

BARTOK'S NEW KOUSSEVITZKY NUMBER

THE Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra*, commissioned by The Koussevitzky Foundation in 1943, was introduced to the public this last December and already promises to become one of Koussevitzky's better war-horses. This "symphony-like-orchestral work," as Bartok refers to it, is relatively long, though by no means diffuse, composed in five movements, and in the composer's least aggressive manner. The three middle movements contain some of the most expressive and ingratiating tunes heard in these parts for some time, and the overall scoring seems fine and unusual. I liked especially the second, a kind of scherzo concertante, where the trick of pairing wind instruments in succession (bassoons in major sixths, oboes in minor thirds, flutes in perfect fourths, and trumpets in major seconds) comes off very well indeed. The elegy is an intense Magyar lament, very queerly but effectively orchestrated and possessing some remarkably beautiful piccolo solo passages. The intermezzo could easily become my favorite night music with its charming folk song beginning and its broad slapstick parody of Shostakovich. The first and last movements seem somewhat sectionalized and shortwinded.

Koussevitzky also introduced Arthur Lourié's *Symphonic Suite* from his opera ballet *The Feast During the Plague*. It is supposed to be smart to speak condescendingly of this sometime Stravinskian music. True, the harmonic interest is not always sustained, the orchestration is often artificial and tentative, and the choral writing (composed in what Lourié half-facetiously describes as immovable counterpoint) needlessly difficult. And yet the music reveals a seriousness, an integrity, that is altogether admirable. Why it should possess such individuality is a mystery for the best passages seemed to be those in which the influence of Stravinsky was most apparent, as in the beautiful song of Mary or in the celestial finale, which also brought to mind the last big aria that Penelope sings in Monteverdi's opera, *The Return of Ulysses*.

During Mitropoulos' fortnight stay, we heard performances of Morton Gould's *Spirituals for string choir and orchestra* and Ernst Krenek's *Variations on a North Carolina Folk Song*, "I Wonder as I Wander," Opus 94. The Gould piece was slickly performed; but the movements are pretty much of a muchness, since the declamatory style tends to be-

come tedious and the texture is lacking in variety. The audience thoroughly enjoyed the movement called *A Little Bit of Sin*, which is the very best of Cresta Blanca-Copland *brut*.

The Krenek *Variations* are solid stuff. My own preference is for the more sustained diatonic passages, especially in the fine lyrical sixth variation. However, the reiterated rhythmic transformations of motives from the tune tend to sound like vulgar distortions; I suspect that the beautiful folk song has too much individuality to be regarded as ideal raw material for the kind of cantus firmus treatment which Krenek employs. There is no question here of technical mastery, for as constructivist music (call it organic if you like) it is a *tour de force*. "I admire it," Nadia Boulanger used to say, "but it does not inspire me with love."

At a previous concert we heard Ernst Toch's eclectic but charming piece for student orchestra, *Pinocchio, a Merry Overture*, and we were also fed a liberal dose of Ernest Bloch's eroticism in the *Suite for Viola and Orchestra*. Primrose, Koussevitzky, and the orchestra joined hands in a performance which raised goose bumps on the flesh of nearly everyone and had no harmful effects upon the audience saving a slight *mal-de-mer*.

Across the Charles in Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, members of the orchestra conducted by Richard Burgin and assisted by the pianist, Edward Steuermann; the soprano, Norma Farber; and the Speaker, Floyd Worthington, gave a *Festkonzert* in honor of Schönberg's seventieth birthday. The concert was the gift of The Committee to Visit The Music Department of Harvard University, and was free to the public. It began with the *String Quartet Number 2*, Opus 10 (arranged for string orchestra by the composer) and included two performances of the *Ode to Napoleon*. Sandwiched between these was *Verklärte Nacht*, offered as a sop to the public, but even then, only the faithful remained. The *Quartet* is preferable as a quartet, but even in its amplified version it was beautiful, if neurotic music. The *Ode* is exciting melodrama, and if less beautiful, also less neurotic. I cannot agree that Schönberg's treatment of the narrator's part is the final solution of the *Sprechstimme* question. Both strike me as being artificial and, more often than not, unpleasant; but for the kind of sonorities found in *Pierrot Lunaire*, the present treatment of the voice would have been unthinkable. I am not even sure that it is not a poor choice here, since it invites the audience, which strains at every word, to thrust the music completely and irrevocably into the background. When the voice is a genuine musical participant in the proceedings,

there is no such temptation. All of this seemed to me a great pity, since the *Ode* contains some of the most arresting music I have heard in a long time.

Contemporary music, chiefly Prokofiev, is beginning to appear with some regularity on recital programs in this city. Within the period of a few weeks, Horowitz played the *Piano Sonata Number 7*, Borovsky the *Piano Sonata Number 2*, and Szigeti introduced the new violin sonata. Of the trio, I only managed to hear Szigeti. The *Sonata in D Major*, Opus 94, is a pale neo-neo affair, cheerful enough, but very minor and almost amateurish when compared with Stravinsky's wonderfully mellow *Duo Concertant* which appeared on the same program.

The Czech pianist, Rudolf Firkusny, dazzled a pathetically small audience at Jordan Hall with, among other things, a first performance of a *Fantasy and Rondo* by Martinu. This piece should be gotten out as a text book on how to string together a series of introductions to introductions. It must be quite a feat to write several minutes of music without a consequent phrase.

Leonard Bernstein visited the folks at home on two different occasions recently. On his first visit he conducted the symphony orchestra in a hair-raising performance of Shostakovitch's *Fifth Symphony* and on the second he returned with his own *On the Town*. The music, excepting the brash but appropriate show tunes, is fine theatre music, but, for the most part, too serious and too good for the book.

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A CONCERTO RE-INTRODUCES GRUENBERG

JASCHA HEIFETZ with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra gave the world premiere of Louis Gruenberg's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*. It was a gala occasion and high time we heard another work by this composer. The concerto is alive with song, it incorporates folk themes and jazz-born rhythms. Fortunately these native elements were present at the work's conception and not tagged on episodically. The opening *Rhapsodie* has dignity and exquisite simplicity. Melodic technical passages replace the usual itchy fingerboard Olympics. Solo parts grow into tuttis that carry on with the line, never mimicking the soloist; and long violin passages are often saved by imaginative scoring. The so-called cadenza seems to be there because the violin happens to be playing alone; it is followed by a quiet and beautiful recapitulatory sec-