

mentioned this year, as I should have, the appearance of a new modern dancer of great promise, Valerie Bettis. As a generous rival said of her in admiration, "But she moves." Bettis too has dance rhythm. Her vitality on the stage, her technical facility are astonishing, and her compositions unusual. The other young modern dancer I find extremely interesting to watch is Merce Cunningham, of Martha Graham's company. His dance rhythm too is like a natural gift one watches with immediate pleasure.

A number of people have asked me the reason for the present wave of balletomania that is sweeping from coast

to coast, and that packed the Metropolitan for the longest ballet season in our history. My personal opinion is that ballet — when it is well danced — is the least provoking of our theatrical forms. Nobody on the stage says a word all evening. Nobody bothers much about sexiness or self-importance. The performers are bright, tender, agile, well mannered, they are serious and perfectly civilized. It is good for one's morale, because it appeals to the higher instincts. You feel sociable and friendly and at the same time wide awake. I think that's why so many people are delighted. Civilization is really a great pleasure.

THEATRE and FILMS

BY ELLIOTT CARTER

DURING the past three years the League of Composers has been encouraging composers to write theatrical works for communities with modest resources. Out of this project have come *Paul Bunyan* by W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten, *Solomon and Balkis* by Randall Thompson, and this year *A Tree on the Plains* by Paul Horgan and Ernst Bacon. Like *Paul Bunyan*, *A Tree on the Plains* was revealed to New York audiences by the enterprising Columbia Theatre Associates in cooperation with the Columbia University Department of Music at Brander Matthews Hall. Milton Smith, the theatrical director, was able in both cases to get together shows which were interesting to people who were not in any sense "community audiences" and hence did not exactly conform to the conditions under which the operas were originally intended to be performed. Professional singers were

enlisted for important roles and professional musicians were added to the university orchestra. The Britten work being conceived in a more formal and intricate style was much better adapted to these conditions than Bacon's, which seemed to cry for more intimacy.

Indeed, the best thing that can be said about *A Tree on the Plains* is that all the performers seemed to be having a good time. This is a result of several factors which must play a certain role in any musico-theatrical work to be given by amateurs. First, there should be nothing difficult, risky or perplexing in the musical score. Next, the underlying feeling should always be direct and self-evident to both actors and audience. Also, the dramatic situations must be simple and natural and varied enough to afford the composer opportunity for different kinds of music and to give the actor-singers ample chance to display

their talents. Besides meeting these requirements, Bacon used a musical style derived from various kinds of Americana that Americans can sing in without seeming to carry on like opera stars.

To mention these things, however, is to suggest the danger of obviousness which a work based on such premises must run. Both the librettist and composer often fell into the trap; Horgan, because his book did not have a clear sense of style but wavered between treating the folksy characters as noble and as quaint; Bacon, because he adopted clichés in the more serious sections, especially in the religious and amatory moments, neither of which rang true. In spite of this, Bacon showed a real flair for the treatment of homely comedy, as in his setting of *A Frog He Would A-Wooing Go*, the big production number of the show. Not an outstanding artistic success, the work should serve its purpose and give many people pleasure.

Paul Bowles' setting of the masque within the last act of F. García Lorca's *Asi que pasan cinco años* and named by him *The Wind Remains* was given with chamber orchestra under the able musical direction of Leonard Bernstein at the Serenade Concerts in the Museum of Modern Art. The few vocal numbers were excellently sung in Spanish and the rest was spoken in English and danced against a musical background. In taking an excerpt from one of Lorca's most fantastic plays and presenting it out of its context, Bowles drew attention to the extreme obliqueness of meaning of his author. As Englished, this "zarzuela" has such a tenuous thread of implications that in spite of the music it fails to maintain the poetic tone, and easily becomes a vehicle for such free associations by the audience as to verge on

the nonsensical. Like the meanings of words which tend to evaporate under the scrutiny of semanticists, love, the subject of this play was atomized to the vanishing point. Bowles wisely covered it all with a pattern of coherent music aimed to hold the disjointed fragments of text in a kind of poetic suspension. His work, as always, is a comment on popular or folk music treated in curious ways to deprive them of their usual feelings.

FILMS

Roy Webb's score for Saroyan's film, *The Human Comedy* (it happens to be the centenary of Balzac's work) gave a different slant to the author's writing than has been seen hereabouts before. Saroyan has been treated by composers like Bowles as a commentator on life as it is lived, which helps to evoke a kind of wistful mood that makes the action seem unreal and yet somehow to correspond to our desires. Webb and his collaborators treat this script as if it showed life as it actually is. The score continually quotes parts of the national anthem and in other ways, by the constant use of the usual devices in their usual places, contrives to bring Saroyan down to earth. Nowhere does the music match the land-of-Cockaigne mood which persists in all of Saroyan, except perhaps in the magical scene where two young boys wander in astonishment through the towering stacks of the Public Library overcome by the vast number of authors. The music here catches and sustains the strangeness in a shimmering dissonant chord on the high strings.

Max Steiner, another proliferator of movie scores, each year sees his name in bigger and bigger letters on the list of credits. For *Mission to Moscow* he has

harmonized a lot of national anthems to introduce appearances by Mr. Davies (Walter Huston) in each of the European capitals, Madrid excluded. For once this technic seems justified, although the *Internationale* was adroitly dodged just at the point where you expected it.

It is curious that the makers of *Desert Victory* did not use one of their outstanding composers, William Walton, Vaughan Williams or even Benjamin Britten, instead of taking an English

counterpart to our Hollywood arrangers. The film itself shows the most careful and thoughtful preparation. Even the comment is well written and the plan of explaining the campaign strategy excellently devised. The score was effective enough, but it should have been as stirring as the picture. The one really fine place was when the music stopped and a bag-piper played as soldiers sat around in the night waiting for the big offensive to begin.

OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

C. B.S. has done itself proud again with the production of a weekly cycle of concerts devoted to the music of Charles Ives. Especially memorable was a fine performance by Bernard Herrmann and the Columbia Orchestra of the *Prelude and Fugue* from Ives' *Fourth Symphony*. Although this movement may lack distinction and freshness, it nevertheless projects genuine inspiration and conviction. The naively eloquent prelude, though slighter in content and energy than the fugue, achieves a tranquility, indolence and late-summer color found elsewhere only in the best of the transcendentalists. Probably the orchestration is simpler and clearer than the purely tonal craft, but there is an able blending of sound materials within the spirit of the dynamic design and a musicianly consideration of the motion and speed necessary to make certain harmonic densities sound effectively. The strength of the fugue lies in its natural rise and fall rather than in any textural beauty or contrapuntal intensity. In fact the counterpoint seems often to be no more than an attractive harmoni-

zation of plain melodic materials, which have been organized more with an ear to their vertical and harmonic coordination than to rhythmic independence of individual voices and the resulting tension and release of resolving suspensions.

Less successful than this fine movement by Ives, was an arrangement of his *Quartet in G*, also well managed under Herrmann's baton. This piece, based on provincial tunes and treated with much local color, seems a little slight and transient in charm, though as a radio miniature it amuses and entertains in a harmless way. John Kirkpatrick's work on the *Concord Sonata* was a wonderfully wrought projection of this curiously individual, often splendid composition whose tonal images are especially effective, both as formal delights and as gems of pianistic writing.

Alexander Nevsky, an epic cantata by Serge Prokofiev, was given its first Western Hemisphere performance by the N.B.C. Symphony Orchestra under the fine direction of Leopold Stokowski. This is an expanded and reorganized version of the incidental music to the