

PHILADELPHIA STORY

THE report from here is a bit sunnier than usual. We have had many new things, though the parent body, the Philadelphia Orchestra, seems still to move along definitely conservative lines. With Ormandy, two important firsts and one pitifully minor were displayed. Beecham brought Virgil Thomson's dry *Second Symphony* and the attenuated and bare Delius *Piano Concerto*. The general tempo of progress is best illustrated by the fact that it has taken ten years for the reappearance of Aaron Copland on our orchestra's programs: in 1932 *Music for the Theatre* and finally in 1942 *El Salon Mexico*.

With Paul Wittgenstein as the instigator, Benjamin Britten produced his *Diversion on a Theme* for piano (left hand) and orchestra. I have heard a great number of Britten's works. In my opinion, he has never been a real voice, and with this latest opus my estimate became more definite. There were too many notes, too much dry trying, and very bad organization. In summary, a theme is stated, followed by eleven and a half variations. Britten specifically notes his attempt to show all possible varieties of treatment for a one-handed pianist; but there still remained unsolved the problem of two-eared audiences. One heard a Czerny-like canvass, full of "wrong" notes. The Ravel opus is pure gold by comparison. Britten needs to exercise more diligent self-criticism.

Robert Russell Bennett's *Eight Etudes* proved a delight. There's no doubt the fellow can score. Bennett manipulates the orchestra so as to make it a full-blooded seething mixture. There were concise contrasts, pithy contours to the melodic lines, and suavity in the humor. I found the sixth, an orchestral personification of the Grand Lama, best. This piece and the *Violin Concerto* convince me that Bennett at some time will be up front where he belongs. The other first was Eugene Bonner's *White Nights*, a horrific nothing.

Other orchestral performances around town have been disappointing. The NYA Orchestra played Henry Cowell's *Melting Pot Set*. I grow more and more convinced that Cowell's best direction is not along this road. Purely aimed for popular approval, it shows a direct writing-down which serves no real purpose whatsoever. I would like to see Cowell turn again to his experimental work which gave us some very good and vital things before, and which I do not doubt, would again. The *Rhumba* movement in this piece, a carefully contrived item with an eighth added to the basic rhythm, suggests that Cowell still nurtures such a desire. The WPA Orchestra gave the revised *Masterpiece* overture by Paul Nordoff. Sub-

stantially it added no luster to the weak effect of the entire opera, heard here last season. Nordoff comes to better grips with himself in chamber music.

The recitalists know none but the time-worn, hackneyed tracks. When the exceptions occur we either have the exquisite art of Elsie Houston (magnificent songs by Camargo Guarnieri and Villa-Lobos) or the hair-tearing transcription stupidities of the two-piano team of Whittemore and Lowe (Enesco's *Rumanian Rhapsody*; Ravel's *Bolero*).

In the field of chamber music the work of the Twentieth Century Music Group is tops. This organization only needs financial support to really move ahead. On its first program it introduced a curious work by Nicolai Berezowsky - his *Suite No. 2* for woodwinds. Berezowsky has always been one of our expert scorers and here again his skill was manifest; personally I found the work too long, and too full of clichés. The second movement, with its patternized waltz moving in fragmentary patches of color-sound was best. The Suite suffered a bit from a too academic performance. Piston's *Violin Sonata*, coming from this perfect craftsman, also seemed curious. There is Mozartian clarity and precision of expansion with neat manipulation of architectural detail in the first movement. A beautifully spun slow section follows. But I cannot understand the final movement, with its hat tipping to Tchaikowsky's *Piano Concerto*, or the fugato subject as if from Max Reger's *E♭ Major Quartet*. Amadeo Roldan's *Three Motivos de Son* shows poor writing for the piano. The soprano lines are nicely set and odd in their clinging outlines, but the piano seemed to serve as a pitiful reduction of an instrumental body. Hindemith's *Acht Stücke* for quartet showed his sure hand at work in a sketchy form.

The same organization presented an evening of music by Philadelphians. Best was Isadore Freed's *Postscripts*, delightful and droll, for four women's voices and piano. Set to *Saturday Evening Post* texts they showed a very different composer from the one known to us in the quartets and piano pieces. Far from being functional, the music surrounds the smart-aleck patter with deft conclusiveness. The blackout ending device is used several times and produces, as in *Paging Emily Post*, a sort of thumbs-to-the-nose effect. These items should become very popular. Vincent Persichetti was represented by an effective quartet, written three years ago. Although extremely derivative, it displayed a tight hand and a purposeful restlessness. The block segmatic unisons and fifths used in building up the second movement, of course stem directly from Hindemith's *Third*

Quartet. A better organized top line and a greater usage of the sonorities of the quartet body would improve his writing. Jeanne Behrend's *From Dawn to Dusk* is a little too naïve for my taste, especially when performed as a solo piano suite. The orchestral arrangement by the composer is better; in that form it is acceptable fare for children's orchestral programs. I found nothing of interest in the insignificant *Five Songs* by Romeo Cascarino. In addition, this reviewer's *Music for Brass Instruments* was played.

TAYLOR'S THIRD

The Philadelphia Opera Company gave the world premiere, in its home town, of Deems Taylor's third operatic effort, *Ramuntcho*, before a swank first night audience gathered from New York and Philadelphia. The libretto (also by Taylor) is drawn from Pierre Loti's novel of Basque life. My impression however can only deal with the score, its physiognomy and purposes; I saw nothing of the stage, being in the pit orchestra for this occasion.

Taylor, as might be expected, is not one to set forth on an operatic crusade. Completely cast in old molds, the form consists throughout of set pieces, with little dramatic interplay, all layered with lush melodic lines. One found elongated arias, duets, a love quartet, a drinking song, a ballet section (the latter the best sustained piece of writing in the three acts). All this is projected via usages of leitmotif à la Wagner, and opulent brass inter-twined with contrapuntally thick strings à la Strauss. It isn't too sugary and moves mostly with a metronomic impetus sufficient for sustained liveliness. Substantially it shows Taylor as one of our best eclectics. This score is far superior to his *King's Henchman* or *Peter Ibbetson*. With Sylvan Levin as the dynamic manipulator at the controls, the work was given a perfect performance by the most progressive opera company in the country.

Arthur Cohn