

FORECAST AND REVIEW

MUSIC AND THEATRE - 1932

THE "modern" opera movement which sped through Germany some years ago has died there because of economic duress; and one looks more or less in vain for its emergence here, in accordance with the usual chronological scheme whereby we take over, a couple of years later or a couple of years too late, what has had a burst on the Continent. Indeed, the season of stage works looks even shabbier than past ones. We are having our own hard times. Yet this cannot be the sole reason, since quality in productions is the main lack, not the productions themselves. From the Metropolitan, of course, nothing could be expected; and it met expectations to the letter. . . It is a pity. We now have dancers (forced, through lack of funds, to depend upon a piano for the music and velvet curtains for the set of their largest conceptions); we have orchestras, vocalists, stage-designers to make up a fresh, abundant and alive musical theatre. Where is it? Perhaps it will arrive with Radio City; perhaps.



Stokowski performed in Philadelphia Carlos Chavez's ballet *H.P.*, before an audience dizzy with advance ballyhoo. The most important aspect of *H.P.* is its music (and its composer)—luckily, since the music came off with the most honor. The work, in spite of its title, is no mere "machine" ballet. It contains only one section of the mechano-delineative type, that one good enough, although not startling; the rest of the score affords music of more moment. (How tired we have grown of the special little "machine" esthetic! This esthetic, whose day is happily about over, was for music fatally limited and limiting,

in its exclusive stress upon sonority; inferior, in that it depended upon illustration rather than symbol; false, since it was based upon noisiness of one sort or another: in actuality the best machines make the least noise. The "machine-as-art" in music probably took root in Stravinsky or through him; developing, with much preaching and flag-waving from the sidelines, through the music of Prokofieff, Antheil, Varese, Honegger, it has at last achieved its perfect minuscular fruit in the tricky little *Iron Foundry* of Mossolow—a two-minute genre stunt belonging in a class with the Paganini-Liszt *Campanella* and Tardini's *Devil's Trill*.) Chavez's ballet is highly uneven. There are some excellent spots; in these, a charged, fighting music breaks through, the trumpets are exploited with love and more, the instrumentation is whittled down till the sound almost cracks. There is often too much brassiness. The juxtaposition of tango rhythms and those of Chavez's characteristic "classical" formulation is novel and sometimes invigorating; the tangos themselves are far below the quality of the rest. A continuous line is missing; the episodes link disjointedly, even haphazardly, and the form becomes lumpy; at the same time, it is in the interludes that some of the best pages are found. He seems not quite to have realized the Stravinskian equation between an advanced method and a primitivism of effect; sometimes the severity, sometimes the abandon dominates. The music seems at first curiously immature, though not adolescent; upon reflection it is seen to have that idiomatic, strange, unreferable finality like the sort found in all "local-color" art. And it is precisely here that a major critical problem presents itself. To Chavez, this music (both internal and external evidence make it plain) means a quite full, universal conception and reaction, his totality in fact. It is the duty of the critic to comprehend both this self-and a "world"-view; and his almost hopeless task to strike a mean between them; to balance immediacy against perspective. The critic is ordinarily content to emphasize perspective, the outside view. He does, it is true, consider briefly "the creator's intention;" but he forgets or is too lazy to distinguish between what the creator means to say, and the manner he cannot help saying it in. To some ears all medieval music sounds "quaint," whether it be a love-ditty

by Morley, or a mass by Palestrina. . . I found the scenario of *H.P.* trite and unwedded to the score. Since Chavez' music is hard, not soft, literal, brutal and unperfumed, we were offered the paradox of a "Southern" composer dealing most successfully with the "Northern" aspects of his theme. The décors of Rivera were two-dimensional, like drawings, riotous in color. His costumes were good in their way, the way of the mummer's parade; enormous papier-maché pineapples, cocoanuts, bananas and palm-trees peopled the stage, the amiable product of a child's profuse imagination. They took up so much room that the logical choreographic plan should have been modelled on the simple *défilé*; instead of which, everybody was made to dance, the Big Fish got in the way of the Grand Pineapple, and the stage was invariably messy and ugly to look at.



Respighi's "mystery," *Maria Egiziaca*, styled a "triptych for concert," turned out to be bad music even for Respighi, which is almost being superlative. It is not a "mystery"—rather the medieval "miracle," handling an un-Biblical subject; not for "concert" (it derives from a poor Rimsky-and-Puccini theatre-music) unless it becomes so by being performed in Carnegie Hall, and putting musicians and conductors where they can be seen; and the triptych idea—3-scenes-in-1—seems exploited only to cramp the freedom of action during each scene. In a word, *chichy*.



