

AU REVOIR TO THE U. S. A.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

SINCE I am about to leave America and cannot expect to return for some time, let me set down briefly some of the impressions I shall take away with me, after a visit of nearly three years.

One of the first was perhaps an obvious one, but it was strong and it persists. The abundance of musical activities in this country cannot surely have been equalled within the memory of any European musician. Although it is unfair to compare conditions here with those of Europe in recent years, I am sure there never was so much music-making even in Imperial Vienna as there is here now. The number of concerts and concert-goers in this country is prodigious. (I am not now considering the value of these activities, about which opinions may differ.)

Apart from the rather conservative treatment of opera, there is no field neglected. Programs are usually pretty catholic in make-up, and they also show general signs of improvement. For my taste, there is still too great an insistence on the nineteenth century in the orchestral repertory, but that is to be expected and will probably continue, since people who go to hear a symphony orchestra usually like to hear everyone playing all the time, and most music before Beethoven was written for fewer players.

The standard of performance generally is very high, particularly that of the symphony orchestra, which has become to the twentieth century what the virtuoso singer was to the eighteenth. In skill and quality of sound, as is now universally recognized, the great American orchestras have no superior.

The general encouragement given to living composers, old and young is remarkable. I still maintain that, compared with their contemporaries in Europe during the years that I have been around, composers here have very rosy opportunities, what with commissions, prizes, performances as well as the work in the commercial fields of radio, film and theatre. I do not say that this has always been the case or that the composer's lot is now

a perfectly happy one. But even during the last three years, I seem to have noticed an increase of general interest in contemporary music. Owing perhaps to the radio-education of the public, audiences begin to prefer less hackneyed pieces – an interest not always so well catered to as it has been by one great Midwestern orchestra which, in response to public demand, played the *Mathis der Maler* suite ten times on tour.

How much this interest in music is founded on genuine taste and knowledge, and how much on the desire to be au courant, to hear the latest thing, it is hard to say. One of the most serious dangers to the future of American music seems to me to lie in the crop of interpreters, commentators, explainers and synthesizers, who make such comfortable livings telling the public that music is really very simple and easy to understand and available to anyone who absorbs this or that easy approach. (Whereas any honest musical craftsman can tell you it is not. Like any other art, the true understanding of music requires great labor and patient concentration, as well as a good deal of humility.) Those who sell music as if it were a kind of breakfast-food merely function as part of the big business machine which runs so much of the music in this country, and on whose future development the future relation between music-producers and consumers depends. What will happen, for instance, if the public gets tired of this particular kind of cereal?

Three years ago, it seemed to me that a self-conscious wave of musical nationalism was sweeping this country, and I was sorry to see it. Perhaps I am wrong, but I think that in the last year this has started to recede. If so, it is good, as now, more than ever, nationalism is an anachronistic irrelevance.

What will happen to music in this exhilarating country in the next few years? I myself would like to see it much more decentralized, and the scene dominated by vital young artists who are concentrating more on music rather than on personalities. I should like also to see more small groups of players, on the lines of the dance bands, so that people may learn that a hundred players are not essential to every orchestral concert. Perhaps opera will be financially successful away from the Met. Perhaps by the time I return to America, the successor to *Das Lied von der Erde* and the *Symphonie des psaumes* will have been written by an American. Scope, spirit, enthusiasm, skill – in America the stage is all set.