

RECENT BOOKS

ENTHUSIASM BUT NO CRITERIA

A WARM personal enthusiasm pervades Milos Safranek's *Bobuslav Martinu, The Man and His Music* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1944) and gives it a sincerity, likeability and ease wholly missing from last year's premature, high-pressure effort on Shostakovich. Yet here too, purely musical achievement is not the springboard for a study, apparently intended as definitive, of a composer still in the midst of his career. The author attributes to Martinu's music an intent comparable to that of a high-minded political figure: the "principles of Masaryk" who "has given a historic mission (to Czechoslovakia) in a most constructive and human program . . . may be applied to Martinu's work . . ." Thus: "He stood for disinterested collaboration rather than for any conscious effort towards the creation of social art. But he wanted to have the artist's task clearly defined, as in the Gothic period — only from the human point of view rather than the religious. In this inner struggle Martinu is a true son of the Czech nation . . ." The plug is in, but more for the homeland than for the composer himself. Just how Martinu is "creating for this new world with perseverance and also with success," as the author, in his introduction, promises to show, is never made very clear. A questionable premise is offered as foundation: ". . . great discoveries in the sciences . . . have brought so much exhilarating inspiration to artists and philosophers that the composer now has greater freedom than ever to become an

integral part of the world as a whole." That Martinu "comes as close as anyone else (in the whole of his mature work) to expressing the feelings of his fellow man" is a piece of personal bias that remains unproved.

The lack of real substance behind this sort of analysis brings confusion and even contradiction. Possibly some of the indecisive effects are due to the translation. Such inept phrasing as "the indulgence of a bird's-eye-point of view" makes one suspicious.

There is similar dependence on intuitive feeling and half-digested knowledge in the discussion of the music itself. The poor admission is made, about the *Piano Trio*, that "the effect of this new technic is most successful, although it cannot be defined." This statement is illustrated by a quotation in which the Stravinsky and Hindemith neo-classic method of the period is obvious. Likewise Safranek seems unaware that his insistence on the influence of the *concerto grosso* style in Martinu's work hardly proves that "his compositions are in a manner of his own, having no relation to current fashions." A section on the stage works uncovers some unfamiliar material but the composer can only be harmed by the comment, that he always maintains "a primary interest in the unity of the musical conception, which he never sacrifices to considerations of action or characterization."

The events of Martinu's life, as befits their none too novel nature, form interludes between the sections devoted to

the various works. It is monograph rather than biography technic. There is a generous sampling of critical reaction to Martinu's music, a good index and catalogue of his output, all showing careful research and a scholarly mind. But

Safranek is too occupied with the extra-musical meaning of his subject, and the qualities brought to more routine tasks hardly suffice for a convincing essay on musical matters.

Donald Fuller

ENCYCLOPEDIA, STILL-BORN

MUSIC FOR THE MILLIONS (Arco Publishing Co.) is a sort of encyclopedia compiled by the prolific David Ewen. The only reason for mentioning it in MODERN MUSIC is the fact that most outstanding contemporary composers here and abroad are included. It is a big, heavy book, 673 thick, luxurious pages printed in large, readable type on which "virtually all the great men in music up to our own day" are arranged in alphabetical order. Each gets a short biographical note, a paragraph deciding his "place in music," determined either by Mr. Ewen or by someone whom Mr. Ewen quotes, and a discussion of each of his "outstanding" works, grouped together according to the form in which they are written.

Presumably the book is to serve as a handy reference work for that popular but doubtful character, the bewildered concert-goer and radio listener. It is to save him a tiring trip to the li-

brary and persuade him to the unfortunate illusion that knowledge is really easy to come by. Actually it is no reference work at all, in spite of its encyclopediac costuming, but merely a compendium of program notes about those works of music which most frequently figure on current popular programs. Under the guise of giving information, it attempts to dictate ("Today, Schönberg's music neither shocks nor magnetizes nor pleases."), and by confining the discussion to "masterpieces," it attempts to perpetuate a concert repertory that is certainly a matter of continually changing fashion.

Mr. Ewen revels in the inaccurate cliché. Haydn is the "father of orchestral music;" Purcell is the "father of English music;" Satie, "the father of humor in music." It is to be hoped that he himself is not fathering a new and insidious type of encyclopedia.

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