

SCORES and RECORDS

By AARON COPLAND

THE scores and records recently issued while fairly impressive as to quality would be more striking news if they depended less on long-familiar names. Thus, Paul Hindemith makes a winter bow with no fewer than three newly published works—an opera, a ballet and a symphonic suite. The record makers on the other hand have been starring Prokofieff with new discs of a recent orchestral suite and a whole series of piano works, early and late, performed by the composer himself.

Hindemith's three recently composed works are *Mathis der Maler*, an opera in seven tableaux; the Saint Francis ballet, which in the published form is called by its original title, *Nobilissima Visione*, and a four movement suite of *Symphonic Dances* available in miniature score (all issued by Edition Schott—Associated Music Publishers). Considering the varied mediums for which these works were written, they present a surprisingly homogeneous physiognomy. This is both a weakness and a strength. It means that Hindemith possesses without doubt one of the most defined and completely integrated styles of any composer now writing. But it would be foolish to say that this perfectly manipulated style of his is equally adaptable to opera, ballet and symphony. The theatrical works suffer from the fact that they are conceived in a manner most naturally at home in the concert-hall.

One will examine these three works in vain for any reflection of the five stormy years through which Germany has been passing. On the surface Hindemith appears to have continued writing in his accustomed style, indifferent to censure or acclaim. But if one looks more closely, there seems to be an increasing dependence upon the elegiac mood, the mood of resignation, and a corresponding absence of that robust and aggressive manner that was once so typical of Hindemith's work. Is it mere chance that the composer turns to the sixteenth century for the subject matter of both his opera and ballet? Perhaps this apparent attempt to escape the confusions of the present day accounts for his

ability to placidly produce work after work (for which we are thankful) yet at the same time give his many admirers the impression that he is no longer inventing out of new experience but merely creating from an experience that has already served him over and over again. Nevertheless, despite our conjectures and misgivings, these works are worth recommending. Contemporary music boasts few better examples of present-day composing.

The complete antithesis to Hindemith's stage music would be something like Marc Blitzstein's radio song-play *I've Got The Tune* (Chappell & Co.). Half the point about the music in a piece of this kind is its ability to graphically heighten the dramatic action. This it does to perfection. Yet it is curious to note the degree to which Blitzstein has brought the psychology of the concert-hall along with him to the theatre. One can detect it in the sometimes over-complicated accompaniments that underscore some simple tune. It is also easy to detect the same hectic, nervous mood that characterized his concert music. But most of all it can be seen in Blitzstein's preoccupation with form. The desire to have his colloquial characters and ordinary situations add up to a form which is tight and satisfying in its own right, is his most original contribution to our stage music.

Certain parts of the song-play are inimitable. Take Scene IV for instance. Here Blitzstein writes one of those depressed and soulless songs similar to the one with which *The Cradle Will Rock* begins. But as a whole *I've Got The Tune* bears signs of having been written to order. There is a synthetic quality about it that no amount of ingenuity and talent can hide.

Benjamin Britten, a new name in English music, is a young man of twenty-five who lives in London. His *Variations* on a theme of Frank Bridge for string orchestra (Hawkes & Son) are a brilliant achievement for a man of his age, or for a man of any age for that matter. Each variation is in the familiar style of a Chant, a Romance, an Italian aria, a Wiener Waltz etc. This rather unpromising plan is carried off with an amazing flair for a kind of pastiche plus. The piece is what we would call a knock-out. It is pleasant, for a change, to find a young Englishman whose music seems free of the stuffy and conventional atmosphere of his respectable British confreres.

Marcel Dellanoy, the French composer who will be remembered for a talented string quartet heard in America several years ago, has just published a *Sérénade Concertante* for violin and orchestra (Max Eschig—Associated Music Publishers). It is music in the French tradition, situated somewhere between late Ravel and early Milhaud. To say that it is pleasing, graceful, and in excellent taste will astonish none. They are qualities that we have come to take for granted in a French composer. But each new composition from the pen of a competent Frenchman makes us scan the horizon more anxiously for the new man with the stature and personality of a first-rate talent. Dellanoy, I fear, has only a *joli talent*.

