieff remains the incorrigible adolescent; his hastiness and laziness have no longer the excuse of great fertility. He is being betrayed by an easy, *de luxe* musicality; moral character, long due, is still missing.

Krenek's *Der Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* (February 4) is amusing in spots; deadly in others; at all times most fashionably contrived; neither witty nor inspired, making claims to being both. The music, in short, of a man who would still like to be thought "irrepressible."

Daniel Gregory Mason's *Second Symphony* is the very contrary. Where Krenek is purposely light, Mason is purposely serious. His work kept giving me hopes, which it never managed to realize. He has a fondness for the passionate high register of

the violins *tutti*, and for scales in fourths; he leans upon Franck for chromatic sequences, and upon Tschaikovsky for whimsicality and glitter. His form-idea is discovered to be a rationale whereby he need think up no new matter for his fourth movement; it is as though he had not survived that critical moment when a composer "passes out" on his work.

The point about George Gershwin's new *Rhapsody* (Koussevitzky, Boston Symphony, February 5) is that it is no better and no worse than his earlier one, but that it is a repetition, in rather more pretentious terms. There are to be found the same "war-horse" pianisms of Liszt; the same evidence of thinking from one four-measure phrase to another, of enough breath for the broad melodies, and too little for the patchwork-padding; the same excessive climaxes; and the same talent for easy, and extremely catchy tunes.

Aaron Copland has been writing the same piece since he started composing. Not in the Gershwin sense, however. Copland has been at work in a process, at once spiritual and musical, of purification and refinement. There has been no attempt at writing various kinds of music; only one of expressing more truly and unfailingly his own being. The expression in turn has provided him with a formulated picture of himself; the music makes the man, as the man makes the music. It is direct autobiography. So it is natural for one tendency in his music (for example, jazz) to appear first in tentative, suggested form, gather momentum through a series of pieces, and finally become welded with the sharpened, modified organism of his music. No element ever appears abruptly in a work, or gets cut off in another. Copland's *Symphonic Ode* (Boston Symphony, March 3) is one of his latest, therefore one of his ripest testimonials. In this work, the propulsion of the ego outweighs the natural gift, although the gift comes out strongly in the more quiet music. The ego is mystic, and (Thomson's word) "penitential;" yet the propulsion is Dionysiac. The piece is not a perfect one for me. I find the material redundant, and at times less individual than in his other music. The whole-tone sequences, the open octaves doubled many times in the massive orchestra, the lack of flow between the rhythmic blocks, disturb me. I suspect the opening

leaps from middle register to deep bass and then to top-treble, to have been thought out pianistically; in the orchestra I got none of the sense of "space" I had expected. There is also a too-sumptuous quality, *volupté*, which gets in the way of the cleanliness of the declamation; luckily it is entirely absent in the later *Variations*. The *Maestoso* opening has a unique mood of exaltation, gray in color, with a wonderful undercurrent of sorrow; and the mood gets broken up into the light and wild *Allegro* with a masterly grasp of mosaic form on a grand scale.

Hindemith has apparently reached an impasse in style; but his fatal virtuoso gift for music-writing will not let him stop long enough to regain direction. His *Konzertmusik* for string and brass is an example of two contradictory tendencies; one to follow his natural, formal, "neo-classic" inclination; the other to let his intellectualized romanticism get the better of him, because of his sense of duty to the masses. The work is very facile and effective; theatre-music—without a program. It has sentiment but no emotion. The scoring is a "stunt," which does not quite come off: by frequently suggesting the full orchestra (brasses in mass against vivacious strings is one method), he makes one miss the wood-winds.

