

music. In the brief list of present-day music the only record we can refer to with enthusiasm is Bartok's *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet and piano (Columbia). This is certainly one of that composer's important works — three concise movements of sharp and highly percussive music. At the same time it presents for this listener the typical contradictory qualities found in most of Bartok. He is extremely interested in the sensuous quality of his music. His search after the most refined, highly individual timbres inevitably succeeds. His form is ingenious and perfect as a bird-cage made by a Chinese craftsman. And yet, in this work, there is something for me strangely unsatisfying. It seems keyed at too high a pitch; there is too much tension, and, as the rhythmic energy is nervous rather than physical, so is the sensuous quality a purely intellectual one. We are in a remote, abstract world, where warmth and humanity are strangely wanting. I think that such complete control of one's medium defeats its own ends. In *Contrasts* we can admire much, but are baffled rather than moved after hearing it. Of course I make this statement only in relation to my own feelings

about music as something far more hedonistic and relaxed if it is to give pleasure. Nevertheless, this recording is definitely an important addition to the library of contemporary music. It is to be hoped that it is only the first release which will give us Bartok's later work.

After this highly organized and brittle music the *Romance* for orchestra by Sibelius (Victor), sounds incredibly banal and vulgar. There seems to be little one can do about the Sibelius situation except to keep reiterating that his music is false and bombastic, with a popular and reactionary appeal which becomes more and more dangerous. Victor also gives us *Belshazzar's Feast* by the same composer, an orchestral suite of four pieces of incidental music to a play of that name. Gentle Orientalism à la *Peer Gynt* characterizes this innocuous music which can contribute nothing, even to the most ardent Sibelius fan. Nor, unfortunately, is the Victor album of re-pressings of two orchestral works by Fabini, *The Country*, and *Isle of the Ceibos*, a more welcome advent. This is simply inflated, familiar "symphonic" music which could just as well have been written in California as in Uruguay.

IN THE THEATRE

By SAMUEL L. M. BARLOW

A NEW member of the Académie Française pursues a classic ritual: he eulogizes his predecessor, dusts off the chair with a reverence approaching necrophilia, and sits down to enjoy immortality. So it seems proper that in my first review I should begin with a bow to Virgil Thomson who has recently done

what he would call a pretty thing but what I would call momentous. He has opened a whole new field to music criticism; not that the field was forbidden, — it had of course been staked and plowed in MODERN MUSIC, — but the newspaper critics had never jumped the fence. I know of no other critic on one of our

large dailies who has ever before given serious attention to theatre-music. And as some of the best American music is being written for the theatre and not for the concert hall, this praise of Thomson is also the back of my hand to the other gentlemen of the press.

Many a play on Broadway has thirty or forty minutes of incidental music, all laboriously run up by a carefully chosen composer. Such music, at least in length, is as considerable as a concerto or short symphony. It is the kind of work that attracts the best composers, because it is the only kind that pays properly, because there is reasonable hope of more than one performance, and because it allows of experiments alien to Carnegie Hall and generally congenial to the modern temperament. The tradition is an honorable one as all the *Overtures* prove. Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Grieg, Debussy – I can think of few composers, in fact, who have *not* written incidental music. And the negligence (or perhaps it is diffidence) which has kept our music critics away from the door of the theatre is as deplorable for the critic as for the composer.

The pole with which Thomson vaulted into this neglected pasture was *Twelfth Night*. Paul Bowles wrote the music; and, as with everything he has done for Broadway, it is skillfully scored, fresh and apt. His theatre-music always has enough profile to make one want to listen to it and yet enough discretion not to make one have to listen to it. In this case, he has taken Elizabethan songs and made them his own without robbing Shakespeare. The originality of the play lies in Malvolio (much of the rest being warmed-over *Apolonius and Silla*); and, with understanding and wit, Bowles has

given to his score just the right Malvolious humors, Illyrian charms, and cross-gartered foolishness.

