

for Wind Instruments was well-contrasted with Saminsky's more sombre vein. The music is attractively instrumentated and readily assimilable. In the *Six Portraits for Harpsichord* Virgil Thomson has succeeded in perfecting a little genre all his own. Each one etches its atmosphere with simple, telling means. The *Portrait of the Spanish Lady* was especially charming. With the exception of the middle movement, Roy Harris' *Three Pieces for Piano* offers some of his best-wrought music to date; the last with its fanciful charm is surely one of his best creations.

Israel Cirkowitz

LONDON: FOURTH WINTER OF THE BLACKOUT

London, December, 1942

THE BIG TOWN: The joint is jumping. Even before the North African landings, admittedly a galvanizing agent, there was evident here-about a frenzied activity in all fields, and a driving spirit I hadn't remembered in pre-war London. They are working, fighting, and playing furiously. Theatre-life and concert-life are booming; restaurants, taxis, clubs, pubs, are all doing land-office business. (The food is not much, and not good, so that most bought meals are short on content and strong on "production" – like the supper at the Savoy, where bread showed up in three different guises; and very decorative too). If the blackout is lifted or modified – there has been some talk of it – a certain seething undercurrent and excitement will go. For now the gloom is shot with dancing torches; and on the streets you hear the click of all-leather heels and the strangled, really desperate yells of "taxi!" (The taxis themselves are small, dim, one-eyed and disdainful, like a scottie with a shiner). Jammed dance-halls, snack-bars and pubs prove that the non-com military and working-people are also taking strenuous release, for a few hours, from the grind of war work and the war.

2. COMPOSERS: Among those as yet unclaimed by the Royal Forces are Edmund Rubbra, William Walton, Constant Lambert, Vaughan Williams (at his age, he is unlikely to be drafted), Benjamin Britten, Arthur Bliss (who has for the time being given up composing to head the B.B.C.), and Arnold Bax, official composer-laureate. Alan Bush, a soldier in the Medical Corps, is stationed in town, and is able to turn out music working nights in a hideaway studio on Baker Street. The output in general is

pretty large in quantity. The English in their new music, I find – and here comes a wholesale generalization – seem either to be sternly dogmatic or deliberately trivial. The exaltation boys are around too; their music is more in the nature of an obligation acquitted than of a muse served.

3. CONCERTS: At one of the Boosey-Hawkes Sundays at the Orpheum in Golders Green, Adrian Boult and the London Philharmonic did the finest *Lied von der Erde* I have ever heard. This work is for me by far the best Mahler – almost the only one I can take whole-heartedly; and it never seemed so fresh. Peter Pears sang the tenor solo, Astra Desmond the contralto. He was very good in the lighter passages, but in the stirring parts appeared to be doing a silent movie with tremendous orchestral background. She was utterly voiceless, utterly intense. Yet the music came through superbly . . . Henry Wood and the same orchestra did a mostly good Shostakovitch *Seventh* (first movement), the symphony which composers run away from, and conductors can't get enough of. In the great cylindrical Royal Albert Hall the piece came electrically to life – although the performance was probably inferior to Toscanini's or Koussevitzky's. It had a gaunt power and a big line, so that even the excessive repetitions of the Fascist March built into horrifying meaning. The Kastschei-music from Stravinsky's *Firebird* (on the same program) was by comparison the merest Halloweenery – I recalled that cartoon of a witch riding her broomstick in the air with outstretched arms, yelling to another: "Look, Gussie – no hands!"

4. BALLET. The Sadler's Wells troupe have been having an enormous season – eight or nine performances a week at the New Theatre for months now – with every indication of continuing through the winter. They have three big mainstays: an ensemble of great technical proficiency (credit Ninette de Valois); Constant Lambert as musical director (a first-class theatre-conductor); and the solo-dancer and choreographer, Robert Helpmann, who is a real star. He, Helpmann, might be Martha Graham in switched-drag, so startling is the resemblance. He is like her in mood and esthetic attack as well; macabre, gyratory, eccentric, full of theatre-flair; and in his humor, on the loony side. He did a stunning version of Milton's *Comus*, to Purcell-excerpts arranged by Lambert, wherein Helpmann spoke lines as he danced, to thrilling effect. He did an elaborate, many-scened *Rake's Progress*, with music by Gavin Gordon – the only serious composer to my knowledge who doubles as revue-performer (he

is at the moment playing utility roles — stooge, feed and straight man — in Firth Shephard's *Fine and Dandy*). Helpmann also has an ambitious *Hamlet*, done to the Tchaikovsky overture, which I seem to be alone in finding unimpressive. It has a fine opening and closing tableau (the same picture, really, of murder and devastation, the nightmare at the beginning having come true at the end). But he has been at such pains to get in the entire point-by-point story, that his twelve-minute condensed tragedy was for me more Spam-let than *Hamlet* — and decidedly not my dish.