CHAMBER WORKS

Three out of six is a good average. I found three numbers on the Pan-American program (February 16) interesting or more. Roy Harris' *String Quartet*, played with ardor and sincerity by the New World Quartet, is a piece I should like to have heard immediately over again. It is not so good as his *Piano Sonata*, but it is good Harris. It should once and for all stamp out the delusion that he is anything but a romantic. Harris insists upon, practises, the theory that material should dictate form; and that no two types of material should employ the same form. This is pure romanticism: the classic Beethoven of the early sonatas, the Bach of the fugues, were able to contain the most widely different subjects in approximately the same form. Appositeness and plasticity of form the classicist admits, intrinsically ordained form never. After a first hearing, I am still wondering about the precise subject-matter of Harris' quartet. I feel the impetus, the

personal drive of the composer (another hallmark of the romantic), but not much organic necessity in the substance. I note also a lushness in the harmony, to which he has always been prone; a finely irregular melodic line, his chief and most characteristic gift; an over-fondness for the sudden full-stop; and an attempt at intricate rhythmic device which overloads, seems interpolated, and does not "sound." But one remembers the lyric line and the pulse.

Charles Ives' *In the Night* has a lovely texture of plangent sound, simply that, recalling the post-Impressionists and particularly Roussel (but considering when it was written, there can be no possibility of imitation or influence). Ives, except in works of this sort, seldom has sufficient craft. I feel a sketched rather than an achieved intention; this may be due to his almost deliberate dependence upon the spirit of minstrelsy. The result is highly theoretical.

The third interesting piece was the *Energia* of Carlos Chavez, whose bright and earthy music appears to undergo no development, almost no change. It would be hard to imagine music fresher, more candid and engaging than that of Chavez; but either he has not yet found a form which will enable him to grow, or it is not the sort of music which is meant to grow. Hard, athletic, it has the galvanic charm that goes with health and with complete unconcern with nuance or suavity. It is delightful, but small-scoped; but delightful.

Of the League's February 7 program, I was most interested to hear Alexander Mossolov's songs and *Legend* for cello and piano. One could tell nothing from the recently-played *Iron Foundry* except that it was a well-written trick. Now Mr. Mossolov is clearer to us. He seems a composer of very limited talent, poor in temperament, good enough technically and in effectiveness. He is full of mannerisms and mood-posturings. It is because of Scriabin that such music can still be sold to the public; Scriabin stands behind this product. But it is a small and feeble Scriabin.

On the same program: Egon Wellesz (*Tanzstücke*) has never seemed more full of pompous rhetoric; Paul Pisk (*Klavierstücke*) borrows his spirit from Schönberg and Scriabin, doing

homage to neither; and the Hebrew pieces of Stutschevsky are banal *morceaux caractéristiques*. The *Duo* for violin and cello by Schulhoff is better-made; but it follows Hindemith and Stravinsky's soldier, and then shifts to a more folksy Bohemianism.

OLD MUSIC - NEW INSTRUMENTS (NEW SCHOOL CONCERTS)

The inclusion of the concerts of old Hebrew, Chinese and Occidental music in this report needs explanation. The concerts were among the most enjoyable of the season. They were of course in the nature of curios, and have perhaps no place in a review devoted to modern music. There is prevalent a snob-attitude among laymen which would make "modern" whatever is unfamiliar, exotic, removed, uneasy. Some people even like modern music on these grounds. They have jaded ears and like to be "stimulated." Puritans and die-hards also hold the attitude and stay away from the music. When it will be perceived that the essence of all music lies elsewhere, beyond the first taste of sugar, spice or gall, something will have been gained. The snob-attitude would put new musical compositions in the class of curios, and I do not want to appear to subscribe to it by talking about curios as if they were properly placeable beside the compositions. I prefer to include them on the basis of the modern musical temper, which is exploratory and time-conscious as never before.

The Chinese concert (February 22) agreeably touched the exotic note. It made an evening of charm, the spectacle more impressive than the music.* Delicate and beautiful people sat, moved about, modestly played the Hu-Chin, the Hsiao, the Pi-pa, sang in flat, pure, unresonant voices. Sometimes the effect was moving. When Tsu Kuo-Mo took up the Sheng, an enor-

*A few details: It is a fairly primitive music, practically without bass. Many "scales" were promised; I caught only the type-pentatonic, usually in D, sometimes including a C sharp, and another sort of pentatonic, very "melancholy" and fine, B, C sharp, E, F sharp, A. Of the instruments I liked the horizontal flute, a sort of high English horn, but not oboe-like; the Sheng, which has qualities like the high register of the pipe-organ and, for special purposes, the croaking music of the stringed Hu-Chin. There is a definite feeling for accompaniment. The lute breaks its melody with a handroll over all the open strings, the vertical flute produces octaves. When there is an ensemble they all play the same notes, with some exceptions; these are allied notes of the pentatone and by giving off always the same harmonic chord, show that there is no real instinct for harmony. The time follows a certain speech rhythm—often a single unit repeated irregularly until the caesura, which occurs at cadences, like old European psalmody.

mous balloon-shaped mouth organ, and played, the whole story of mankind making music—not writing or reading it, but playing it; not as art, but as folk-idiom—was manifest.

