

CZECH AND OTHER NOVELTIES IN PRAGUE

C ONTEMPORARY music was treated in an extraordinary fashion in Prague this season. The theatrical directors and concert organizers had promised so much that a splendid development of music here seemed assured. But what did actually take place has been greatly disappointing, especially in the opera. The German Theatre, for example, presented none of the novelties it had announced, contenting itself with re-stagings of established works. However, the audiences have warmly received all new works, so the apologetic phrase about the gap between modern music and its hearers is not true here. Neither can poor financial returns from new music be advanced as an excuse, for there have been few box office successes among the substituted revues and operettas.

On the Czech stage, things are brighter, for there modern works have been used to round out programs. At the beginning of the season there was the premiere of Bohuslav Martinu's *Spalicek*, which the composer calls a "song ballet in three acts and ten pictures." The emphasis is on "ballet" for the stage events are expressed only by the dance, while groups of voices, a women's chorus and three soloists—soprano, tenor and bass—are placed in the orchestra. They accompany, explain, and enhance the dramatic presentation, which is made up of fairy tales, ballads, children's games and legends. The music is naturally appropriate to the simple material, without however renouncing its claim to art. Martinu is a captivating master of rhythm. His

dance pieces gain national character from the use of Czech folk melodies. The polytonality, the marked time changes, the polyrhythms, and the combination of the instruments with the piano, make this score noteworthy. The songs have tonal richness; in the remarkable a capella of the women's chorus, in the soloists' songs and recitatives, and in the antiphony of chorus and solos. But Martinu's personality does not stand out, his work is a composite of Bohemian folk music, the early Stravinsky and French impressionism. The orchestra is large and effectively used, but the score is not complicated. This dance opera may be called the most racially characteristic work of the composer.

The Czech premiere of Jaroslav Kricka's three-act comic opera, *Spuk im Schloss*, came tardily to Prague, for it had already been presented on the local German stage and in foreign countries. The performance, under the musical direction of Milan Zuna, with excellent soloists and amusing scenery, clearly revealed how this kind of opera has lost its effect. The libretto is a modernized and slavized version of Oscar Wilde's novel. It makes interesting reading, with its variety, parody and many jests, but everything is too broadly handled for the stage and the points do not strike home in song. It is significant that Kricka's music already sounds out-of-date, despite its many ingenious conceptions. The use of jazz for the American scenes and native music for the joyful Bohemian peasants, of percussion in cabaret style and light cantilenas for the love scenes—these facile antitheses are too painful to discuss.

On the concert programs, there is more contemporary music, for here there are fewer difficulties. Czechoslovakian concert life has felt the influence of Joseph Suk's sixtieth birthday, celebrated at the beginning of last January. This reverence for a recognized man obviously accounts for the diminished demands on the younger generation. The latter find expression only in the concerts of the society, Gegenwart, whose name indicates its purpose and its goal. A new figure is Mieczyslaw Kolinski, born in Warsaw, 1901, who made his debut with a sonata for violin on a Russian folksong theme. The piano part is of virtuoso proportions, and because of its great demands on the performer, really abandons the functions of accompaniment. So far as style

and form are concerned, the work is labored, revealing a seeker who has not yet found the right road. Of the *Three Pieces* for violin and piano by Lopatnikoff, opus 17, the most successful is the slow movement, the canzonetta. The title of Prokofieff's *Five Melodies*, opus 35, reveals the nature of their development. Everything is approached in cantabile, everything based on refinement, with a delicate flageolet and a nicely led melody that never becomes sentimental.

In the same society the disciples of Alois Haba presented their apprentice works. Ernst Strizek's *Piano Suite for Four Hands*, 1933, was notable for its rich play of color. The contrast between the dull bass dissonances and the shrill, tinkling chords in the festive largo was especially pleasing. The *Small Suite for Violin and Piano*, 1933, by Joseph Zavadil is a grateful work for the solo instrument. The magic of a modern cantabile unfolds in the adagio, and the dazzling violin figures in the allegro vivace make a real bravura piece. Vasil Bozinov's *Piano Sonata*, 1933, reveals an individual, completely personal speech. In his sonata for violin, Karl Reiner has undertaken an external formal development of five phrases. The conception is not very convincing, it is aphoristically constructed, seldom carries its thought through logically. So far as form is concerned, the most complete work was Georg Srnka's *Fantasie for Piano*, deriving its tonal effects from impressionism, but using its materials rhythmically in a crisper, and, harmonically, more thorough manner.

The concert series of the German Chamber Music Society has proved to be of the greatest importance because its leader, Gustav Becking, Ordinarius for Musical Science in the German University, is a powerful promoter of the modern. He had the happy idea of preceding the otherwise classical romantic series of the society with an evening of contemporary works. The Kolisch Quartet gave the *String Quartet*, opus 4, by Toch; Bartok's *String Quartet*, No. 3; and the *Five Movements for String Quartet*, opus 5, by Anton Webern. Then the Prague Quartet gave Martinu's *String Quartet* No. 2, striking for its rhythmic strength and Arnold Schönberg's *String Quartet*, opus 10, with its wonderful interpretation of Stefan George's verse. There was also the premiere of Kolinski's *String Quartet*, 1933, a four movement

work whose finale-allegretto has an individual rhythmic and tonal atmosphere created by exotic elements. Finally the Goldberg - Hindemith - Feuermann Society presented Hindemith's *String Quartet*, 1933, a representative piece, beautiful in the lyricism of its slow phrases.

Among the directors of the large orchestras who have on the whole avoided experiments, the exceptions are quickly enumerated. Vaclav Talich, head of the Czech Philharmonic, introduced Roussel's *Sinfonie No. 3*, opus 42. Nikolai Malke, the Russian, sponsored Prokofieff's orchestral suite, *Portraits*. The subject is a gallery of musical descriptions of characters in a song-play. The first concert of the German Theatre included the premiere of Hindemith's "Boston" *Symphony* a work magnificent in its rhythmic vitality, its mighty wind chords and the plan of the second part, where the hurried fugal thematics is contrasted with a slow incidental movement.

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