

SCHERCHEN ON CONDUCTING AND EWEN ON COMPOSERS

WHAT must one do in order to become a conductor? Here, in English, for the first time, is a book which succeeds in fully answering that question. For despite the continual discussion that goes on in relation to conductors and conducting, no attempt has been made up to now to write an exhaustive study of the actual technic involved in the conducting of an orchestra.

Hermann Scherchen was ideally fitted for this task. In a foreword Professor Dent says, "Herman Scherchen has won his distinguished reputation chiefly by his courageous interpretation of the music of our own day. There is no conductor whom modern composers and those who are seriously interested in their work should regard with deeper gratitude." Scherchen has given us further cause for gratitude in the writing of this *Handbook of Conducting*, (Oxford University Press, 1934).

The author begins with the assumption that a student can be fully prepared for his job as conductor without ever having faced an orchestra. This goes counter to the usual opinion that conducting can be learned only "by routine." But Scherchen shows that a technic of conducting exists which "can be learned and practised down to its smallest details before a student first attempts to conduct an orchestra." ("When conductors try to learn their job from an orchestra," Scherchen says, "the orchestra should refuse to play.")

In an important section called "The Science of the Orchestra." Scherchen does not repeat what can be found in any good text book on instrumentation, but instead he lists the qualities, peculiarities, weaknesses inherent in the nature of the various instruments or of the way in which they are played. A wealth of musical illustrations ranging from Bach to Anton Webern accompany the text. The author is especially acute on the subject of the percussion group of the contemporary orchestra. "These instruments," he says, "are constantly gaining ground in modern

music as carriers of accents and rhythms. Concurrently, the number of the problems confronting players has increased But the players have not changed; they remain almost uninterested; they remain obstacles in the way of the music. One of the duties which the modern conductor has to face is to effect a transformation in them and in their playing." These remarks are true, unfortunately, not only of the players in the percussion section.

The concluding chapters are devoted to the actual technic of the baton. At all costs the conductor must avoid ambiguity in gesture and intention. Scherchen believes that "for every technical problem there is one solution; an intelligible, unequivocal one which any orchestral player will understand". He demonstrates this search for absolute clarity in an analysis of three works: Beethoven's *First Symphony*, Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel* and Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. The explanation of the unique rhythmical difficulties presented by the Stravinsky score is admirable.

The book does not pretend to be a guide to the interpretation of music, new or old. Scherchen knows that a conductor, like any other musician, must be endowed with true individuality and a rich natural gift if he is to be really creative. But whatever can be learned this book teaches. The translation by M. D. Calvocoressi is entirely adequate.



Just for the record it should here be noted that David Ewen's compilation of the biographies of two hundred *Composers of Today* (H. W. Wilson Company, 1934) is not to be taken too seriously. For one thing the book is full of inaccuracies, one or more to the page. Mr. Ewen possesses a talent for confusing the simplest facts: thus, *Les Noces* is listed among Stravinsky's neo-classical works, the beautiful one-page song *Where the Eagle* by Charles Ives is referred to as a Song Cycle, the League of Composers becomes the League of Modern Composers, Chavez's *Energia for Nine Instruments* and his *Sonata for Four Horns* are neatly joined together as the "Energia for Four Horns," Carl Ruggles, born 1876, is described as one of the "Younger American Composers," Bloch uses "strange intervals

of one-quarter notes," etc. Added to these mere inaccuracies of fact, there are, it must be admitted, a suspiciously large number of composers who are brilliant golf players, or passionate readers of detective stories. And, as you might guess, almost all composers, according to Ewen, are frightfully hard workers.

These talents of confusion and suggestion are enhanced by what amounts to a genius for pure invention. Mr. Ewen thinks nothing of describing a work which he has never heard, or of ascribing opinions to composers which they have never entertained. One good case in point is his statement that the present writer has "little patience with the art of the past—with the possible exception of Mozart"(!). Mr. Ewen should take heed—this is pure invention approaching the libelous.

The one redeeming feature of the book consists of a number of sketches certain composers have supplied of their own careers and achievements. But most of the short biographies written by Ewen in high school English, with a continual use of superlatives, read like any concert manager's blurb. One can only fervently hope that Mr. Ewen may soon find some other field than music, in which his "talents" may be displayed to better advantage.

Aaron Copland