

FORECAST AND REVIEW

SPRING SEASON IN THE EAST

STRING QUARTET MUSIC

A GREAT deal was expected of the new Bartok quartet. It seemed that the master had finally transcended the period in which everything he wrote was in some way connected with a folk-rhapsody and was forging a unique and original absolutism. This in the *Piano Concerto*, the *Second Violin Sonata*, and the *Third String Quartet*. So that the *Fourth Quartet*, played in Liège by the Pro Arte group, and finally performed here (twice the same evening, March 17) by the New World Quartet, was due to be a further blossoming from the new stem. As such it is a disappointment. There is no need now to go at length into Bartok's magistral technic; his knowledge is supreme both as to sonorous effects and to form, whether it be the relatively simple structure demanded in this work or one more extended. In short, what he does, he does perfectly and in a way which could be done by no one else. My objection, then, is invalid. On the strength of the *Concerto* and the *Second Violin Sonata*, I object to this piece as a reversion to the thing which comes so easily to Bartok: the orgy, the racial frenzy, the whipped-up passion; and on the other hand the lush exoticism, the languorous mood-play. It is to be found in nearly all the early works, which seem utterly dependent upon dance rhythms of one sort or another. They are all "first shock" pieces; the reaction to repeated performances is a steady dwindling of interest. In the *Fourth Quartet* it is all on a much grander scale; yet the final response is the same: an exalted gypsy rhapsody.

sody, powerful and *entraînant* while it is going on and curiously empty afterwards.

On the same program was Schönberg's latest quartet, opus 30, but only the slow movement! This, I beg leave to state, is unforgivable. Why was not the work given whole, or not at all? The quartet is among Schönberg's best, least aloof music; it is noble, tender and gives off a rare sense of fullness. It is undesirable to present only one section of any work, because of the incompleteness of the spiritual context, if nothing else. But in Schönberg's case, the lack is double and the act becomes criminal. Schönberg's airtight note-scheme runs from the beginning of his work to the end, each measure is an indispensable factor in the plan; so that a movement, lifted from the others, has not even the approximate independence of an excerpt; it becomes an unintelligible fragment, a musical dry-goods sample.

Sandor Harmati's quartet (League of Composers, April 12) is competent and dull; Hungarian (not the Hungary of Bartok!) sentimental salon music, which in today's terms means café music or movie music.

OTHER CHAMBER MUSIC

Stravinsky's *Three Pieces for Clarinet* (Boston Chamber Orchestra, April 11) have at all events this advantage over the Varèse *Octandre* (same concert): that they are frankly studies for an instrument, exercises in range, fleetness, tonguing, portamento. Besides, they have formal clarity and musical weight, elusive as they are. The Varèse work is a pretentious machine, intent upon its sonority, which, although it must be one of the loudest pieces ever written, betrays no new or arresting kind of sound. Varèse certainly knows his instrumentation; by adroit placing he can make seven wind-instruments and one double-bass seem like a cohort of brass bands. To what end? The motifs (they can hardly be called themes) undergo either no development, or an obvious kind of rearrangement which clinches their initial banality and makes them positively silly. There is a sensory excitement established, which at a point does get crucial; but almost any enormous noise-making, if protracted, must inevitably do that.

I was greatly impressed by Leo Ornstein's *Six Cello Preludes* (League of Composers, April 12). Certainly they were superbly played by Ornstein and a new, a magnificent cellist, Alexandre Barjansky. I can think of no other Ornstein work which has seemed so good. But it is impossible, even here, to escape the ever-present echo of Bloch; they are short lyrical preludes, whose forms present no problem (usually simple binary) and therefore little interest; good mood-sketches in a minor idiom.

PIANO MUSIC

Henry Cowell is first of all an inventor; then he is several other things: musicographer, theorist, research specialist. Somewhere in the list of his accomplishments comes the composing of music; but one never feels it is his prime activity or his richest gift. His recital (New School for Social Research, March 31) made this clear once again. His piano works demand and get from him a prodigious piano-technic of a specialized kind; his "tone-clusters" involve fist-playing, wrist-to-elbow stretches, string-plucking upon the sounding-board. What always impresses one is the new quality of sound, never the music itself. His formulas are usually elementary: *pp* to *ff* to *pp* often (the *Lilt of the Reel*, *March of Invincibility*, *March of the Feet of the Eldana*, and the *Harp of Life*, the last-named derived almost whole from *Parsifal*). His harmonic gift, aside from the "clusters," whose effect is after all purely percussive, resembles Percy Grainger's.

