

G. I. LETTER FROM LONDON

London – October, 1944

TO the Editor:

Sheltered by the good will generally extended servicemen these days, I'm presuming to write you a letter from England, strictly from the G.I., or worm's eye, point of view, since I am a composer quite unattached to any special service unit or army band. The occasion is a weekend spent in London after a few months in the provinces. My observations are obviously restricted by off-duty hours and accessibility, but I have gotten around.

In general the hot-house seems to flourish, while the fields lie fallow. London's musical activity is bewildering in its profusion – elsewhere things are pretty dead. There is not much music making of a spontaneous sort either. I've come to share the trite opinion that the English are unmusical. The temperament from which music springs is a little too impolite for people who have not yet come all out from under the Victorian umbrella. Children and young people don't seem to sing aloud of their own accord, even at home, or if they do, it's more apt to be *Mairzy Doats*. However concerts and recitals are a fetish; when they can be afforded, the high priests are called in from London, when they can't the local priests do their best to give a good imitation. Always there is the feeling that the performers are actors trying to play the part of musicians. There is a general lack of flair.

The concerts as a whole adhere to the standard of Bach, Beethoven, Elgar, Handel, Mendelssohn. This is relentlessly the case, with only a very small margin of space for curiosity and adventure.

There is of course some concern with new music and ideas here. But I get the impression of the hot-house from the fact that at the three musical events I attended during my brief London visit, the audience was always substantially the same – the same groups, even the same individuals.

At a trio concert, one of a chamber series, I heard a piece for violin, viola and cello by Lennox Berkeley which I found synthetic, except for the third movement, a meditative one that did make a direct musical impression, although its harmonic idiom bows deeply to Bartok (without however showing his rhythmic energy) and tips its hat to Harris.

More interesting are the performances of experimental music sponsored by a Committee for the Promotion of New Music, whose honorary

president is Dr. Vaughan Williams, with the organization of the programs actually in the hands of Mr. Francis Chagrin. I arrived one night too late to hear any of the music, but I stayed for the post-mortems which were interesting more as evidence of the existence of an interested group than as constructive criticism for the benefit of the composer.

Among other works, I heard two cantatas, on different programs; one was by Christoph Bernhard, the contemporary of Purcell, performed at Morley College where Michael Tippett is the moving spirit, and the other, the spirit having evidently moved him, was by Mr. Tippett himself. The Bernhard cantata was for contralto, strings and continuo, to the words "Why art thou troubled O my soul", and was most lovely, far surpassing the Bach work for similar combination both in sheer beauty of sound and mastery of vocal writing.

The work by Tippett entitled *Boyhood's End* was for tenor and piano, very well sung by Peter Pears and expertly accompanied by Benjamin Britten. Judging by this piece Tippett belongs to the English strain that includes Yeats, Eliot (by adoption) Warlock (Heseltine), Holst, — the eerie-ecstatic-mystic-unwordly strain. The work is interesting and I liked it, but in review it troubled me. The combination of the voice with piano was very well handled, the piano writing was very good piano, without being obtrusive; and the vocal writing was very good voice but not good word-setting. There's a real singing part, making free and unabashed use of the voice, but I appreciate the difficulty of getting the words intelligible where the vocal line is in itself so expressive. Although Tippett has written an interesting piece of music he hasn't solved the problem of using this kind of poetry in conjunction with music.

It is curious how audiences at such concerts resemble each other the world over. Looking about at Wigmore Hall one night, I could easily think myself at the Museum of Modern Art in New York or at the Lyceum Theatre in Shanghai. To be in such a place is to forget the war for a moment, to remember that despite the upheaval of these times there are satisfactions of the spirit and the mind that can still be shared.

Jacob Avshalomoff