In point of fact, the best spectacles of the New York stage are being contributed by the revues, the musical comedies. I am all for the non-serious theatre, especially when it is as good as *Of Thee I Sing* and *Face The Music*. Still, I should appreciate it more, if there were a substantial serious theatre which it set off, as hors d'œuvres or dessert; as the solid meal itself it is highly inadequate. The popular musical theatre has turned its attention to the *zeitstück* (Germany's vogue of about five years ago): a satirical view of the political and economic scene and mores. The genealogy of this form in America is worth noting.

On the serious side, it stems from a certain "Left bank" tendency which appeared in old pages of the Paris *transition* (Lincoln Gillespie's *Amerikakia* scenario), and in the works of young radicals and expatriates (Antheil's *Transatlantic*, the anonymous *U.S.A. with Music*; the productions of the Playwrights' Theatre), finding a popular reading public through the *New Yorker*, which filched the satire, but missed the passionate fury, or rather, discarded it for a more urbane *menfoutiste* manner. On the popular side there have been such exhibits as the *Grand Street Follies*, the *Garrick Gaieties*, the first *Little Show*, and later the more sophisticated but less "intimate" *Three's a Crowd*, the *New Yorkers*, and the *Band Wagon*—revues generally lacking in tempo, but featuring sketches of the satirical style. This season's revues are the first to exploit the attitude consistently, and throughout. *Of Thee I Sing* has the best music, Gershwin's; *Face The Music* is superior in all other ways. It is better to look at, quite gorgeous; its book is wittier because more varied, yet it never loses its "horsing" point of attack. The best scene in *Of Thee I Sing*, that of the Senate Chamber, is equal to the level of *Face The Music*; the rest of it is heavily-paced, driving home a single theme—which is perhaps one reason why it is more popular. Gershwin's music is good, but not up to his every-tune-a-hit standard; nor is his style any longer unified. He is evidently getting ambitious, in a misguided attempt to approach "art;" the results are somewhere between the marchy zestfulness of Sullivan and the dreary-but-wise music-making of Cole Porter. I wish too that he did not overdo what he would probably call vocal counterpoint. Berlin's songs for *Face The Music* miss fire; there is a frantic attempt to catch up with the tricks of other composers, which fails. Berlin's real gift for the sentimental ballad and for swift raggy melodies is here absent. At the same time, these two productions, with their breeziness, genial insanity and undercurrent of intelligence are welcome and inspiring.

Jerome Kern's music for *The Cat and The Fiddle* also exposes its composer as needlessly presumptuous. He is obviously going "Viennese," with lamentable effect; the guileless pretty music of *Show Boat* and *Sweet Adeline* is gone, and we are handed in its place (among other dull ineptitudes) something Kern calls

"melodrama," an appallingly dull sort of continuum composed largely of tidbits and refuse from Chaminade, which runs through a spoken scene. The production was fair; I find it difficult to go operettas of the "charming" school.

Nor can I with any pleasure witness so stupidly vulgar and inane a performance as Ziegfeld's *Hot-Cha!* proved to be. The sets and costumes were elaborate in the Christmas-tree tradition of Urban. The book is inconsequential and bawdy, lacking even ordinary continuity; each "gag" demands a special narrative paraphernalia which weights the whole down inexcusably and to no avail. The music has moments of brightness and verve (for this sort of show), but is in general only passable.

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SPRING CONCERTS IN NEW YORK

IF the essence of music is motion, a motion controlled and brought to definite issue, it is interesting to note each new work's version of this essential motion as its characteristic feature, its very physiognomy. This motion, this fundamental shape and direction corresponds in music to Blake's "bounding line." "How do we distinguish the oak from the beech but by the bounding outline?"

At the League of Composers concert (March 6th) one noted an interesting contrast from this standpoint between Koutzen's *Sonatine* for piano and Antheil's *Chamber Concert* for eight instruments. Koutzen's "bounding line" seemed to consist solely of an incessant motion of two or more contrapuntal parts. As such it no more constituted and guaranteed real continuity than the continuous movement of a churn or a ratchet-wheel does. There seemed to be nothing inherent in the stuff of the work that shaped its movement and brought it to a necessary conclusion. Antheil's work was more resourceful. The motion was free and varied. What was more characteristic was the flow from idea to idea. While the work is not at all abstruse it requires a closer knowledge than one hearing affords to judge as a concatenated whole. The working out of the cadence and codetta in A was one of the most successful bits of writing in the piece.