There are a few exceptions: *Advertisement*, a good genre study; the *Whirling Dervish*, excellent musico-photography, a bit too long; *Sinister Resonance*, wherein the piano sounds like a totally strange instrument; best of all, his *Piano Concerto* (not on this program), where Cowell takes the whole business of composing more seriously, to the extent of eliminating a great deal of the facile entertainment-writing which underlies the bulk of his music. I am against, too, the species of academism which makes Cowell rush into finding new terms for new ideas—cross-rhythms, poly-accents, cross-accents, etc. Defining is dangerous, since it means confining, and is a form of death. A practical example of this occurred in the piano piece *Fabric*, purporting

to be a demonstration of polyrhythms; it turned out to be an inoffensive, romantic little morceau, with the old-style *rubato* now mathematically calculated.

ORCHESTRA MUSIC

Aaron Copland's *Dance Symphony* (Philadelphia Orchestra, Philadelphia, April 15) is interesting chiefly because of what it indicates in his development. Actually part of a ballet, sections of which were written ten years ago, it is a veritable source-bed of his later music. There are the beginnings of the multiple-rhythmed jazz, the virtuoso orchestra. The first pages have that mystic melancholy of his best slow movements; the quick sections are brilliant and nervous, and a little overwrought in instrumentation. Vitality, exuberance are manifest; style is as yet uncertain.

MUSIC AND THE STAGE

One should be wholeheartedly gratified, I suppose, to note the unanimous acclaim with which *Wozzeck* (Philadelphia, March 19) was greeted in this country. There is no doubt that the almost terrible sincerity of the opera was felt by everybody. If then some of the reviewers (particularly the Philadelphians and one or two from New York) were respectful to the point of being awed or even frightened, there were many who came directly to terms with the work itself, and found it extraordinary. I find myself not in agreement with those who see *Wozzeck* as *the* opera of the decade; I can perhaps name no finer work at the moment, however. It seems too typical, too little individual, to be a masterpiece; exactly the sort of opera one would expect from a fine member of the Schönberg school. For what it is—a cumulative musical description of Büchner's appalling story of the underdog—*Wozzeck* is outstanding. It belongs in the post-war German period, loosely termed expressionism, that period of morbid and neurotic art which we must thank for Georg Grosz, *Pierrot Lunaire*, *Caligari*; an art overladen with hysteria, charged with passionate bitterness, the fruit of shock. Somewhere behind the composition of *Wozzeck* lies essential unbalance and essential irresponsibility. As for the classical forms found in the musical body of the opera, about which so

many reverential words have been written, they were probably valuable to Berg as an arbitrary plan in composing music which constantly ran the risk of going off at a tangent. They are like the forms in *Pierrot Lunaire*, for the most part *augenmusik*. There is no good esthetic reason apparent why a passacaglia should be used in the Doctor's scene nor why a full symphony should underpin the second act; no real connection between the form used and the emotion projected. No connection is intended; what was wanted was to get across a sustained mood which would be febrile yet powerful; and in this Berg has in general succeeded brilliantly. One curious dramatic lapse mars the work: the arrangement whereby Marie's prayer-scene, in itself one of the high spots musically, precedes the murder-scene, which it deforms and minimizes by the juxtaposition. The scene which follows, in the tavern, is the finest moment of the opera.

The opera-oratorio, *Oedipus Rex*, of Stravinsky is something else again. The sublime creation of Stravinsky's art, it is unquestionably great music, a masterpiece. Perhaps the most remarkable quality in *Oedipus*—incidentally one which has not received much attention—is the manner in which it effects its harmonic development; its fundamental lack of contrast. An extraordinary sense of endurance is engendered; variety in the old sense is absent. For relief there are sudden shiftings of the sombre color; the technical method employed is usually raising one block of harmony to a block a single tone higher. Some examples: the B-flat minor of the opening chorus adds without warning, at 7, a D-natural; Oedipus' aria lifts at the first "ego clarissimus" in the same way; the famous "quid faciendum" is another case in point; and again, Creon's beautiful solo, "latet peremptor" moves at the words "luere Thebas" from a ground plan of B-flat to B-natural, with a strong C-major bass. The effect is always of an almost intolerable depth and darkness pierced by illumination, just as the Sophoclean tragedy is pierced through by a divine compassion.