RECORDS

RCA Victor, through its policy of issuing foreign-made records under domestic imprint as a "special release," has to its credit a considerable number of contemporary recordings. The two sets of music by Prokofieff mentioned above provide an excellent cross-section of that composer's output during the past twenty years. The *Program of Piano Music*, as the piano set is called, ranges from the early *Suggestion Diabolique*, Opus 4, through the *Visions Fugitives* and *Grandmother's Tales*, to the more recent *Sonatine Pastorale*, Opus 59, *Etude* and *Paysage*. It is good to have these dozen or more pieces, permanently waxed in a clean cut interpretation that only the composer could give. But it always comes as a surprise to realize how little the essence of Prokofieff's music has changed during two decades either in emotional scope or in technical perfection. His discovery of the Soviet Union has only made him lean more strongly on music of utter simplicity and directness.

In but one respect does the suite of excerpts from the Soviet movie *Lieutenant Kijé* represent an advance upon his earlier compositions—the orchestration. All his recent works are scored in a much more distinctive and original fashion than even so well-sounding a piece as the *Scythian Suite*. It is a pure aural pleasure to hear these refreshing orchestral sonorities, particularly as played by the Boston Symphony. Prokofieff may not be the greatest of modern composers, but he is certainly one of the most delightful.

The Boston Symphony also has recorded another Sibelius set that includes the *Fifth Symphony* and *Pohjola's Daughter*. The symphony is undoubtedly one of the best of the Sibelius's seven. For those recalcitrants who still profess to see nothing in the Finnish master's work, it may be recommended as a good starting point. Aside from the slow middle movement, which is the weakest part, the work evokes pastoral and rustic sentiments, emphasizing Sibelius' most sympathetic qualities. *Pohjola's Daughter* must also be counted among the better works. It contains prophetic passages and an original close, though also lesser moments of old-fashioned bombast.

Music for Strings, a full-sized three-movement work by the English composer Arthur Bliss, has been made available. In the twenties, Bliss occupied a position in English music now held by William Walton. One's judgment of music like this will partly depend on the critic's mood. If he is feeling lenient, this is sincere, honestly written, craftsmanlike in its handling of the medium, and in general a credit to any school of modern music. But if one is more severe it is obvious that the expressive content is second-hand, that it is over-eclectic and lacking in individuality, that its developments are often pedestrian, and that in general it leaves no impression of being written out of any vital necessity. Still, if you want to know what is composed by a man of the middle generation in England today, this is one fair example.

Crossing the Channel, we get Jean Françaix's *Concerto* for piano and orchestra, in which the young Frenchman performs his own piano part. It is a little difficult to get fresh impressions from each new composition of Françaix. Unfortunately, this *Concerto* is no exception. No one would deny Françaix's natural talent, but his musical gamut seems clearly limited. It moves from gay to quite gay to very gay; and back again from very sad to quite sad to just sad; and there it stops. Sometimes it is really sparkling and witty, at others merely glib. It makes one think that even music which is unpretentious and meant merely to please, has standards to uphold. The first of these is a real spontaneity and an unfailing inventiveness. Françaix has these certainly, but they are spread pretty thin at times.

Two single discs worth more than passing attention are

Malipiero's short string quartet entitled *Cantari alla Madrigalesca* and Ravel's songs, *Ronsard à son âme* and *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée*. The Italian composer's work especially should be heard by anyone who wishes to estimate him by one of his best works. It is music that is deeply felt, and written with absolute clarity of intention. Moreover it is beautifully played and recorded by the Quartetto di Roma. The three *Don Quichotte* songs, written during the years of Ravel's decline, show a falling off of inspiration but *Ronsard à son âme* is one of his finest lyrics.

A curious feature of the past five months is the absence of any outstanding contemporary work from the lists of the Columbia Phonograph Company. It is the more remarkable in view of the amount of modern music issued by that company in the past. What can the significance be? If the reason is simply one of sales resistance, then we must point out that although the marketing of records may be primarily a business enterprise, it cannot be merely that. Its effect on musical culture is much too widespread. Everyone knows that record sales have climbed with unprecedented speed during the past three years. That makes the companies' responsibility to provide well-balanced lists greater than it ever was. A representative contemporary work may not earn as much money as a well-known classic, but the musical interests of the country demand that it be made available nonetheless.

IN THE THEATRE

—By JOHN GUTMAN—

IF adequacy were the standard by which to judge a composer's work in the theatre, one could wholeheartedly endorse Kurt Weill's latest extravaganza, *Knickerbocker Holiday*. His score is not in the least extravagant, and in that rather negative way it is a perfect match for Maxwell Anderson's lame story and fairly insipid lyrics. Mr. Anderson was evidently meant to be a disciple of Tragedy; he is much better in grim *Winterset* than in the jolly somersaults which he now tries so desperately to turn. This, however, is his own concern. But we want to know what the composer has done for a work so dependent on music that it would be quite unthinkable without it.