

music—it is a kind of a symphonic poem with pictorial accompaniment. A good commercial movie score more closely resembles an opera.

## IN THE THEATRE

By ELLIOTT CARTER

AMERICA'S idea of opera, if you can judge by the excerpts we see in our movies, or by the performances at our opera houses, consists of well-jewelled audiences listening to standard works sung by well-paid prima-donnas in front of standard sets doing standard stage business that is the same in all opera houses (so that identical performances can be given with little or no rehearsal here or in Lima, Peru, or anywhere else).

The Salzburg Opera Guild, now on its first visit to the United States, flies in the face of this tradition. The seats are the same price as in an ordinary theatre, the singers as a group sing and act well, the *mise-en-scene* is adequate, the whole is rehearsed, and the repertory is not standard. This program should meet with the approval of anybody interested in opera as a really living form.

The choice of works is decidedly popular, except for Milhaud's *Le Pauvre Matelot* and Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea*. For *Così fan Tutte*, Ibert's *Angélique* and Rossini's *Matrimonial Market* are gay and spirited and have a great deal of appeal when done the way the Salzburg people do them.

*Le Pauvre Matelot* has an unfortunate history in this country. It was given last year by the Curtis school, with the orchestra too loud, drowning out the singers. The Salzburg performance also was not good, as the performers did not sing their parts accurately and the orchestra, with too small a string section, sounded confused and bare. The score is original and new and its spirit is hard to convey; strong and simple, it uses popular sailor songs in a contrapuntal texture that is often against rather than with the voice. Its fault is that a few places are too greatly developed. But it does have a new quality of grim humor and many beautiful passages. These have to be done really very well to come across.

*Angélique*, on the other hand, is an operetta that is built on well-known lines. It is always effective, brilliant, ingenious and is right up the Salzburgers' alley, for they have a greater gift of buffoonery than for serious acting. The good old, rather trashy, slicked-up French rural comedy has made its way from the films to the opera stage. Musically it is an unmelodic string of clever, often amusing effects. Like most movies this operetta is fun to see just once.

Stage music is becoming more and more popular for Broadway plays. Already there are two schools: the incidental sound effects that have great dramatic value but could not be played away from the shows they are written for; and the set-pieces which do have an independent musical life. With the first type Virgil Thomson has reached a high degree of perfection and effectiveness in his scoring for *Injunction Granted* and *Hamlet*. The danger of this kind of writing lies in the fact that it depends so much on the play of which it is an integral part. The new *Antony and Cleopatra* is badly directed, and hence Thomson's music does not come off well, though it helps to point up many an indifferent scene.

Marc Blitzstein has also used this style for the Mercury Theatre's extraordinary *Julius Caesar*, and with great effect. The wonderful roars of the Hammond organ, the sardonic Fascist march are not easily forgotten; they play their roles with great cogency in a marvelous production.

Samuel Barlow with his music for *Amphitryon 38* represents, very ineffectively, the school of set-piece writing. This could have been so good if the score had only underlined the wit of the play. Instead it emits a few faint Debussyan wisps of sounds, altogether out of keeping with the production.

A film made by the former Resettlement Administration, to be released in December, presents Thomson in one of his best phases, that of composer for the movies. In my opinion he has written by far the most distinguished film scores in America. This one is no exception. Along the same lines as the *Plough that Broke the Plains*, *The River* illustrates a less pastoral and poetic theme in a vigorous, austere and simple way. The music is never cheap, though at times it has symphonic effects. The roomy treatment of a hymn tune at the conclusion is one of the best pieces of music

Thomson has written. It has a large beauty that never appears in the choppy little musiquettes Auric, Shostakovitch and Honegger write for the movies.

## OVER THE AIR

GODDARD LIEBERSON

**A**N answer! An answer to all those who say that the American composer does not have an audience in America! Here is part of a letter sent to the Columbia Broadcasting Company from somewhere in Ohio by a listener who had just heard a piece commissioned for radio. This simple document is one of the most touching comments on music that I have ever seen. It came as a reply to Aaron Copland's request for titles for his new composition: "first part fast means work. second part quite (quiet) means lunch. third part fast, work. fourth part quite going home from work." That letter must have been interesting to the officials of the C. B. S. too, coming as it did, from a source seldom considered music-conscious. It also proves that C. B. S. had a good idea in commissioning six Americans and justifies their faith in an American audience for American composers.

When the Columbia Compositions Commission (a committee headed by Deems Taylor, C. B. S. musical consultant) chose Copland, William Grant Still, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, Louis Gruenberg, and Walter Piston to write especially adapted works for radio, they provided their audiences with six very different types of music. From the point of view of radio exigencies and possibilities, none of these men can be said to have plumbed the depths. Still did the best job with his *Lenox Avenue*, but musically it did not stand up beside Copland's *A Saga of the Prairie* (the winning title for his composition) or Piston's *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra*. This latter work and Howard Hanson's *Third Symphony* were straight pieces of music with no particular significance for radio production. Piston set out to write a simple and clear piece, feeling that to be the best possible style for radio. The result was exciting music, particularly as performed in the piano solo by Jesus Maria Sanroma. Harris