The performance accorded *Oedipus* by the League of Composers under Stokowski (April 21) was both good and bad. Robert Edmond Jones' conception of the staging—the massed chorus, the huge marionettes, the invisible Speaker—was, for

me, perfectly adapted to the work. In Stravinsky's *Oedipus* the music is the important thing; and the problem was how to reduce the attention of the eye to a mere registering. The marionettes solved this admirably; they were beautiful to look at and when they moved, it was nobly and effortlessly. They moved very seldom and very little; one gradually stopped watching and devoted oneself to the score, returning now and again to the visual scene, where the imagination was touched off by a new gesture, or the appearance of a new character. Music, marionettes, and Speaker (Wayland Rudd's voice had a flawless, caressing beauty) formed a very satisfying unit. The production failed in mood however. Everything was too shadowy, too veiled. The world of *Oedipus* is a real and grim world, remote and Olympian; here, with greenish lightings, gauze, and a too-nuanced musical interpretation, it became the dim realm of impressionism. Too much fantasy, too little clarity. The most flagrant instance came at the close: those fate-like bass octaves which end the work were allowed to fade and die in an inarticulate Debussyan fog; while visually the majestic and horrible figure of Oedipus sank and swooned into oblivion. It was a beautiful moment in itself, perhaps; but how much more in keeping, how much more effective, had the curtains closed on an Oedipus who remained erect, bloody-eyed, a ghastly display of the cosmic trap!

Very little can be said for, or indeed about, Prokofieff's *Le Pas d'Acier*, presented on the same program. It is a "machine" ballet; the music is fairly recent, but old-style Prokofieff: satirical, clever, highly-accented, unarresting. Compared to his later *Fils Prodigue*, it is a nonentity. The production was garbled, overloaded, puerile.

The general impression gleaned from the Polyhymnia Society's presentation of a part of Gniessin's *Phoenician Maidens* (April 12) was of excellent music of the post-Glazounov school. The dancing of Ruth St. Denis was, for one spectator at least, painful in its pretentiousness. . . Evelyn Berckman's ballet on Odysseus surely deserved a better production than it got. The stage action was poorly devised, and verged on the ludicrous. The music appears to have a certain quiet and exotic beauty, especially the opening pages.

The revival of *L'Histoire du Soldat* gave us an accurate, biting reading of the score, one of those heart-warming performances, when each man playing knows and loves the work; the dancers were not nearly so good.

Marc Blitzstein

ROCHESTER'S AMERICAN SERIES

IT is a commentary on the condition of native music in America that a single city of a third of a million harbors annually the production of more new American symphonic works than probably the rest of the entire country. Rochester owes its preëminence in this effort to the Eastman School, and more particularly to the generosity of George Eastman and the imagination, will and spirit of the School's director, Howard Hanson.

I do not intend to retrace the history of this unique series of concerts, now completing their sixth year. They are sufficiently known throughout the nation to make unnecessary more than a few words about their purpose and result thus far. In the face of continued, confident critical assurance that there is no American music worth the name, Howard Hanson five years ago launched a series of American orchestral concerts. These were conceived in the belief that there are American composers, that their apparent scarcity and silence are due to the single fact that none will give them a hearing, that the most practical way to encourage these scattered and rather hopeless men is to rehearse and perform their works in their presence.

Technical advance and ultimate expertness in creative music is virtually impossible unless the composer may test the score he has written in the laboratory of the concert room. This was an important part of the premise upon which the concerts were founded. The scores played receive four rehearsals, and a large majority of the composers represented have been on hand for at least two of them, besides the concert itself. Most of the younger American composers have found a place on the programs of the last five years, mainly with works heretofore unperformed; and several of the older, established men have contributed scores. The performances have been signally helped by the devotion and technical excellence of the Rochester Philharmonic players.