

FORECAST AND REVIEW

NEW YORK, 1934

THE cardinal virtue of hope was one against which Nietzsche was especially violent in his anti-Christian attack. He called it the "most mischievous of all evils." As in many of his observations, there is, even in this one, a psychological truth far less incompatible with Christian doctrine than Nietzsche doubtless realized. An example of the kind of thing he had in mind is a certain attitude current in America towards our composers, an attitude of hopefulness which tends to look for potentialities rather than accomplishments, to yearn over the half-hatched, rather than try to estimate soberly what has fully emerged. This was well illustrated at the Yaddo festival last September by the reactions of certain hearers to the Harris *Sextet* and the Piston *Quartet*. The former, by far the more imperfectly realized work of the two, had a kind of urgency which to many people expressed itself no less appealingly by what it stammered than by what it managed to say. Walter Piston's exceptionally fine quartet, on the other hand—a work which is far superior to his recently heard orchestral suite—had that aloofness of music which does exactly what it sets out to do, without tentativeness or strain of any kind. It had, properly speaking, no potentialities, since everything was cast in its definitive form. People were inclined to find it uninteresting on that account. They didn't feel "needed."

However, concerning the Roy Harris *Symphony* that was given some weeks ago by Koussevitzky, I must plead guilty to having taken the very attitude I have just condemned. It moved me by what I felt to be its closeness to life; it gave me the intuitive assurance that beneath all this composer's erratic inade-

quacies and undiscipline there flows a deep current of music. Study of the score has by no means destroyed, but it has somewhat qualified this feeling. I am now uncertain whether or not, like the yearners at Yaddo, my sympathies were not so much aroused by the urgency of his stammer as by the explicit power of his coherent utterances. The opening period of the first movement (up to the cadence on the dominant) has a freshness of temper, a nervous vigor of pace, that is as exhilarating as a dash of salt spray on the face. Thereafter, however, and until the cantabile melody for strings, heard over an ostinato figure which is based on a finely poetic adaptation of the introductory theme, there is little but rhetorical vehemence and the mechanical reiteration of fragmentary motifs to fulfill this promise. Again, the theme of the slow movement depicts with noble eloquence the kind of supra-personal sadness which Harris had in mind for it—"the pathos," as he describes it, "that seems to underlie all human experience." At the fourth measure the horns enter with a harmony whose alien but non-modulatory inflection is of great beauty. His feeling for the peculiar character of this chord in relation to the principle key of E minor is evident from the way he dwells upon it again in the closing measures. But the movement as a whole has a stagnant, aimless quality. The texture is for the most part thin and developments of the theme are gingerly and weak. In the finale a fragment of it is put to further and more energetic uses. This movement, the sparsest in thematic material of the three, contains again that disconcerting interplay of genuine power and unmotivated violence between which, at first hearing, I failed clearly to distinguish.

Another new work of his recently played was the *Variations* for string quartet. All three movements are built around a theme that is Harris-like in manner (it has rhythmic kinship to that of the slow movement of the symphony) but devoid of that elusive, almost spoken eloquence, which gives his best themes their highly personal mark. The work seems hastily and often sloppily written—the first variation in 6/8 time is an instance of this.

Harris's potentialities are surely real; the deep current is there. But though he has doubtless "found" water, one still

lacks the assurance that he can dig a well. We have seen the divining-rod bend, which is significant but not entirely conclusive.

The concert of works for chamber orchestra by Stravinsky and Hindemith, given last January by the League of Composers, was as memorable for the vigor and precision of Fritz Reiner's conducting as for the choiceness of the program. Frank Sheridan's playing of the Hindemith *Concerto* (opus 36, No. 1) should also be mentioned. What trick of fate has relegated this outstanding pianist to the position of a minor one? Whether in chamber-works by Fauré or Brahms, Bloch or Hindemith, there is always, in his share of their presentation, the same abundant musicianship, the same warmth of understanding, that makes any performance in which he has taken part an impossible one to forget.

