

## HEARD IN NEW YORK

OSCAR THOMPSON

**I**N a year of Schubertiads, the worst of much bad new music was the highly rewarded prize symphony by Kurt Atterberg. Along with those who attend orchestral concerts the world over, we of New York heard \$10,000 worth of vacuity and wondered what the other compositions in this international memorial contest could have been like that such a premium should have been put upon such a trifle.

The wonderment born of these contests found another if very different focal point in the provocative, surprising and yet disappointing *America* of Ernest Bloch, which brought him a more modest \$3,000, indicating that in prize contests the rewards are in an inverse ratio to the merits of the score.

Arturo Toscanini's patriotism led to the espousal of Italian music in the concert halls which paralleled espousals by Mr. Gatti-Casazza in the opera house. Ottorino Respighi and Ildebrando Pizzetti had generous attention in both spheres. Of the operas, *La Campana Sommersa* and *Fra Gherardo*, it must be written that both failed to exert any very compelling interest. In this Italianization of Hauptmann's *Versunkene Glocke*, Respighi wrote fluently and with more reticence than has sometimes marked his orchestral works, but the symbolism of the play made cardboard figures of his characters, and his melodies lacked the salience to win and hold the ear. *Fra Gherardo*, Pizzetti's latest, would have been a weary business but for its superb choruses; the recitative lacks the expressiveness of the musical dialogue in *Pelléas* and the song speech of Wagner.

Respighi's *Festa Romana* proved of a piece with his *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*. The same mastery of sonorities decked out the same full-blooded and sometimes rather popular melodic expression. Pizzetti's *Concert dell' Estate* was a more

patrician score that had similar instrumental and structural skill.

Two more operas, a piano concerto, and two symphonic compositions may be counted among the major novelties, even if only as major failures. About the most that can be said for the *Egyptian Helen* is that it has what is taken for granted in any Strauss work, a beautifully constructed score—one which, indeed, is only equalled by its emptiness of anything approaching inspiration or freshness of melodic ideas. *Jonny Spielt Auf* was not quite a failure, but Ernst Krenek wrote for his operatic travesty some of the most inconsequential music that ever sailed under false colors. To style *Jonny* either a jazz opera or “modern music” is to flatter it inordinately.

The authentic jazz touch gave a measure of street vitality to George Gershwin's *American in Paris*, but as a work for symphonic performance this was very second-rate music. An *American in Paris* is nearer in spirit to *A Rhapsody in Blue* than it is to the Gershwin *Piano Concerto* and never very far from musical comedy. But if we had to choose, we would prefer *An American in Paris* to such triviality as the *Suite* extracted from Lord Berners' *Triumph of Neptune*, the insipidity of Strauss' *Liederkrantz*, *Tageszeiten*, and the dreary wastes of a concert arrangement of parts of Alexander Tansman's opera, *La Nuit Kurde*.

The piano concerto mentioned as among the prosilient works of the year was that of Ernest Toch, his opus 54. *Rondo Disturbato* was the designation given the last movement. This proved something of a Concerto Disturbato, possessing a pile-driving vitality, the propulsiveness of a highly energized machine. But when, in its *Adagio*, it attempted to be tender it disclosed a lack of those inwards that always have and always will distinguish the work of real inspiration from the work of smart showmanship. Played as the Boston Symphony played it, this is an exciting concerto—just now. But it is ringmaster music.

Perhaps no sharper contrast could have been presented than that between the Toch *Concerto*, which plowed ahead along the paths Igor Stravinsky apparently has renounced, and Stravinsky's own *Apollon Musagète*, the ballet he wrote for Mrs. Coolidge's Library of Congress Festival. *Apollon* sounded pretty frail and

inconsequential when heard in Washington. The Boston Symphony strings made of it another work when Serge Koussevitzky presented it in New York. This *Apollon* has atmosphere and is filled with lovely string sonorities. Stravinsky has here recaptured the spirit of eighteenth century Versailles, though eighteenth century Versailles heard many finer melodies than his.

The visit of Arthur Honegger altered no horizons. His *Rugby* turned out to be a lesser *Pacific 231*, his *Sonatina* for piano and orchestra a work as inconsequential as it was characteristic of the influence of American jazz upon Europeans. Of the Honegger music played at a special Pro Musica concert devoted entirely to his compositions, this commentator's memory refuses to yield the slightest recollection two months after the event, save that the *Partita for Two Pianos* suggested a beginner's four-hand study taken at half speed, perhaps with secret purpose to be humorous.

