

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

## VARIATIONS AND THE SEASON'S NEW MUSIC

WHEN a chronicler turns first to "variations" in recording the new music of any span of concerts, the indications are that the period has not been productive. Schumann's "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!" was provoked, it is true, by Chopin's skill in varying Mozart's *La ci darem*, and the world is far from ready to consign the Brahms' *Variations on a Theme of Haydn* to the large dust heap which is popularly supposed to be exclusively reserved for works composed in this form. Nor is it necessary to point out that Beethoven and Bach wrote music in kind that escaped oblivion.

Perhaps the reason for the decline in favor of variations is the growth of other development forms which have made of it a far less imperative device for the composer who had to do something more than present a melody or erect an edifice in counterpoint. In the hands of lesser men, variations have seemed the most rudimentary way of speaking at length; while fully equipped technicians have made the form equally burdensome as a praxis for the display of their command of resource. Only rarely has there been a set of variations emotionally and programmatically expressive, like the Strauss *Don Quixote*, or D'Indy's *Istar*. The growing tendency to regard works labeled *Variations* as primarily technical showpieces, particularly with respect to coloristic orchestration, undoubtedly reflects the experience of audiences over a considerable period.

The first half of the present season brought two scintillant examples of the parade of skill on which this prejudice is in some measure founded. These were the *Variations* by the Italian, Tommasini, after Paganini, and those by the German, Busch, on a theme by Mozart. There is no escaping the conclusion that

in both instances the composer had done little but gratify himself, shown the world that he, too, had come into possession of all the tricks of the bag. He had applied the common store of contemporary technic, utilizing much, adding nothing.

But what of the Schönberg *Variations* which had the distinction of being hissed in Carnegie Hall? It is impossible to consider them with the *Variations* by Tommasini or Busch, so utterly different their idiom, so completely divergent their scheme, so alien and antithetical their personality and their feeling. They are hard nuts to crack; whereas Tommasini and Busch propounded no problem save that of their reason for being at all. What, in essence, are the problems of this labyrinth of cancrizans and multifarious devices by which Schönberg has made an astounding series of "cross-tone puzzles?" Are they not as purely technical as any work which concerns itself with mere orchestral diversity? Perhaps no composition that has come from the pen of the enigmatic Austrian has seemed more essentially cerebral, more deliberately mathematical, more informed of the calculating spirit of geometry. Why anyone should hiss an art work so amazingly wrought is a puzzle; but it may well be that such importance as this art now possesses is due to a misunderstanding of its significance, which is primarily that of a technical tour-de-force.

Misunderstood in quite another manner has been the significance of *Bolero*, the unquestioned sensation of the orchestral season, a work so close in its technical principle to the variation form—though its actual working out may seem the direct opposite—that it may with rough justice be grouped with the season's variational adventurings. In repeating for twenty minutes a single theme above a changeless accompaniment, without development or modulation until the explosive close, but with a continually shifting use of timbres to vary the theme in a coloristic way, Ravel wrote a work primarily sensational, and, one fears, as primarily cheap. He wrote it with consummate mastery and he disguised its cheapness by the gorgeous colors of his virtuoso palette. But he created his furore by the obvious stratagem of rhythmic irritation, in much the same manner as the jazzists, and it cannot be said that his pseudo-Spanish thematic material was notably better than theirs.

Schönberg may be hissed but he does not prompt hilarity as did Anton von Webern, Schönberg's disciple, when his vest-pocket *Symphony for Chamber Orchestra*, composed especially for the League of Composers, was presented for the first time at that group's December concert. But whether von Webern intended his fragmentary utterances humorously, or as the perfectly serious series of patterns in unusual timbres that this listener took them to be, it is not to be recorded that they cut any very positive furrow in the recollections of those who heard them. On the same program, Goossens' *Concertino*, for a double string orchestra, proved a brisk and highly vitalized work, if not one of strong individuality. In Paul Hindemith's *Concerto for Organ and Chamber Music*, once more ingenuity outran inspiration, with the result that structural mastery and an unbounded contrapuntal energy produced more that was drab than brilliant, and much that suggested straining to avoid the obvious.

Of other novelties imported from abroad, little need be said. No English composer has given us a more pointless and vapid mustering of the choral and orchestral devices of the musical everyman than was found in the *Pastoral* of Arthur Bliss, *Lie Strewn the White Flocks*, for chorus, flute, drums and orchestra, introduced by the Schola Cantorum. At least interesting to the point of compelling attention was the chorus called *Rasga o Coracao*, by Hector Villa-Lobos, heard on this same program. Though the long orchestral introduction suggested a diligent piecing together of imitative fragments, the vocal part had a peculiar color which we may assume is the synthesis of Portuguese, African and Indian elements; yet for one pair of unregenerate ears the rhythm and spirit were not un-suggestive of a North American college yell.

Music for the Theremin machine being still in its infancy, too much was not to be expected of the *Suite* which Joseph Schillinger wrote for this profoundly disturbing intruder in our symphonic midst. As a suite, this yielded every sign of being music conventional, modest and agreeable, but with its sonorities multiplied by nine thousand it possessed climaxes undreamt of by Strauss in *Heldenleben* or Stravinsky in *Le Sacre*. Less terrifying were the results when Mr. Stokowski adapted the machine to

reinforce the bass of a Bach transcription, though it is not inconceivable that an organ would have served him quite as well.

Of new works introduced to New York by the Boston Symphony, the *Second Symphony* of Arnold Bax seemed so good that the pity was it was not better. In spite of the composer's use of the cyclic form, the symphony sounded episodic, each of the movements taking on the nature of a dramatic tone-poem. The salon music which Serge Prokofiev and Alexandre Tansman played in their respective recitals rippled no new waters; Mendelssohn would not have objected to most of it.

New American compositions of consequence have been less numerous, but at least two, Louis Gruenberg's *Enchanted Isle* and Werner Janssen's *New Year's Eve in New York* possessed a skill of facture by no means secondary to that of the importations. It was possible, indeed, to prefer Janssen's rowdy jazz to the equally hard-boiled overture to a *Don Quixote* by the Frenchman, Jean Rivier, which appeared on the same program of the Cleveland Orchestra. The American succeeded manfully in portraying hilarity unconfined; Rivier only contrived to be cynical and imitative. The Gruenberg symphonic poem was confessedly a revision of an early work by the composer of the *Daniel Jazz*, and one of unabashed romanticism. It came to the ear fresh in spirit and rich in color, if rather obviously derivative and lacking in any very positive goal—an instance of *dolce far niente*, the dreaming of a youth.

Skill and brevity were noted in the *Sinfonietta* of Bernard Wagenaar, but its irony was haunted, like so many other examples in kind, by the ghost of poor *Petrouchka*. A revision by Deems Taylor of his *Jurgen*, to shorten and tighten it, left that symphonic poem substantially where it was. And that, it would appear, is where the array of novelties of the first half of the season has left New York's music.

Oscar Thompson

### STRAVINSKY'S "CAPRICCIO"

THE opening of the Paris season was marked by two events of unequal importance. First was the premiere, December 6th, of Stravinsky's new piano concerto, a work in which more clearly