

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

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## MID-SEASON, NEW YORK, 1940-41

**E**VEN the talk about Arnold Schönberg had been over for a long time. It had already been decided, but not as a result of actual hearings, that all the works, before as well as of the twelve-tone period, were emotionally "bad" and subversive and the technical substructure artificial. With an effortless sweep the superb performance of *Pierrot Lunaire* by the New Friends of Music dispelled all that. From the very opening one plunges into a phantasmagoric dream-world, where the experience is extremely affecting, yet somehow impersonal, the reaction of the listener a vicarious observing rather than an intimate participation. Although the piece does not substitute the analysis of emotion for actual emotion, as in the later music, it has the typical Schönberg aloofness, neither cynical nor scornful. The sheer sound of the work is compelling and unique. Icy and with a distant but intense sparkle, it seems almost to emanate from another world. Such distinction and meaning to each note are hardly equaled even in the later Stravinsky. Above hovers the *Sprechstimme* like a subtle effluence of the instrumental parts. The masterful technic is never obvious, always subservient. Behind all, one feels the weight of Schönberg's aristocratic and commanding personality, of the emotion yet not its slave.

The new *Second Kammer-symphonie* (New Friends of Music) was disappointing. It is difficult to consider this work, written in two distinct periods, as a product of the mature Schönberg. In fact it seemed not even as well done as the important early works, more conservative and less distinguished in its material. The emotional quality was sick, frustrate, and unhappy to too real a degree. I missed completely the peculiar objectivity which makes *Pierrot Lunaire* palatable, also its distinguished instrumental sound. The diabolical humor of the *Allegro* was quite ordinary. Best were the closing sections of the two movements, similar in material, which achieved a placid quality full of hidden depths.

Alexander Zemlinsky, well-known here as Schönberg's teacher but unfamiliar for his own work, made his bid as a composer with a *Sinfonietta for Orchestra* (Philharmonic Symphony). Containing little of the expected influence of the pupil, it was yet Viennese and, though eclectic, showed a definite individual personality, elusive and complex, without being psychologically tortured. Clear and forthright in its presentation of material, the music was exuberant and so youthful that it frequently overflowed its boundaries to become thick and over-weighty for the essentially light quality of ideas.

In distinct contrast to the music of Schönberg is that of Paul Hindemith, with its bourgeois rapid turning-out of products according to stock measure, formal and expressive. Well-made for a demanding market, it lacks the intimate personal touch of the hand-finished object. A new *Sonata for Violin and Piano* played by Werner Lywen and Robert Pitney at a Town Hall recital showed once more that Hindemith's method has not changed, although his emotional quality certainly has. The long list of *Kammermusik*s has been replaced by an endless series of *Sonatas*. Mechanization of this sort may have been justified when Hindemith was writing the motorized music of his middle period, music marching relentlessly past all obstacles, dehumanized to the point of suggesting a triumphant non-organic world. Now that quiet, flowing, easy-going charm, *Gemütlichkeit*, wistful pondering and philosophizing are the thing, this mass production seems just a little bit smug. Thus I found myself more sympathetic to the famous Opus 36, Number 1 *Kammermusik*, the piano concerto, presented by the New Friends of Music (not the Opus 24, Number 1, as mistakenly announced in the program, even to tempo indications). The great fascination of this work, expertly played by Petri, lies in its electrical quality, its very individual sound. But it is too volatile a piece, emotionally barren, and suffers from the obvious plan of making an entire movement out of a few ideas, from the typical fugal excesses. Its fibrous strength is however almost a substitute for the expressive lack.

A relief from all this came at the concert and reception tendered Darius Milhaud by The League of Composers. His music has qualities which German music of today so infrequently gives us – imagination, delicacy, gayety, seriousness without heaviness, great purity and simplicity of approach and style, fine technic that never degenerates into mere display. If you are sympathetic to this, you would have found the whole program enjoyable, even to the *Album de Mme. Bovary*, a series of brief, naive

piano pieces, played with great charm by the composer in a café-like style. There was a similarity of mood in the program, but what contemporary composer comes out of a one-man concert completely unscathed? I know of few others who, with a series of minor works and excerpts, could provide an evening at the same time musically satisfying and so diverting. The *Ninth String Quartet* is distinguished by the lyric appeal of its opening movement, by the solidity of the entire piece which holds together the generally light moods expressed. The excerpts from *Christophe Colomb* hint at Milhaud's ability in handling epic subjects, at his bare, stripped, superhuman eloquence. It was as expert song-writer, however, that he shone. *Le Voyage d'Été* offers a constant stream of invention in its colorful piano accompaniments, a lyric loveliness in the vocal part, and an easy-going conversational quality. *La Cantate de l'enfant et de la Mère*, though difficult to grasp because of the strange text, has elfin mystery and charm; the icy, tingling sonority of the second part captivates. Let us hope that Milhaud will come to be felt as a fresh "foreign" influence here. We have much to learn from him; he is emotionally as well as technically significant.