Reviewing and summarizing the various other orchestral "first times" between October and April is not now a highly stimulating task. At the opening of the season there was a *First Symphony* by Bernard Wagenaar, a little unusual in form, mildly reminiscent of many men, and not largely burdened with ideas. One sighs for ditto marks to describe most of the novelties that followed. Emerson Whithorne's *Fata Morgana* is now a vague recollection of a similar category. Lyof Knipper's *Märchen eines Gyps-Gottes* was another of those mandarinistic splurges that all the little Stravinskys and Prokofieffs write when they take to marching. Something like it arrived with the Cleveland Orchestra in the form of an *Oriental March* by Joseph Schillinger. We wouldn't know today which was which.

Simon Bucharoff came into our ken with two tone-poems, *Reflections in the Water* and *Drunk*, plus a ballet scene from an opera, *Sakahra*, all well written, but pale in the company of Kodaly's biting *Hary Janos* suite, and that, at best, is music of cleverness and high spirits. The roll of agreeable but undistinguished music proceeds with the *Hebrew Suite* of Nicolai Berezhowsky, the *Chanticleer* overture of Daniel Gregory Mason, the *Rhapsodia Catalonia* of Gaspar Cassado, the *Danses Africaines* of Villa-Lobos, *Hercule et les Centaures* of Yves de la Casinière, and the *Prelude, Fanfare and Fugue* of Tommasini.

One of the most depressing concerts of the season was that which brought forth three new American works in a row, depressing not so much because these works were new, or American, or without their good points in workmanship, but because they came at the end of a season filled with so many others like them. Mr. Sandor Harmati's *Prelude to a Drama* was neatly wrought, but too long for its material. Mr. Wallingford Riegger's *Study in Sonority* was just that, a study, and its merits were essentially technical. Mr. Jacobi's *Indian Dances* would have fared better in other company. As Indian dances go, these were good ones, but it is not so easy now as it once was to have an open mind—much less a keen expectancy—where American Indian music is concerned.

And now the reviewer is compelled to confess his utter defeat. Before him are the programs of concerts by the League of Composers, Pro Musica and the Messrs. Copland and Sessions. Nothing could be more unfair than to lump all this music. And yet the circumstance that it has become in his memory largely a jumble of titles and of names of composers, is not without significance. At the League's first concert, Paul Hindemith's *Die Junge Magd* had a measure of not very spontaneous loveliness, admixed with the already out-dated post-war morbidity. Lazare Saminsky's *Litanies of Women* attained what can be described as a respectable level of poetic expressiveness. Whithorne's *Quintet* for piano and strings was of sound workmanship.

The League's second concert brought out some music that was more individual, if no more momentous. A *Piano Sonata* by Karol Rathaus and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Dances of King David* profited by the superb art of Walter Gieseking. The *Sonata*, as played, had a cumulative vigor, but it seemed to this listener one of the hardest, most unyielding and most unfeeling examples of mere effect-building the year produced, while the *King David* dances were anything but personal. Aaron Copland's *Vitebsk*, built upon a Hebrew melody used in *The Dybbuk*, made harsh music of a tune that might have been treated more affectionately, though it was not one of the most ingratiating of its kind. The composition had more of genuine feeling, however, than its companion pieces.



Pro Musica, early in the season, brought to hearing a *String Quartet* by Krenek that had structural and harmonic interest, though in its entirety it seemed long, labored and ugly. At the same concert Carlos Salzedo's *Pentacle* for two harps was disclosed as a mine of special effects for the exploited instrument. Bernard Rogers' *Pastoral* was the most acceptable new music of a later Pro Musica program, possessing, as it did, a certain sensitiveness quite generally divorced from the music of the day, though it was over-long for its material. John Beach's setting of *Angelo's Letter* was mildly diverting and that only because of its text.

There remain the Copland-Sessions concerts. With respect to most of the works performed, amnesia again must be pleaded. It is possible to recall, however, the effrontery of a burlesque *String Quartet* by George Antheil (his second), the admirable string writing of Henry Cowell in his neatly turned *Paragraphs*, and the monotonous nonsense of Virgil Thomson's plain-chant setting of Gertrude Stein's *Capital, Capitals*.

After all this, it was one of the major pleasures of the season to hear the Prague Teachers' Chorus sing their so-called vocal symphony, *Zborov*, by Otakar Jeremias, a Czech composer otherwise unknown to us. *Zborov*, commemorating a struggle in the World War, is music grim, austere, at times gnarled, its harmonies prevailingly dark and even uncouth, its melodic line halting and shifting and adapting itself primarily to the demands of the text. But this is not the music of satiety, of insolence, of satire; it plows deep.