

SAMINSKY'S PUEBLO AND OTHER NEWS
FROM WASHINGTON

As a prelude to the biennial chamber music festival in April at the Library of Congress, the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation presented from February 9 to March 11 a series of eight concerts by the Coolidge Quartet (William Kroll, Nicolai Berezowski, Nicolas Moldavan and Victor Gottlieb). Eleven of the twenty-four works performed in this series were contemporaneous, and three of the historical items were unusual: an early Haydn divertimento attributed to the year 1750, and quartets by Gossec and Pierre Vachon, the latter as extinct as his fellow-poet, Baculard d'Arnaud.

Of living composers, Paul Hindemith received the emphasis of prominence with three works: the third quartet (1922), the first trio (1924) and the second trio (1933). This salience may be interpreted as a complimentary fanfare preceding Hindemith's presence at the festival. The periodic glimpses of his style through a decade served the dual purpose of revelation and anticipation, but by no means provided adequate grounds for an appraisal of his esthetic. On the basis of the music disclosed, one must still think of his *Ars Nova* as inverted romanticism and of himself as a convex reflection of Mendelssohn, although the analogies are not necessarily derogatory. Whatever the Felixian umbrations, the important distinction remains that Hindemith thinks, while Mendelssohn merely mooned. The cerebral bite of his music leaves indentations on the memory, and his apothegmatic manner of speech is arresting.

Bohuslav Martinu was represented by his second quartet (1925), vigorously nationalistic despite the admixture of international idiom in the dissonant sense. Quincy Porter, a cynosure of hopes these days, had a deserved place with his fifth quartet (1935), forthright and incisive writing with an unmistakable profile. Although the program made no mention of the fact, this quartet is the one, I believe, commissioned by the League of Composers. It had been played here before by the Gordons, and a second hearing left no doubt of its perdurable quality. Another League commission was Nicolai Berezowski's second quartet (1934), subtly Russian in thematic and rhythmic implications,

for all its disguise of unprejudiced eclecticism. It has sinewy strength, nervous verve, and imaginative impulse.

Erno von Dohnanyi's third quartet in A-minor (1926) is a far cry from the lush sentiment of his Opus 1, the piano quintet. In place of *schwärmerei* is an astringent acidity, even in the diffuse *Andante religioso con variazioni*, which surprisingly reverts to type in an otherwise intellectualized work. Still more acidulous was G. Francesco Malipiero's fourth quartet (1924), harsh and opinionated music with no concessions to affability or grace.

Two works of 1935 vintage were Walter Piston's second quartet and the ninth of Darius Milhaud. It may have been associational fantasy that made one feel in Piston's quartet a faint influence of the whole English procession from Byrd to Vaughan-Williams. Faint is the word, for Piston's individuality is paramount, a forceful projection both in architectonic device and intensity of ideas. In comparison, Milhaud's quartet was scarcely more than badinage: four programmatic novelettes in the manner of *Le boeuf sur le toit*. Last of the contemporary items was Randall Thompson's *The Wind in the Willows* (1924), three pieces suggested by Kenneth Grahame's nostalgic aperçu of childhood, fanciful and frankly descriptive.

Conspicuous in the season of the National Symphony Orchestra was the all-American concert on February 17, when Lazare Saminsky's *Pueblo: A Moon Epic*, commissioned by the League, had its premiere under the composer's direction. Saminsky took the baton unexpectedly, as Hans Kindler, who had conducted the last rehearsal with one arm in a sling, succumbed to a bursitis. The work is a rhapsody in two movements: a prelude expressing impatience with winter confinement and monotonous diet, and a war-dance-like allegro of rejoicing at the advent of spring. Says the composer's program note: "I have used short tunes, war cries, and corn and moon dances of the Pueblo, Tewa and Ute Indians. Yet the employment of these melodies is not literal or mechanical; their use is free, deliberate, and subordinate to the peculiar conception of the piece. Of this extraordinary folksong, it is the spirit and the drive that lashed my creation, rather than its flesh. For my work these mighty songs were the fuse, not the fuel. This composition is frankly descriptive. I have wanted to

capture something of what lies behind the inscrutable Indian visage; capture the whole rainbow of their savage grief, their martial fire, their craving for sun and space."

The impact of primitivism is what one feels from *Pueblo* wherein is none of the dulcification with which composers are apt to romanticize Amerind material. The treatment is severe and stark, economical in instrumentation, savagely plangent in harmony, direct in statement. This stripped and muscular music, elemental in its urgencies, provokes atavistic response. It is not imitation but transubstantiation of a primitive ethos.

Another premiere at this concert merits mention: a pianoforte concerto by Everett Stevens, a Washingtonian of twenty-two with a promising talent. Brilliantly written for the solo instrument and well scored, the work has dash and vitality; a tendency toward romanticism in the melodic lines is counterbalanced by a conservative modernism in harmony.

Ray Brown

NEW MUSIC IN CHICAGO

THERE is still some life in musical Chicago after all. It would be difficult to remember a similar period when as much new orchestral music has been introduced to audiences here as in the two months since the first of the year.

Carlos Chavez' *Sinfonia Antígona* did not meet a rapturous public success, either with the audience or with the critics. In the latter group I seem to be alone in finding the symphony worthy of considerable praise. Certainly it is a reticent piece of music. But the gracious fluency of its modal melodic lines, which are neither medieval nor quite Greek in structure, was enough to give the symphony great honesty of expression. No novelty of the current season has exemplified so pure a taste, or so virtuous a disdain of artifice.

Serge Prokofieff's first suite from his new ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*, is more shrewdly calculated to seize upon public fancy. At the same time, it is one of the best of all the Prokofieff works I know. Both melodically and harmonically it is straightforward—almost conventional. It shows, however, that Prokofieff has graduated from his recent period of gymnastic melodic lines.