Walton's *Façade*, with Helpmann and Margot Fonteyn, is faded and limp by now, as music I mean; the sparkle of that kind of thingummy passed out in the 'thirties. Lambert gives it brisk pace, however; and Helpmann has at least one good moment, when he flirts with and pats the buttocks of a dame painted on the backdrop.

5. FILMS: When the pother over the spoken words "bastard," "bloody," etc. in *In Which We Serve* has died down, and the Noel Coward film is finally seen in New York, I am wondering how it will go. I find it a skillful picture, but a cold one — to me that fact is almost inevitable, since Mr. Coward is responsible for all departments. It is class-angled with a vengeance, its author being a very conscious, if not entirely kosher member of British aristocracy. In the story of a ship's birth and death, the upper (Captain Mountbatten-Coward), middle (Petty Officer-Bernard Miles) and lower (Ordinary Seaman-John Mills) classes are treated. The chins of captain, captain's wife, progeny and friends are so high; the gallantry so great; the upper lips so stiff; that whatever speech is intelligible is practically ventriloquial and immediately apologized for. But the others — the middle and the lower burghers — just scream through the proceedings. Mr. Coward's musical score is in his purpler, or Bitter-Sweet manner, with regrettfully snatched memories of lesser Elgar.

Coastal Command, a movie done by the brilliant makers of *Target for Tonight* has the same fact-fiction formula, and suffers by being the second one of a series. There is too much music by Vaughan Williams; and most of it is too insistent, as though written with a good weather-eye on a future concert-suite. One excellent device: various airplane-shots are accompanied by a veritable checkerboard of changing motor-roars, instead of the bland continuous studio-made sound-track pasted on in most Hollywood scenes. This film is another cold one; that human breathing element which some of our independents and all of the Russians capture is largely missing.

I thought *Thunder Rock* better as a movie than as a play; indeed I like the movie best when it departed from the play. Michael Redgrave is superb, Lilli Palmer lovely. Music OK.

A curious phenomenon should be noted. Richard Addinsell wrote a mediocre score for a mediocre picture, *Dangerous Moonlight*; it contained a piece which the chief character, a Polish musician, was supposed to play, the *Warsaw Concerto*. Immediately after the premiere of the film, behold the music-and record-shops besieged by customers for the *Warsaw Concerto*. The number, a gaudy bit of pretentious writing, has become a best-seller. I daresay no one was more surprised than the composer. It is said that after its first concert performance, a colleague embraced him effusively, exclaiming: "Darling, it stinks!"

6. RADIO: The biggest throw has been Walton and Macneice's *Christopher Columbus*, done on October 12. It lasted two hours, which is at least one hour too long for any radio-work. The music ranged from romantic to archaic to impressionistic to don't-know-quite-what; always well-covered, rarely compelling. The text was good in conception; but Macneice has still to learn what sort of speech and language sits well with music.

7. THEATRE: The only serious incidental score I have found is Alan Bush's for Patrick Hamilton's *The Duke in Darkness*. This is an excellent historical-thriller with Michael Redgrave and Leslie Banks; and Bush's music (even though scratchy on an execrable sound-system) lends a lot to mood and dramatic direction.

I have enjoyed many musical revues here, particularly *Best Bib and Tucker* and *Fine and Dandy*, both staged by the remarkable showman Robert Nesbitt; but I can't say much for the scores. They don't know how to get hot, or how to get Viennese-sweet. The best music in the West-End theatres is by Cole Porter, with *Let's Face It* and *Dubarry Was a Lady* exhibiting acceptable imitations of the New York originals.

8. SWING: I said they don't know how to get hot; but I forgot the "Number One Swing Club," which, on Saturday nights is to be found in a dive near Oxford Circus; and the Jamboree, a peculiar manifestation of wartime London, where, "accidentally," a private party is in progress from midnight on (everything closes officially at eleven); and, "accidentally," someone is discovered to have brought his own bottle, someone else a trumpet, and someone a double-bass. Happy, happy accidents.

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