The Hebrew concert (February 2), sponsored and prepared by Lazare Saminsky, provided a less homogeneous evening, but better music. Saminsky himself did an excellent feat of *Gebrauchsmusik*, by composing in short order a hymn *O Lord, What is Man?* in commemoration of the late W. I. Spiegelberg. The hymn is predominantly modal, with the traditional semi-Oriental cadences, and the open fifth and octave; it has boldness and solidity. Saminsky's other sacred works, particularly the *O Lord of Our Fathers*, were the best of the modern Hebrew music. I preferred too, his harmonization of the ancient music to Ravel's, it was more discreet, simpler, less "evocative," had greater depth and dignity. The three old songs—the *Thal*, the *Shir-hashirin*, and the *Kaddish*—are among the most beautiful traditional church-music I know. Their quality is surprisingly noble and restrained; they have in common with Jewish secular music the plaintive descents of melody and the repeated wailing note, but are formalized and singularly impersonal. They were sung magnificently by Rudinov, whose voice and method are worth going miles to hear, and Ray Porter Miller, whose shrill treble had precisely the right sound.

On March 1, Judith Litante sang with great taste and poise *trouvère* songs of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the ravishing *Lasciatemi morire* recitative and aria of Monteverdi, and an isolated Purcell, a Lully, a Morley and a Bach. Her program was arranged chronologically; it showed off quite perfectly (though in miniature) how the "program" element in music has followed the course of an ever-increasing preoccupation with detail. This theory is too ramified to be gone into fully. Here is an outline: each century has followed spiritual context more closely and faithfully than the preceding one. To Palestrina, Bach would have seemed a complete programmatist, needing twenty-four pieces to expound the different phrases of a mass. Handel must have thought William Byrd, with his *Te Deum* written in one long never-varying piece, an inelastic absolutist. Byrd and Palestrina "set" whole moods; Bach and Handel "set" phrases, and

turns of phrase. Later, with the romantics, Strauss and Debussy, single words evoke their special music. It is a lucky thing that the cadence at this point diffuses and all but disappears, or we should have, in *Pelléas* or *Elektra*, a new piece with each word.

A new instrument is presumably invented to enlarge the musical range and capacities of mankind, not to limit or cripple them. Henry Cowell's "rhythmicon," perfected and demonstrated by Leon Theremin (January 19), scarcely fulfills this primary condition in its present state. It does produce rhythms of any combination from 1 to 16 simultaneously and at all speeds; but insofar as one is constrained to represent a single rhythm always upon the same repeated note, and without deviation from the regular beat, the limitations far outweigh the advantages, from the point of view of musical application. The instrument might have conceivable use in the schoolroom, to show pupils what a thirteen-against-sixteen sounds like; it is certainly easier to manage than several metronomes. And it was a good idea to give each rhythm a different pitch in sound; although any set of pitches would have done. . . . Theremin's electrical instruments have undergone steady perfecting; without much result. Their tone color (it is the same for all—keyboard, space control and fingerboard instruments) remains lamentably sentimental, without virility. The most perfected one, like a cello, exposes most brutally the cloying sound.

Marc Blitzstein

VIENNA RESISTS THE DEPRESSION

SINCE the fall, as everyone knows, the economic situation in Vienna has been acute. What can be expected of music at such a time in an impoverished city where, moreover, the attitude towards art is so conservative? The season opened with great misgivings. But our theatrical and musical life must indeed be enjoying a false spring. For the dramatic and operatic theatres are well-attended, often sold out and many of our concerts fare better than in more favorable times. It was not to be expected that producers and managers who ordinarily cared little about modern music would be more venturesome in a cru-