

FORECAST AND REVIEW

NEW YORK, SPRING, 1934

TO attempt, with the few paragraphs which are all that a brief and comprehensive review of this kind can spare, to estimate the scope and importance of Ernest Bloch's *Sacred Service*, would be the merest effrontery. Much has already been written about the work, it is true, but much has still to be written. It will, however, in the present article, only be possible to mention one or two aspects which, after one hearing and a still far from thorough knowledge of the score, seem most significant. The rich and many-sided personality portrayed by the music would alone suffice to distinguish it from almost everything that is being written today. But it is the singular candor and completeness of the portrayal that gives it its place in a spiritual tradition which Bloch is perhaps alone among his contemporaries in upholding. Especially striking is the imaginative fertility evinced by his treatment of the role of Cantor. Without ever losing its character of recitative or declamation (nowhere does the Cantor become lyrical, as does the chorus on several occasions) it ranges in expression from the quietly self-assured exhortation of the beginning, through the more compelling vehemence of the *Shema Yisroel* and the extraordinary "call to order" following the *a capella* section of Part III, to the final humility and compassion of the closing Benediction, when the Cantor would appear to lose some of his assurance and to cease altogether to exhort. As Bloch truly conceives it this Benediction avoids the expansive lyrical confidence of Mahler in order to express something far deeper and more personal to himself—a state of mind perhaps still secretly disturbed and uncertain. The sublime, at all events, is here reached more through pity

than through faith. In the last thirteen measures I cannot, to tell the truth, accustom myself to the shifting of the tonality from C to G. The Cantor's last phrase gives an impression of tonal finality which the subsequent emphasis on G fails, to my ear at least, to dispel. I do not mean that the work should end in a key other than G, but rather that the final approach to G might, perhaps have been negotiated in another way.

Of the performance it may be said, especially as regards the chorus, that it was for the most part adequate but fell at times far short of the necessary vigor and incisiveness. To the stirring *Mi Chomocho* of Part I, the *Odon Olom* of Part V and the magnificent pages that follow it, full justice was done. As much could not be said for the rendering of the *animato* section which closes Part II. Friedrich Schorr sang the role of Cantor with self-effacing understanding.

At the League of Composers' last concert the work which left by far the most sympathetic aftermath was the de Falla *Concerto for Harpsichord*. The Bartok *Second String Quartet*, which opened the program, proved, after a lapse of some years since last hearing it, a disappointment. Even the glow which in memory suffused the last movement had lost its warmth; much that had formerly seemed poetically suggestive, appeared merely indefinite; and for the texture of the work as a whole, what had once sounded rich and colorful was marred by a certain coarseness. The work did not, at all events, strike me as an example of the purest kind of string quartet writing, nor anything approaching it. This reaction may have been partly accidental and subjective, or it may be that Bartok's music, for all its vigor and undoubted talent, may, along with many another equally talented product of this unsettled age, prove ephemeral. Whether the de Falla *Concerto* is destined to longer life it would not be possible to say. It has, in any case, and quite apart from its somewhat austere charm, great purity of style to recommend it for survival. No less dissonant than the Bartok work, it is, indeed, at times far more boldly and uncompromisingly so, as where, in the slow movement, he reiterates the E-major triad over a broadly and diatonically harmonized melody in C-major. But his use of dissonance is always organic, never by way of vague suggestion.

Like most of de Falla's music the *Concerto* is discreetly evocative and even pictorial in character. The slow movement has for its epigraph *In Festo Corporis Christi MCMXXVI*, which might indicate, perhaps, no more than the date of its completion. But it is more likely that the movement was directly inspired by the feast day itself, as de Falla may have witnessed it being celebrated in the Granada Cathedral. It is even possible that he consciously employed a fragment of the hymn *Pange Lingua*, which is sung on that day. He has at all events caught something of the note of solemn jubilation that characterizes this hymn, one of the finest in the Catholic liturgy. The first movement is a concise sonata form, in which "masculine" and "feminine" elements are placed in opposition to each other and finally reconciled, in strict accordance with classic procedure but with no trace of academic formalism. It has alertness and a strong sense of the open air. The finale is a joyous rondo, in perfect complement (rather than contrast, which is a thing far less rare) with the other movements. One's only reservation about it relates to what may be a certain finickiness as to detail. De Falla's attempts, with the five accompanying instruments, at orchestral sonorities, are at times more studied than effective.

The *Concerto* was followed by a group of songs by Charles Ives, of which the general shoddiness and vulgarity, emphasized rather than relieved by an occasional note of flaccid lyricism, only confirmed previous impressions of this composer's music. The concert closed with Roy Harris's *String Sextet*, a work heard at the Yaddo festival last September and one which, despite fine and characteristic moments, fails as a whole to grow more convincing with successive hearings. One cannot but respect and admire Harris for the kind of music he is obviously trying to write: music of breadth and vigor and directness; nevertheless it is to be hoped that he may before long produce a work that will end the state of disheartening suspense as to his real capacities in which many of us find ourselves, believing in the strength and validity of his talent, yet somewhat appalled by his evident willingness to make his name known through manifestly unfinished products.