Various organizations have lately been giving Shostakovitch quite a run. The Philadelphia Symphony did the premiere of the *Sixth Symphony*, the Boston Symphony decided to produce the *Fifth*, the Musical Art Quartet presented the first concert hall hearing of the *Quartet*, previously available in a recorded version, and the early *String Octet* was done by the Farbman String Symphonietta. The new symphony is a serious, philosophic old man followed by two gamins (suffering slightly from malnutrition) thumbing their noses. Seeming to lack both a true first movement and a finale, it produces a very unbalanced and incomplete impression. The heavy depths of the opening slow movement, too premature to be convincing, and the lunatic smartness of the very similar second and third have no bond. Shostakovitch appears to have become mired in a definitely limited emotional range. The piece is no more controlled, no less sloppy or hasty than the *Fifth Symphony*. The *Quartet* offered antique, deliberately gauche lyricism, owing much to Prokofieff and already made familiar in certain of the piano *Preludes*. It was unpretentious, but unexciting, yet had more real substance than either of its oversized brothers. A hearing of the *Octet*, with its most undistinguished first movement, proves that the composer has made one real step forward; his music is now all of an individual personal nature. His technic however has proceeded in retrograde motion, as has his taste. Not one new piece is as well-written as the *First Symphony*,

and all are shot through with a cheapness absent from his earlier work. At its best the music gives us something that the movies do, publicly spreading out emotion of an intimate nature – a certain lump-in-the-throat feeling, rather obvious, if undeniably real.

The music of Prokofieff is far more up-to-date. It never falls into over-pretentious late-romantic banality. *Le Fils Prodigue* (the Original Ballet Russe) is clean, healthy, athletically robust in its fast passages, imbued with the very special lyricism found in all his later slow music. This of course was not the first work to show his great melodic gift, but reaffirmed it. Never before had that peculiarly awkward cantabile, moving and beautiful in its very gaucherie, been so clearly presented. In the *Andante* from *Roméo et Juliette*, one of the two pieces from this ballet presented by Piatigorsky in his own arrangement for cello, the line is manipulated with great dexterity. What is sometimes merely awkward in the earlier work is here always suave and convincing.

The music of Nicolas Nabokoff is expansive, with a real flair for the long line, permeated by a solid neo-romantic feeling. The material, though not distinguished, has a definite personality, yet in this personality is a strange retiring quality, so that one's emotional reaction is never equal to the implied expressive content. The *Sonata Number 2* for piano (premiere by Leo Smit) runs a smooth course and did not suffer as much from this fault as the *Sinfonia Biblica* (Philharmonic), also a premiere, whose breadth, though neither pretentious nor over-elaborate, was not as impressive as it should have been. Everything is clear and planned, yet nothing hits you squarely between the eyes.

The Bartok *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (New School Chamber Orchestra) is certainly one of the true masterpieces of recent years. Its sonority is completely clear and has none of the muddiness so disturbing in parts of the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*. The excitement is almost unbearable in places, so long is it kept at such a high pitch, and the constant inventiveness in technical procedures produces an intellectual stimulation equally sustained.

### III

In the great onrush of Europeans, American composers were almost lost. They had a chance when the Chicago Symphony came to town, but did not make out too well. Roy Harris' *American Creed* is little more than a rehashing of the far better *Third Symphony*. It contains not only a blueprint reproduction of thematic material, but the same devices ap-

plied to the same type of idea, even a similar opening. All the obvious planning is to little avail; Harris seems unable to view his work critically in long sections. Climaxes are debilitated through some sort of misplacement. Constant basic quarter-note motion, sluggish and flat-footed, is unrelieved by the too late introduction of little rhythmic figurations. A lack of contrast between the sections and a general aimlessness result. It is pleasing to find Harris continuing in the line of his more popular style, although the material appears to be unproductive of really fresh thought. Above all I miss the clarity and unconfused directness of the preceding work.

John Alden Carpenter's *Symphony*, the saga of small-town bourgeois life in a film version, was hopelessly out of date. It had an irritating tendency to hover constantly on the borderline of good taste.

Better was the joint program of the NYA Symphony Orchestra and People's Philharmonic Chorus, opened by Aaron Copland's fresh, youthful *Outdoor Overture*, with its lovely second theme. William Schuman certainly has a feeling for the large, forceful, direct kind of music that his *Prologue* and *This is our Time*, both for chorus and orchestra, show that he wishes to write. Because his harmonic material is so ordinary however, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between these pieces and the average type of pot-boiler choral work. The more recent composition is more imaginative, creates and sustains quiet, sad moods also, yet much still seems merely pretentious. The ideas, excepting the excellent opening motive, are too largely pieced together from short-breathed fragments to obtain a broad sweep.

