

# FORECAST AND REVIEW

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## STRAVINSKY'S VISIT; NEW MUSIC IN 1945

TWO dynamic visitors were the focus of interest in the first months of 1945. Igor Stravinsky came to the New York Philharmonic with a sheaf of recent, and earlier, unfamiliar music, and Hector Villa-Lobos took over in several spots as an almost official representative of the good neighbor policy.

We would have liked the *Symphony* from Stravinsky, but even with this omission, he has never before so concentrated on the work his admirers most respect. The *Piano Concerto* has been heard here rarely, and not for many years. It has terrific impact. An impressive, hardshelled opening moves suddenly to sparkling activity, sustained with an unsurpassed force and grand line. The slow movement is elegant and solid, a touching interlude. The finale dances again with high good spirits and no relapses. The sounds made by this almost stringless orchestra in combination with the piano are striking. On the way there are notes which do not have the absolute rightness of the most recent music, references to the past which are not so well assimilated as they are today. But the amazing vigor of this work, its carrying power, are absent from the late, tender distillations, with their fussy emphasis on tiny detail and the fragmentary effect of their many small sections.

Of the new pieces, the *Ode*, a gracious memorial, is certainly superior. It combines the grave respect of an elegantly inscribed marble testimonial in a calm, appropriate setting, with gentle remembrances of the small, happy moments of living. Sonorous harmonic phrases that recall the *Symphonies pour instruments à vent*, alternate with flowing, mobile episodes, which ride by like passing scenery. The lovely *Eclogue*, "suggesting out-of-door music," has the grand line in a small-scale version. The emotion finally becomes a little remote, but the work eases off into eternity with much grace.

The *Four Norwegian Moods* remain of minute interest, but their slim precision took on distinction when heard after the new *Scènes de Ballet*. Even performed in its entirety (the version used for the *Seven Lively Arts* is said to be considerably garbled), this work's sectional quality is only too exposed. Nothing develops to any great length, and the scenes seem more like sketches than complete little entities. The rather gaudy tone of some of the music, though possibly appropriate, is not carried off with much conviction. *Jeu de Cartes* is also a bit too present for any but a Billy Rose audience. Each concert was rounded off with an earlier, but more spontaneous and likeable, version of a similar approach, the *Circus Polka*.

The music of Villa-Lobos is full of likeable things too, but they rarely add up to a complete picture. The composer appeared first at a concert and reception tendered by the League of Composers. His songs are rhythmic sentimentalities, his piano pieces effective miniatures, which at times become inflated and heavy through mere pianistics. For anything but tidbits Villa-Lobos seems to need the large orchestra to evoke his personality. The *Second Trio* for violin, cello, and piano is a dreary romantic-impressionistic waste. The two *Chôros* for violin and cello are so full of unusual and "characteristic" sounds for the instruments that little but an ugly scraping and picking results. With the Philharmonic Villa-Lobos conducted two of the large numbers of the *Chôros* series, the eighth and ninth. They offer colorful scenic displays and the excitement of an amplified, mass rhumba. Sentiment, as the composer points out, is the "dominant note," but his statements about the new form of these highly improvisational *Chôros* are to be taken lightly.

Form appears much more convincingly in the *Bachianas Brasileiras*, of which he conducted the seventh with the New York City Symphony. The Bach side is a little obscure, but if we owe to it the clarity and point, well and good. Here the jungle growths are forgotten, and the nostalgic tunes, somewhat metamorphosed, shape a relaxed but balanced work. *Uirapuru*, a symphonic poem with a fantastic program, brought us back to the travelogue sound-track. After assorted bird calls and primitive stampings, Villa-Lobos again fails to show that mere sounds and colors can supplant the essential matter of music, and so one loses interest in the later episodes. Though none of these works carried the composer beyond the early thirties, it is a pleasure to note that the most recent piece was by far the most satisfactory.

The Bela Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra* (Boston Symphony) combines to an unusual degree both his popularized treatment of and more serious derivations from folk tunes. The two styles mix well, but there is a real conflict in the incessant contrasts of mood. These break up the line, following each other in no very convincing emotional progression. It is like a long series of even little mounds. The arching spans provided by climax and relaxation are largely missing. Thus the three small-form middle movements come off best. The work is really more of a divertissement than a "symphony-like orchestral work," but planned on too great a scale for such patchy treatment. Bartok's mysteriously *tremolando* strings in slow chromatic ascent or descent are becoming something of a mannerism.