Of the two concerts given by the Pan-American Association

the first was the only one I heard in its entirety. On the whole of the long program there were but three brief but relatively honest attempts at music. The three *Son Motives* by Amadeo Roldan were, considered as rather literal-minded ethnological transcriptions, not ineffective. Roy Harris's piece for flute and strings was somewhat insipid and formless, yet had pleasing moments. The *Piano Concerto* by Colin McPhee was no doubt the most substantial offering of the evening, but it suffered from the fact that it was heard only after two hours of all but unrelieved boredom and irritation had been endured. Compositions by Salzedo, Ruggles, Ives and Varèse made up the greater part of the program. The Salzedo *Concerto for Harp* was a niggling collection of noises without sequence or substance, a parade of affectation and emptiness that was peculiarly repellent. Ruggles' *Portals* suggested the possible presence of some kind of emotional impulse behind the music, but well behind it. The surface it presented was a thoroughly messy one. Of the Ives numbers the only entertaining feature was the spectacle of Nicolas Slonimsky going through the strenuous and quite needless exercise of beating 4-4 time with one hand and 3-4 with the other—needless, since, in the first place, it had no relation to the music, and, in the second, since it was obvious, as Paul Boepple pointed out, that the only part of all this folderol that mattered to the players was the upbeat. Varèse's new work, *Equatorial*, had little to distinguish it from these others except loudness. His use of the theremin instruments, shrieking in *altissimo fortissimo*, was doubtless meant by way of a partial answer to the rather idly speculative problem of the acoustical future of music. Whether one considered it in this light or in any other, it had no more to do with music itself than have to do with religion, let us say, the "prophecies" one sometimes hears of, regarding the imminent submersion of North America by a tidal wave; or than has to do with science the apparatus described in the doings of Buck Rogers, the comic strip hero of interplanetary adventure in the year 40,000. What sort of music will be written a thousand years hence no one can say, but whatever the future may bring, to try to forestall it by exploiting the improbable is at best a foolish pastime.

The Pan-American's second concert, which took place at the Alvin Theatre, combined dances by Martha Graham to music by Riegger, Villa-Lobos, Varèse and others, and "intermezzi," during which the theatre was left in pitch darkness, while other American works were played. Apart from the intrinsic mediocrity of the small number of works that my late arrival enabled me to hear, there was an ineptness about the proceedings that made them, if anything, even more irritating than those of the week before.

Nicholas Nabokoff's music for *Union Pacific*, a ballet based on a scenario by Archibald MacLeish and produced by the Monte Carlo Company, was one of the past season's ablest and most vigorous productions. Without being a work of any great musical pretensions, it is so admirably suited to its purpose and uses nineteenth century American railroad songs with so much taste in their selection, so much intelligence and musicality in their treatment, that one is eager to hear further examples of Nabokoff's work. The *ostinati* accompaniments which he devised for some of the tunes (for the most part free adaptations of the "railroad" rhythm that was strummed on the banjo) retained all the essential bareness of the original accompaniments with none of their tonic-dominant banality. Tunes such as *I've been working on the railroad* (in its original and less well-known form), *Lady Gay*, *Arkansas Traveler*, *Susannah* and others, were used with varying degrees of freedom, according as Nabokoff's essentially creative approach to the problem would dictate. That by this very freedom of treatment he was able to heighten rather than disguise the naive gaiety and pathos of these tunes shows a sureness of instinct for the true character of our folk-music which, so far as I know, could not be matched by any native composer. Apart from this the music has, to be sure, an exuberance that could not be other than Russian, and even, in the theme of the finale (which is Nabokoff's own) a faint echo of the Boulevard Montmartre.

Of other contemporary works recently heard, Hindemith's *Concerto* for strings and brass, which was played by the Boston Symphony on its last visit, and Berezowsky's *Sinfonietta*, performed for the first time by the Philharmonic last March, re-

vealed nothing startling. The Hindemith work had all the specious energy that typifies his most uninspired vein; rapid contrapuntal passages that scamper like electric hares, leaving no scent. Berezowsky's new work seemed thin and watery compared to the *Symphony* of his that was heard and liked some months ago. Walter Piston's *String Quartet*, (played by the Roth Quartet) on the other hand, marks an astonishing advance over everything he has written up to now. His ideas are still, perhaps, lacking in individuality, but the work shows a growth in flexibility and distinction of craftsmanship that gives it individuality of another and perhaps rarer kind. The score, which has been announced for publication by the Cos Cob Press, is unfortunately not yet obtainable. In any case space would not permit the more detailed comment which the work amply deserves.

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