

FORECAST AND REVIEW

NEW YORK, 1940 — THE SEASON OPENS

THE American premiere of Bartok's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion Instruments*, presented by the New Friends of Music, makes one again aware of the high place this man holds in contemporary music. Bartok in no way reflects contemporary European excesses. The Olympian quality of his emotions remains unrelaxed. He is a lone figure, at times a chilling and forbidding one. Yet he is no dweller in an ivory tower, but completely a realist, in vital contact with his own time.

The piece is just about everything one might expect it to be from other recent works of the same period. Bartok's greatest fault still is a tendency to repeat himself. The *Sonata* immediately invites comparison with *Noces* because of the medium used, the predominant interest in rhythmic and sonorous material, the surface texture which is almost metallic, hard to scratch or break, even the quiet, mysteriously upsetting end that compels emotional revaluation of the whole work. There is however, no sophisticated veneer over its primitivism. Neither has it the completely clear sonority nor, for that matter, is it so imposing or so successful a piece as *Noces*.

It is difficult to estimate any recent work of Bartok after one hearing. The points of confusion, usually cleared up later, are those of the form, which is in itself complex and based on rare and difficult material. The exact emotional quality too, since it is pitched continuously at so exalted a level, is elusive, hard to relate to personal experience. Because the sound itself is so striking one receives at first chiefly a sensory impression; the intellectual one is well submerged. Yet these definite conclusions may be stated. The texture and sonority, far from being skeletonized as in the Bartok of several years ago, are here definitely on the thick side; the great concentration of notes in the bass obscures the progressions, creates a muddy sound and tends also to dull the contrasting sections that use the more brilliant upper registers of the piano. On the whole the percussion instru-

ments, especially in the tympani and xylophone parts, successfully point up the sonorities of the piano, though at times they seem slightly applied. The form in general is convincing, the work throughout is distinguished, frequently beautiful and exciting. Especially fine are the tender opening of the slow movement and the entire folk-like last movement, with its astonishing close. Although it has the air of an experiment that does not altogether come off, the *Sonata* is music of nobility, elegance, stoic pride and a virility both primitive and intellectual.

Otherwise there has been little of great interest in the line of new music so far, with the exception of David Diamond's *Concerto for Chamber Orchestra*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue (New York premiere by the Orchestrette Classique). The Philharmonic gave us a few New York firsts, also some music of Ravel. Victor Babin's *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, like the works of other composer-performers, has a tendency toward extreme eclecticism; but since this showed an awareness of contemporary trends in music, it seemed of a good healthy variety. Thus the first movement gave us echoes of Prokofieff and Prokofieff via Shostakovitch, the second and third were quite French, while throughout there was a certain motorized quality of middle-period Hindemith; also a little bit of very pale late Stravinsky. Competently enough orchestrated, the work seemed not too well-conceived in, of all places, the part assigned to the two pianos themselves, which was definitely on the sketchy side for the course of the first two movements. As for expressions of personality, the *Concerto* indicates no advance over Babin's earlier *Three Etudes* for two pianos (sans orchestra this time) presented at the recital of Loesser and Rubinstein. These, if anything, were more successful in projecting individual characteristics, also more competently formed and brilliantly scored. Babin is better off when he doesn't have to worry about what to do with the orchestra. The first piece brought us more motorized rhythm, the second, with its late Stravinsky overtones, was more experimental from the standpoint of sonority, the last was vivacious and thoroughly gay and charming, in a French way of course. At the very least he gives us well-written and attractive-sounding music that helps fill up the large gaps in two-piano repertory.

To get back to the Philharmonic, which offered examples of excellent taste in two works by Ravel, *La Valse* and *Tzigane*. *La Valse* is the brilliant opening to the late Ravel period which so closely parallels that of the late Stravinsky. The Russian's works are pasticcios in point of time, those of

Ravel in point of space. From *La Valse* on, Ravel produced a series of exotica ranging from jazz and African primitivism (very sophisticated) to Old Vienna, with the gypsy and a few others in between. Though no less polished than the works of Stravinsky, they are of an inferior quality, not only because of the obvious inferiority of the source material, but also because what Ravel does is never quite as interesting as what Stravinsky does in his own *recherché* way. The emotion, too, tends to be superficial. For all that, these little works are masterpieces of a sort. *La Valse*, although not a great waltz, is very possibly the greatest piece ever written in waltz form and *Tzigane* does most existing Hungarian rhapsodies just about one better. Ravel may well be considered in time the popular composer of his day; this series of concert works is calculated to please all.

Toch's *Pinocchio, a Merry Overture*, an unpretentious, pleasant work in typical overture style, revealed again that composer's adroitness in form and orchestration; also his usual undistinguished material, tinged with the familiar Chinesey progressions. The amazingly Straussian quality of one of the themes only helped to confirm the impression that the piece, though polished, is already slightly out of date.