But for really debilitating cliché see the *Second Symphony* by Bohuslav Martinu (Philadelphia Orchestra). One admires his security in handling the symphonic form, his unpretentious ease. But the misty, shimmering passage work which he still trots forth is no longer new and exciting. It simply serves to gild the lyricism and conceal its lack of true melodic profile. The tunes are graceful, but soft and tautologous. It all needs more bite.

*The Prairie* for soli, chorus, and orchestra by Lukas Foss (Philharmonic), though far too long and weighted down by the fruitless choice of a Carl Sandburg text, is impressive for its controlled handling of such a full medium. The opening, undeniably effective, proclaims his debt to Copland, but later he has much to say on his own. Some fast, pulsing sections, with a strong, hard flavor, and a simple, nostalgic evening episode stand out above the more expected choral developments which, as in all such huge efforts, serve only to mark time.

A League of Composers commissioned piece, the *Scherzo* by Burrill Phillips (premiere by the New York City Symphony), is an expanded discourse on a trite motive of descending thirds. When Phillips gives up juggling this long enough to get lyrical, his melody loses direction through too diverse polytonal pull. And I don't think a scherzo has to be half macabre to qualify as such. In the *Sensemaya* by Silvestre Revueltas, a rhythmic background, rather persistently ostinato-like, really becomes the foremost element of the piece. The little tuneful sprays that are thrown off against it never come to much. It cried out for more expansive singing.

Henry Cowell's *Fanfare for the Forces of our South American Allies*,

in which a languid folksong was cleverly treated in chorale style, with inter-phrase brilliant trumpetings, and Anis Fuleihan's *Fanfare for the Medical Corps* have served to open the City Symphony's concerts. Fuleihan was also represented by a *Concerto for Theremin* (this sounded like fifty mothers all singing lullabies to their children at the same time), and at the National Orchestral Association by a *Concerto for Two Pianos*. For lyricism there are little step-wise passages and changing-note devices distended with meaning. The harmonic scheme sets major triads against each other in chord streams. The mood, slow or fast, is perpetually pensive. It is all rather well managed, but so limited.

The New York Chamber Orchestra performed the *Concerto for Small Orchestra* by Albert Roussel, vigorous and richly expressive, in the manner of the *Third Symphony* and the *Suite en fa*. An unexpectedly fresh *Serenade* by Nicolai Miascowsky proved more appealing than any of this composer's orchestral works so far. Early in the program a shameless *Violin Concerto* by Vittorio Giannini was given its premiere.

### III

The first of the League of Composers' chamber music programs was all New York premieres. Most musical and promising was Sergeant Allen Sapp's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. It achieves style without striving, and its emotions grow freely and naturally. In the *Piano Sonata* by Louise Talma, neo-classic leanings made for some unpleasant austerity, with jerky and nervous statements in fast tempi. A long line of considerable melodic interest showed up in the *Larghetto*. The *Three Songs* by Blas Galindo were just pleasantly folksy, but more aware of the nature of song than the *Four Poems by Robert Burns* of Arthur Kreutz. Against his undistinguished vocal lines he pitted a piano and string quartet. There was not enough for them to do, so when all played, heavy redundancies covered the voice. The *String Quartet in E minor* by Herbert Elwell is able but dull. All contact with contemporary trends seems disclaimed as the easiest way out.

At the second program, two groups of interesting new songs had to be cancelled. A substitute offering consisted of one of Douglas Moore's Shakesperian settings, the *Preciocilla* by Virgil Thomson, and a new Theodore Chanler number, *The Flight*. This was on the long and sluggish side, not up to his most intuitive evocations. Leo Smit performed his *Piano Suite*, sonorous and excellently conceived. It has a vitality which will be better when it breaks away from its very Coplandesque leanings.

