

FORECAST AND REVIEW

NEW YORK CHRONICLE OF NEW MUSIC

Dec. 10. League of Composers:

A clear illustration of the effect a whole program can have upon each of the several works contained in it. At least three of the compositions, heard before, had produced excellent impressions; at the League concert, presented piecemeal and in a large assortment, not one was able to survive, although the performances were quite adequate. Roger Sessions' *Organ Prelude*, for example, was much too short to stand alone; played with two others (the three form a set) it is a bright and solid little piece; now it became simply a sort of squeal from the organ, halted almost before begun. Hindemith's two songs for chorus also suffered from this tidbit mania of the program-makers; the whole *Liederbuch* should have been done. Finally, performing only the *Alleluia* from Petyrek's *Litanei* was little short of criminal. This lovely choral excerpt, hinting at an original and beautiful work, was just that—a hint. As for Saminsky's *Jephtha's Daughter* group and Marion Bauer's *Carol*, the effect was of music well written, the first descriptive and the second serene; I cannot say more, not knowing the full score of either. Music written by present-day composers, couched in not immediately perceptible idioms, already presents difficulties enough in communicating itself to an audience even under the best circumstances. To perform eight composers at one concert, exhibiting snatches of each, is to serve up a musical hors d'œuvres.

Dec. 16. Ondes Musicales:

A new invention by Maurice Martenot introduced by Stokowski, recalling inevitably the ether-wave instrument of Theremin. This one is better, an improvement both in sound-quality and in color-variety. It is still not clear why it should be presented as a

solo instrument. As Mr. Henderson pointed out, the sound is very much like a new organ-stop; it is a flat and depersonalized tone, having none of the resilience, fluidity or bite of a woodwind; carrying a solo line through a whole composition, accompanied by a full orchestra, it resembled a puppet among mortals. There is probably a real field for the instrument in combination with others of its kind; in quartet or quintet arrangement, it might very well give us a new instrumental unit, having distinct qualities. But let us hope the music written for it will be something better than the shoddy *Symphonic Poem* by Levidis which M. Martenot played with the Philadelphia Orchestra; the work was pseudo-oriental, pseudo-Scriabinic, pseudo-romantic, pseudo-everything. The Buxtehude *Sarabande*, on the other hand, was magnificent, especially in the section played in the cello register of the electrical instrument. When is Buxtehude's greatness to be made known to us extensively?

Dec. 17. Harry Cumpson's Piano Recital:

The Roy Harris *Piano Sonata* made this memorable. It is a work teeming with vitality and spirit, large in dimension, and deep in meaning. One has the feeling that the form is less successful than the material. Especially is this true in the slow section, where a truly haunting, meditative mood is spoiled by a growing sense that it doesn't quite know where it's going. The first movement is the best—this muscular music, full of a superb long-breathedness, with flashing chords descending in irregular metric intervals to the same bass-chord—this is music which "comes from the right place," in the words of a young composer present at the concert.

Dec. 18. Women's University Glee Club:

Gerald Reynolds is doing something of value with his women's chorus. They sing with a real firmness and accuracy; the tone, while not very resonant, is at once solid and supple, something very rare for female voices. (So often one misses a foundation to the sound; it is cloaked in air like a bad radio.) Under Mr. Reynold's direction the Glee Club has become a sort of happy-hunting-ground for young American composers. Randall Thompson's *Rosemary*, and the three Chaucer poems (for solo

voice) by Robert Russell Bennett were the best things of the December 18th program. The first is sheer virtuoso writing for chorus; it has amazing variety in style, phrasing, attack, in the manner of announcement and rejoinder; it has brilliance and cunning in the part-writing; it shows everywhere a remarkable flair for the medium. As music it is pleasantly lyrical, by no means startling, and quite adapted to the charming verses of S. V. Benét. Bennett's Chaucer songs have a certain melancholy, a wild and remote sadness, not unlike the Hebridean folk-tunes, though more definitely *moyen age* in content. I preferred them to his *Lorelei*, a small burlesque cantata. The intention in this work was to be funny, and the music was certainly not very funny. The work is too pretentious to be low-down, and too low-down to be serious. I found Robert Delaney's two choruses rather febrile pieces, weak in material, and written as though for instruments rather than for voices. Copland's choruses, one serious, one very amusing, are almost the Glee Club's stock-in-trade, so often have they been performed. They show adept handling of the form, and the rhythmic dexterities of Copland's early style.

Jan. 4. League of Composers:

Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations* (1930) present an absorbing problem for the listener. The work is clear and sharp as a steel blade, it has the feel of flint or rock, its color is a dead gray lit by sudden black and white stripes. (Copland was at one time tempted to call it *Lithic Variations*.) Pain is the whole keynote, and a stunning rebound from pain. This at the best moments in the piece; the ideal which comes through in spots which have true greatness. Why is the summary impression monotony? Perhaps there are too many moments in which the same thing happens. The theme is itself something of a variation, in that its four notes almost immediately transcend one register, and leap above and below the main axis. The method of posing the first two notes against the second two, and then reversing the procedure, is in itself excellent; particularly in the low-bass octave, as in the first variation, the best one. But the trick is overplayed, and betrays a harmonic thinness; the clanging notes in the high register become just so many repetitions of what seem mere dis-

sonances. The *Variations* lack variety. Copland whose characteristic gift (doing much with little) would make him the very person to do such a form supremely well, has here miscalculated. He is perhaps best in an extended work, when he can expand his three-note themes in an even and weaving flow; here, each variation is a set piece, there is a lack of *Steigerung*. The work, I feel, is too long; long inherently, since there appears to be no logical point where it could be cut.

Jan. 6. Oscar Ziegler:

A simple and elegiac *Largo* by Charles Ives, and the electric little piece called *36* by Carlos Chavez, both indifferently played, are worth noting.

Jan. 8. Boston Symphony:

What a tour-de-force the new Stravinsky *Capriccio* is! I heard Stravinsky play the piano part in Berlin last year, with Klemperer conducting; then it was a series of stinging remarks, elaborately staged, involving a fascinating intricacy; the point of attack was crispness. In Jesus Maria San Roma's performance with Koussevitzky, everything was suaver, but not vaguer; the feeling was much more that of an enlarged chamber-orchestra; the solo strings had more meaning. At one point in the last section, when two violins and a piccolo held a theme of long notes against a running staccato piano accompaniment, the difference in interpretation was epitomized; what had been brittle, like sparks flying, was humming, delicious. The work is like a Swiss watch—neat as a pin and as decorative, and containing an enormously detailed and complicated mechanism. There is gaiety, controlled with ease and point. One remembers the Liszt *Hungarian Rhapsodies* of half a century ago, and realizes something of the direction we have taken; this Stravinsky *Capriccio* should fulfill for us the same function.

Marc Blitzstein

STRAVINSKY AS PSALMIST—1931

THE *Symphonie des Psaumes* by Stravinsky will undoubtedly take ultimate high place among that composer's works. Written for the Boston Symphony on the occasion of its fiftieth