Another play of Shakespeare, *King Lear*, was put on at the Studio Theatre of the Dramatic Workshop of the New School. The production was directed by Erwin Piscator, who left the Volksbühne Theatre in 1928 to flounder into obscurity. Like Reinhardt and Charrel, he grew to prominence under the dual influences of post-war German bad taste and second-hand Moscow, with some Gordon Craig thrown in. It is good, in these days, to welcome him here, but it is quite another thing to expect that he has anything new or valuable to teach. On the contrary, he could learn a great deal from several of our directors. His first effort was uncertain; and it is no wonder that Henry Cowell's score suffered from the prevailing gloom. He was called upon, chiefly, for sound-effects – and the results were neither better nor worse than the effects he was supposed to illustrate. Erford Gage and Frank Daly, as Edgar and as the King of France, gave fresh, natural, rounded performances. Everything else, including Mr. Cowell's triads, was suffused with murk.

A new experimental theatre was opened last month: the Brander Matthews Hall Stage, at Columbia. The proscenium is too low for proper experimentation – there is no room for that fourth-dimensional quality which hovers, for example, over the best of Orson Welles' work. But the place is admirably equipped and an indispensable part of the drama department. Though there is an orchestra pit, on the opening night (a composite play from *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*) a none too young phonograph with amplifier was employed behind the

scenes. Some chap with an ear picked out the *Heldenleben* records and adapted them to Augustan uses with excellent results. It's good battle-scene music.

There are libel laws, I believe, so I must not say that certain composers seem to compose occasionally in a stupor. (Though I would point out that the Laws of Pittacus assume that faults committed under the influence are double faults: one for the deed and one for the influence.) However, I can go so far as to say that the producers of *It Happens on Ice*, at the Center Theatre, missed an opportunity. Here is a two hour show, gorgeously mounted, of expert skaters moving with incredible grace and some humor to the sounds of a full orchestra. Messrs. Duke and de Rose and Ahlert are credited with "Songs." And there was a touch of *Swan-Lake*, and much borrowing here and there. But the main body of what was, after all, a long ballet-divertissement reposed on a jumble of third-rate music. Probably what happened was that the producers thought they'd put on an Ice-Vaudeville, and so contented themselves with a two-a-day Caliope. Fortunately, the skill of the corps de ballet skaters, the virtuosity of Hedi Stenuf, the humor of the Four Bruises, and the special and inherent grace of skating lifted the show to a height which must have surprised Miss Henie (who produced it). At the same time, this eminence left the show dangling in the air without the benefit of a coherent and worthy musical score to uphold it. There's no doubt that Ice-Ballet is now definitely on the map. Composers take note, please.

Much less unsatisfactory, but still second-class was the score by Vernon Duke for the very successful *Cabin in the Sky*.

There has rarely been a production with such a visible cleavage. Act I of Lynn Root's play is Grade A. The Aronson set, the costumes, the play, the lyrics, the direction, all unite in a malicious and delicious extravaganza, with one foot in Harlem and the other in Heaven. There is style and pace. With Act II, a plague of Grade B-C descends. What was plot becomes vaudeville, what was forthright becomes lascivious, what was style becomes vulgarity. Even so, the sustained magnificence of Ethel Waters and Dooley Wilson carry the evening through. But what is curious and painful is that Mr. Duke's music never touches the fantastic, pitiful and naive qualities that, for the first half, distinguish the play. The play is a proper race-play; a race-conception. What race there is in the music is good old Slav. If you scratch Mr. Dukelsky you certainly won't find an African. Once or twice, as in *Dem Bones*, there is a deviation from the octaroon into the purer strain. There is some good, hot dancing; but it is worthy of notice that the dance which got the most applause was a little shuffle done with an awkward and shy gaiety by Petunia and Little Joe at the opening of Act II. To return to Mr. Duke: my disappointment is after all a compliment, for we all know what excellent work he can do.

I might briefly note some pleasant Welsh songs in Miss Barrymore's play; and the presence on Broadway of an old Viennese comic opera, done, for once, almost to perfection.

In fact — and to sum up a review which has turned out less enthusiastic than I would like — the season's poinsettias go to the *Nozze di Figaro* and Mr. Bowles and Mr. Thomson.