The *Piano Quartet* by Martinu was given a re-hearing, and another work for this medium by Robert Casadesus received its premiere. This is a kind of sharpened-up Fauré, very correct, whose sculptured lines remain rather uncommunicative.

A new series has been started at the Museum of Modern Art by a revived National Association for American Composers and Conductors. A farewell gesture, one hopes, was made to its former policies with the opening performance of the *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* by Daniel Gregory Mason. The two programs already given then listed such works as the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* by Aaron Copland, the *Stabat Mater* by Virgil Thomson, the *Fourth String Quartet* by Quincy Porter, the *Eight Epitaphs* by Theodore Chanler, and the *Three Excerpts from the Prophet Nehemiah* by Frederick Jacobi. Three *Shakesperian Songs* by Arthur Kreutz were even more overburdened than his other cycle, using this time both a woodwind and string quartet. Arthur Berger's finely-textured, jaunty and exuberant *Quartet for Woodwinds in C major*, and a *Toccata for Two Pianos* by Fuleihan were also heard.

The Society for the Publication of American Music celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with a beautifully performed program by the Gordon String Quartet. Douglas Moore's *Quartet for Strings* has a natural, friendly spontaneity, good humor and graceful sentiments, which come from an easy familiarity with the lighter music of the American people. Charles Martin Loeffler's distant beauty, in his *Music for Four Stringed Instruments*, is expressive without ever being very affecting. Quincy Porter's quartets, of which the sixth was done this evening, now all appear to be much of the same thing. Despite their excellent grasp of the medium they pall. Intensely played scale-like melodies fail to free themselves from gravitational pull. The lyricism, it is true, is kept up for broad periods, but is finally cut off through sheer frustration, never having really gone anywhere.

The Temple Emanu-El, to celebrate its centenary, opened a series, "A Hundred Years of American Music." Religious works from a century ago, and historical and national songs, framed the central, more contemporary part of the program. There were choral pieces by Randall Thompson and Mabel Daniels, chamber-orchestral works by Emerson Whithorne and Charles Griffes. Lazare Saminsky, who of course directed the whole, composed an orchestral *Rhapsody on "Dunlap's Creek"* for the occasion, a reflective rumination on a Western hymn. Specially written too was



Elliott Carter's *Another Music* for women's voices and chamber orchestra. The choral writing was expert, the instrumental parts artfully sustained. Some lovely, still sleepy, matinal music later gave place to very wide-awake vigor. Carter is obviously among our best-equipped composers for significant choral works.

Donald Fuller

## THE RICH AND VARIED NEW YORK SCENE

THE range of styles and technics to be heard during the present mid-season in New York has been extraordinary. Practically every known modern idiom, and at least one new one, were represented. It is possible to come out of the welter with a sensation that one is hearing Babylonian tongues and to heave a long Spenglerian sigh. On the other hand one may adopt the American athletic attitude and rejoice in the healthy variety of fighting teams at present battling their way towards the international cup.

The orchestral fare is an apt demonstration. I have heard a *Symphony* by Miaskovsky (his twenty-first) directed by Stokowski at the City Center that was in every way clear, expressive and unpretentious. In stylistic approach it was a high flown, even flowery outgrowth of the late romantic. But the idiom is so very constant in expressivity that it ceases to suggest specific emotions. The technic becomes neutral and valid for musical structure in itself. This is a fascinating achievement. It points the way, along which the musical practices of Schönberg, Berg, Ives and Ruggles tend, towards a conquest of their nineteenth century heritage by the simple device of going directly through it and coming out on the other side with once more purely musical matter.

On the other hand I also heard a *Piano Concerto* by Ernest Gold as played by Leon Barzin with the National Orchestral Association at Carnegie Hall that was a commercialized adaptation of all the most successful rabble-rousers known to the present century. The same program, however, had Barzin redeeming himself with Nicolai Berezowsky's *Violin Concerto*. This was a neat, not too grand, but most musical work, in the best of taste and having a central slow movement that is highly effective in its minimal subject matter and delicate workmanship. It is written in the half-way house of technical usage that is also the home of composers like Lopatnikoff and Nabokov. These men enjoy a community of style, situated dead center between Debussy and Hindemith, which almost points to the existence of a "school" that might have a name, perhaps