Of the many other orchestral works introduced this season, none were startling or of great import. Earlier the Philharmonic gave us Weinberger's trashy new *Song of the High Seas*, Randall Thompson's well-known *Second Symphony*, and Goossens' *Concertino for Double String Orchestra*. The last was entertaining and colorful in the manner of this composer, though never deep or very inventive. The main trouble with such stylistic revivifications is that the concerto grosso form seems an inorganic shell arbitrarily donned; fortunately it does not succeed in covering up the warm and essentially romantic personality underneath. Frederick Woltmann's *The Coliseum at Night*, is one of the many continuations of the Respighi series of pictures of Rome, shapeless mood-stuff. *Echt-Italian* came with Casella's *Suite Number 2* from *La Donna Serpente* and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Overture, The Merchant of Venice*. Both show that lowering of standards to which



Italians can descend when inspired by the theatre. Casella was at least forthright and simple, if bombastic and noisy; Tedesco was richly confused.

In Jacques Ibert's *Concerto for Cello and Ten Wind Instruments* (New Friends of Music) sophisticated sparkle and pastoral lyricism are exquisitely proportioned. The sound of the ensemble is a sheer delight. Very long and uninspired was Miaskovsky's *String Sinfonietta* (Orchestrette Classique). The much-heralded change in his music from tragic to brighter moods has brought only extreme conservatism and a flattening of personality. On the same program Creston in his *Marimba Concerto*, pleasant enough music, did little more for the instrument than does the average corny band. The *Psalms* for soprano and orchestra (Povla Frijsch with the National Orchestral Association) are the best Bloch, without the motives. Brazenly opulent, richly passionate, they make very beautiful settings indeed.

Recitalists also have continued to show healthy interest in contemporaries. There was Harrison Potter's program, containing the Schönberg *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, Marion Bauer's *White Birches*, and the Griffes *Sonata*. This Griffes work, surely one of the landmarks of American piano literature, reveals, a delicate poetry, passionate intensity and charged mysticism. Based on an arbitrary system, its material never becomes chained to a set design, as in the music of Scriabin and Bloch, which is similarly constructed. A *Konzertstück* for violin and piano of Victor Babin, played by Dorothy Minty, showed this composer on the move. Its excellent feeling for the exact number of notes resulted in a fine textural leanness. The style which has neo-classic origins, and the mood, serious and austere, achieved real unity.

An evening at the Friendship House devoted to "American Artists Interpreting Emigré Music" included, among others, Ernst Krenek, with a song cycle, "*Travel Diary from the Austrian Alps*", written in a deliberately old-fashioned, plushy, romantic style somewhat refreshingly modernized. In the *String Quartet*, Opus 41 of Karol Rathaus, I could wish for less eclecticism and more distinctive profile to the ideas, but it has convincing vigor (not à la Hindemith). On a later program featuring excerpts from "Little-Known Operas," samples of Ferruccio Busoni's *Doktor Faustus* and Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* stood out. Especially fine was the duet from the latter, broad, deeply dramatic, and of a very vocal lyricism. Memorable too was the well-nigh perfect performance of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* at the New School, Kolisch conducting. The only flaw here was the unusual order of the pieces which lost the very subtle and logical emo-

tional progression of Stravinsky's own version. This masterpiece, frequently accused of being "bone-weary," seems to keep its vigor amazingly intact, perhaps because it has real bones instead of the rubber facsimile of so much other contemporary music.

Donald Fuller

## HARRIS' FOLKSONG SYMPHONY

OF numerous American compositions heard during the convention of the Music Teachers' National Association in Cleveland, the *Folk-Song Symphony* of Roy Harris was the plat du jour, warmed over from two previous hearings within the week by the Cleveland Orchestra and Philharmonic Chorus under Rudolph Ringwall.

It is doubtful whether this work will prove any less provocative than a good many others from Harris' pen, but it certainly deserves the kind of reflection which only the highest forms of creative activity arouse. If we can agree on some minor issues such as calling this not a symphony but a series of five folksong settings plus two instrumental dance interludes, if it is admitted that the second movement based on two cowboy tunes is a little long and repetitious, if one concedes that the voices in one or two spots do not find their most expressive register and are overpowered by the brass, if we can condone the Harris tendency to put a good many eggs in one basket, then the ground may be cleared for viewing the essence of the music. This is totally and overpoweringly magnificent in its rich outpouring of lyricism.

There are a half-dozen first rate American folksongs in the work, from *Johnny Comes Marching Home* to *The Gal I Left Behind Me*. To assimilate this material, words and all, and to give it out as something so fresh and momentous as does this music, is to meet a supreme artistic challenge comparable to the decorative problem of the chorale prelude. It requires a subjective approach, an identification of self with the material, such as few composers have ever mastered. It almost involves nourishing the exalted conviction, *le peuple, c'est moi*. Yet I find nothing presumptuous about such an attitude in Harris, because his expression of it shows too deep a reverence for emotional realities to bear any symptoms of megalomania.

The fluidity of his harmony, the variety of his cadences, the ever-broadening current of melodic and rhythmic invention which gives such an extraordinary sense of growth to his form — all these suggest a mind attuned to an inmost spiritual center where all things are one. It is in the