The first movement of the *Concerto* was especially striking, not only for its economy of material but for the strength and sureness of its progressions. The rhythmic contractions that prepare the close are handled with a deftness wholly devoid of the unnatural tension that so often accompanies this device. Recurrent points of tonal orientation give the movement great solidity of form, providing, as they do, resolutions of contrapuntal lines having only the most tenuous harmonic basis in common, where, indeed, they have any. The second movement contains some delicate writing, but does not as a whole come off so triumphantly as do the first and third. The theme of the finale is, unfortunately, so rough and sketchy in line that no amount of counterpoints and *stretti* avail to give it definition. The concert terminated with an all but flawless performance of *L'Histoire du Soldat*. Each movement had its special charm and character brought out to the full. So far as Fritz Reiner's reading of it went, one's only small objection was to the quite pointless crescendo during the closing measures for percussion alone. The little dances (*Tango*, *Waltz* and *Ragtime*) were made especially effective thanks to Jacques Gordon's vivid phrasing. Of the three the *Tango* is perhaps the most appealing. That there is nothing haphazard in the odd listlessness of its line is shown by the happy effect with which it leads into the tune of the Princess, each time in a different key and with new har-

monies. The work as a whole, like *Petrouchka* and a few others, represents what is, or was, probably Stravinsky's most fruitful vein. Though *L'Histoire* is not concerned expressly with puppets, the quality of its pathos inescapably suggests them, as do, for that matter, the *pince-sans-rire* ironies of the *Octuor*. Stravinsky's later attempts to simulate life on the grander scale, whether of Greek Tragedy or the mysticism of David, have produced nothing half so life-like.

The League's more recent concert of American works, given at the French Institute, was, by contrast, a mere emptying of its waste-basket onto the concert platform. Works by Jerzy Fitelberg, Juan Jose Castro, Virgil Thomson, Miriam Gideon, Mark Brunswick and Alexander Steinert were given hearings. Of all the debris Mark Brunswick's *Sonata for Viola* unaccompanied, alone had some values. It conveyed, at least in the last two movements, more of the true character of a soliloquy than is usually the case with works of this kind. Fitelberg's *Suite* for violin and piano showed a musicianship that placed it second on the list of what might, at a pinch, be worth saving. But apart from this it was a tedious and labored composition. Castro's nine preludes for piano should have been pared down to one—the first. On the circumspect effronteries of the Thomson songs, and the more guileless ones of Miriam Gideon's *Dances* for two pianos, it is needless to dwell. Steinert's *Sonata* for piano began in an atmosphere of costly suavety, a kind of cocktail-hour mood, that would have been pleasant enough had he been able to sustain it. But it soon gave way to sound and fury that persisted to the end, and this was a long way from the beginning.

By way of tempering the well-merited severity of his comments on the recent concert given by the New Chamber Orchestra, the critic of the *Times* suggested that insufficiency of rehearsals might account for the uniformly low standard of its playing. Performances whose partial or even general shoddiness might be wholly accounted for in this way are not uncommon. It is rare, however, to hear a comparatively simple piece like Aaron Copland's *Prelude* to his *First Symphony* played in such a manner as to be all but unrecognizable. The total absence of line or balance, or of precision of attack, the more than occa-

sional wrong notes, to say nothing of the intolerable drag in tempo, suggested that the *insufficiency* lay rather in Bernard Herrmann's qualifications as a conductor. Four American works were given their first performance; but, as the *Times* critic succinctly put it, "they cannot be estimated until they have been heard. They were not heard last night."

It is to be hoped, for the sake of the future of American music, that *Merry Mount*, *Helen Retires* and *Four Saints*, our three latest ventures into the field of opera, are not representative of prevailing tendencies. Indeed, viewed collectively, their chief interest is in the way they mark three successive stages of decadence. Howard Hanson, composer of *Merry Mount*, is a musician of considerable culture and attainment, but the conventionality and essential softness of fibre which are manifest in his music suggest the beginning of a decline. George Antheil, composer of *Helen Retires*, is radically no less conventional, but in sense of form and general suppleness of technic only worse equipped. And finally, Virgil Thomson's music for *Four Saints*, with its vocal setting-up exercises, its elementary "keyboard" harmony, its combined neutrality and awkwardness, abandons all pretence at creative volition. Its prevailing continuity is that of complete inertia. Of the three operas the progressive tendency might be summed up in the identical terms used by a Catholic theologian to describe the "decay of psychology." "First," he says, "psychology lost its soul. Then it lost its mind. Finally it lost its consciousness."

Since *Four Saints* is reviewed as a "show" elsewhere in this issue by a more competent critic of the theatre than I can claim to be, I have confined myself to estimating the value of the music alone. This is perhaps unfair. In his assembling of the various elements that lend the music plausibility, as part of a homogeneous theatrical ensemble, Virgil Thomson has shown a resourcefulness, a consistency of purpose, an imagination, even, which, if these qualities are all wanting in his music, he should at least be given credit for in the field in which he has exerted them. He has accomplished the proverbially impossible task of making a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

After all these variously disturbing symptoms of musical de-

generacy, the Berezowsky symphony came as a partial yet welcome relief. Though not, perhaps, a work of great depth or originality, it had an unquestioning directness of feeling, and a brightness and clarity of orchestral effect, that were refreshing to heart and ear.

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