At the first program of the New Friends of Music we heard Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* in its original sextet version, and six songs of Ives. It is unfortunate that some less well-known songs were not selected, although the group was well-designed to seem a cross-section of Ives's work for those unfamiliar with it. Four represented the best, two were dangerously near the opposite pole. *The Greatest Man* has an obvious, ordinary coyness and *Two Little Flowers* an equally trite vocal line, backed up by an equally dull accompaniment. Ives proceeds by intuition; this is not always infallible as a guide to good taste. The complex piano parts of many of the songs usually come in for the heaviest criticism, yet it is at his simplest that Ives shows his most banal, sentimental side. The vocal lines are all quite uninventive; the distinction and backbone which they themselves lack are supplied by the piano writing. When he is complex he often evokes moods of tenderness and excitement, as in *Charlie Rutledge* and *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*, one of the most successful examples of his use of complex harmonies. *Ann Street* is a "hit" song, a good one, simply treated. *Evening* is mood-creating and tone-painting of the most delicate order.

No such instinctive musicality was evident in Mark Brunswick's *Sonata for Viola Solo*. That this is an ungrateful medium at best is a cliché but

true, nevertheless, and it is a matter for wonder that a composer of this sort, whose music is largely chromatic and full of Schönbergianisms, should choose for his medium that of the solo instrument, which gives him the least scope for the display of the harmonic progressions so necessary to the success of his music. The slow sections were uniformly flat with their conjunct melodic lines, the fast ones hysterical, the constant sawing back and forth irritating.

After that the Bloch *Piano Quintet* sounded very good indeed. Nevertheless this famous work has unobscurable faults, though they are not too obvious while one is under the spell of its fascination. The basic motives of the piece are plugged almost continuously and undergo practically no change whatsoever during the course of the entire composition. There are no extensions, no contractions, a practically unvarying intervallic structure, and the emotional quality of each motive is so completely defined that no development or change is possible in that direction. The sum total gives an impression of staticity, of a lack of *libre jeu*. At the high point of climaxes we hear something that in no way excites us, because it has been worn thin through steady use. Few will deny the clear construction, the emotional sincerity and passion of this piece, yet it has much unpleasant hysteria: the moaning, sighing, chromatic querulousness, the somewhat applied mysticism, the false Indian color of the last movement.

Recitalists are at last beginning to show interest in the works of contemporaries. Harriet Eells recently gave a program which other members of that conservative coterie might emulate, with samples of late German charm (most unusual) in Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, French charm (to which we are far more used) in Poulenc's gay *La Belle jeuneuse*, Koechlin's undistinguished *Rondel 'L'Air'*, Ravel's tender *Air de l'enfant* from *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, and American (English) charm in three songs of Paul Nordoff. These last showed a very nice talent for song writing with a good sense of vocal line, the first two on the pale side, but the third, *This is the Shape of the Leaf*, very expressive and quite moving. There were also two early songs by Bloch, dramatic and distinguished.

Heifetz at Carnegie Hall presented his own arrangement of two Gershwin *Preludes* and a work by Robert Russell Bennett, *Hexapoda (Five Studies in Jitteroptera)*. These short pieces were polished, charming, and sophisticated. Their cosmopolitan measures were beautifully scored, but then Mr. Bennett's ability at orchestration is well-known. The poor note was sounded by the cute titles of the separate miniatures (*Gut-Bucket Gus*,

Jim Jives). The jazz influence was pretty remote for a good part of the time, and, when present, seemed of a definitely early vintage and somewhat too refined. I liked best the slower numbers with their charming feeling of nostalgia.

Michael Rosenker's violin recital — one-half contemporary music — included a première, Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Sonata-Quasi una Fantasia*, a variegated assortment of left-over impressionisms, chord streams, lush moods, chinoiseries, and "motives," thrown together in a half-baked manner. Its cheapness was emphasized by works that succeeded it, Szymanowski's *Tarantella*, a brilliant concert piece, and *Chant de Roxanne* (an excerpt from the opera *Le Roi Roger*), distinguished by a rich and tender diatonic melody and a peculiarly haunting cadence, which suddenly introduces an unexpected major chord in an exquisite manner. The Stravinsky *Suite*, based on material from *Pulcinella*, is not so interesting as the later *Suite Italienne*, a similar arrangement done in collaboration with Dushkin; yet even this earlier work shows how Stravinsky, instead of making an arrangement or adaptation, invariably creates a new piece. The writing for each of the instruments is superb, the fresh, clear sonority exhilarating. And *Pulcinella* is charming music in any garb.

Donald Fuller

JUNGLES OF BRAZIL

I THINK that perhaps the most effective way to report on the Festival of Brazilian music at the Museum of Modern Art is to compare it with the Mexican program which Chavez directed at the same place last spring. The Brazilian affair was far more imposing — a series of three concerts of chamber music and solos, including one made up entirely of the works of Villa-Lobos. Works by this composer for three horns and trombone, for eight cellos, for harp, celesta, flute, saxophone and women's voices promised much in the way of unusual and seductive instrumental combinations. Nevertheless there was more musical interest in any single piece on the Mexican program than in all the Brazilian programs put together.

What was impressive about the Mexicans was the sureness of approach, the originality, the awareness and fine manipulation of sonorous material. The Brazilians, on the other hand, lack direction; their exoticism is sentimental and extravagant, their feeling for timbre haphazard and of the lush, impressionist school. They appear also to have only one figure who can be considered in the name of art, Villa-Lobos. And it was precisely