

## FIRST-TIME FEVER

HENRY PLEASANTS

**P**UBLIC opinion has made it expedient for the conductors of our American symphony orchestras to include contemporary music in their programs. No one can say they have not done so. But their attitude has been dutiful rather than enthusiastic, and contemporary music has benefited less from such attention than might be expected. Conductors reserve their enthusiasm for the new musical idol—the premiere. Nothing else counts so far as new music is concerned. A first performance used to be a blessing. Nowadays the parenthesis: (*First performance*) could in most cases as well read: (*Last performance*).

This seems to be the destiny of a new work regardless of its reception. A premiere has a certain value as novelty and news, it contributes to the prestige of the conductor and attracts special attention from local and possibly out-of-town critics. At the second performance a composition has only its musical value. Now while a premiere, if successful, builds up the composer's prestige as well as the conductor's, it should also place the work in the general repertory, at least for a season or so. Conductors frequently cry out for new, worth-while music. Why then, when such a work earns a favorable response and press, doesn't every other conductor in the land attempt to repeat that success?

The situation involves composers with and without reputations almost equally. Besides abandoning works in which the public and press have already shown an interest, the conductors also neglect new music by men of such established reputation as to arouse interest in anything they write. The history of certain important works shows how little a composer's reputation helps in the matter of performances. Coming immediately to mind is Roger Session's *Symphony No. 1*. This has not been heard since Alexander Smallens conducted the premiere with the Philadel-

phia Orchestra several seasons ago. It had a poor press—mine was the only favorable notice—and the audience hissed, but Mr. Sessions is obviously a composer whose works should be presented by all the orchestras as a matter of course. Aaron Copland's *Symphonic Ode* and Walter Piston's *Concerto for Orchestra* also belong in this category.

And, to go outside the American field, why do we never hear anything by Dmitri Shostakovich except his *First Symphony*? If that early work deserves all the performances it gets, curiosity alone demands a hearing of what has since been written. Shostakovich is nothing if not prolific. Moscow had the premiere of his *Fifth Symphony* last June. Here certainly is one of the controversial figures in present-day music.

As a reviewer of musical events I know the situation in Philadelphia more thoroughly than elsewhere. Some of the new compositions introduced by Mr. Stokowski and Mr. Ormandy in recent seasons are serviceable examples of general procedure among American orchestras. During the last three years we have had an abundant crop of excellent contemporary music. Mr. Stokowski brought out the first symphony of Tikhon Chrennikov, and Mr. Ormandy gave us the first symphony of Tibor Serly, a charming sinfonietta by Nicolai Berezowsky, the overture to Gian-Carlo Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball* and Kodaly's *Galanta Dances*. They were received with nearly unanimous approval by the public and the press both in Philadelphia and in New York—and not one has been repeated in either city. There may have been isolated performances of the smaller works in other centers, but nothing more.

The most impressive were the Chrennikov and Serly works and they were also the most successful, but neither has ever been played again anywhere in the United States. How reconcile their history with the conductor's familiar lament about the scarcity of anything worth playing? Chrennikov's piece was introduced by Mr. Stokowski in Philadelphia late in 1936 and had an exceptional popular and critical success. Mr. Ormandy took it to New York next spring, where it was even better received. The late W. J. Henderson wrote in *The Sun*: "Without question the most promising work which has come out of Russia in recent

years. This must be said with the music of Shostakovitch still fresh in the memory. Mr. Chrennikov knows the language of the advanced school, but speaks it naturally and straightforwardly. A youth who already has so much to say and who knows so much about how to say it is to be watched." Mr. Sanborn in the *World-Telegram* even ventured to predict that the work would become popular. He was wrong. It has never been played again in the United States.

Serly's symphony has a similar record. Mr. Ormandy introduced it to Philadelphia in January, 1937 to the applause of public and press alike. Samuel L. Laciari wrote in *The Evening Ledger*: "The work shows the composer to have a remarkable talent for composition, and especially for orchestration. The harmonization is partially modern, but the spirit of the work is wholly so," Edwin H. Schloss told his *Record* readers that "the symphony of Tibor Serly was the high spot of the afternoon. It is a work brimming with evidences of a first-class creative talent. The music has individuality and profile. The thematic material is freshly conceived and handled with assurance. The orchestration is in every way admirable." In New York it had an even more enthusiastic reception. Mr. Henderson said: "The score is a compact one. . . . Mr. Serly scores with an assurance which must have been gained through valuable experience, and with sound judgment in the handling of inner voices, so that his orchestral texture is always firm. A *lento* just before the closing page of the first movement is a very effective episode and, indeed, the entire movement discloses the presence of a definite talent." Mr. Downes told the readers of *The Times*: "The clarity of the writing, the cohesion of the thought and the orchestration made an excellent impression. There was noted the effect of a composer with something of his own to say." The symphony was beyond doubt a success. But no other conductor has indicated the smallest desire to play it.

Samuel Barber's case follows the familiar pattern. I am not one of Barber's more ardent admirers, but it is hard to believe that a composition so much discussed as his *Symphony in One Movement* has not been played at least once by every orchestra in the land. At the most it has had a half a dozen performances,

chiefly under the direction of Mr. Rodzinski who introduced it first with the Cleveland Symphony and later with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony and the NBC Orchestra. Barber was born within thirty miles of Philadelphia and was educated at the Curtis Institute, and yet this work finally got around to Philadelphia only in December 1938, nearly two years after its first American performance.

Chalk up likewise the record of Anis Fuleihan. His first symphony, well received at its New York premiere, has not been heard again there or in Philadelphia, and certainly has not been sought after as it should have been. His *Piano Concerto No. 1* earned three or four performances, but it is a work which should have been introduced generally all over the country.

And what of Nicolai Berezowsky's *Sinfonietta*, which was recognized as uncommonly agreeable music at its Philadelphia premiere two seasons ago, but has not been heard from since? A new work by this composer is on the schedule for the season, but a repetition is apparently out of the question.

Bela Bartok's *Saiten Musik* created something less than a panic. Mr. Barbirolli gave the American premiere in New York last season. But it was at that time a year or so old and had already been hailed by a number of responsible critics as the most important new music since *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The New York reception was more respectful than enthusiastic, but every one agreed that here was a distinctive work by a contemporary master. I know of *no* subsequent American performances. Mr. Ormandy, who has expressed the highest opinion of the score, promised it for Philadelphia last season and again this year, but at the time of writing it has not been played. In the meantime, Kodaly's *Galanta Dances* which were thoroughly enjoyed when Mr. Ormandy introduced them in Philadelphia, and, if memory serves, in New York, have been consigned to whatever limbo exists for unappreciated contemporary composers. There have been one or two other American performances, but a new work by the composer of *Hary Janos* and the *Psalmus Hungaricus* should logically be sought by every conductor in the country.

No matter how effective the new music may be, judging by their record the conductors seem to feel that once is enough.