

## COMPOSERS, SINGERS AND CHAMBER MUSIC

THE current New York season makes one think that suddenly some sort of trust may have been formed between composers and singers. Practically every singer to grace a concert hall this year presents you with a program studded with "first performances." What is enlivening is the fact that so many good songs and choral works are being written.

An all-contemporary program by Janet Fairbank featured a first of Benjamin Britten's *Seven Sonnets* to texts of Michelangelo. Why have composers taken so long to discover the sonnet as a singable possibility especially since there exist a number of fine sonnet series and sequences around which to build a sort of vocal suite? Britten's choice of texts offered him a rich background musically, of which he made wonderful use. However, it is not just for the skillful evocation of high-renaissance spirit that these works are admirable but for a genuine feelingness that pervades them. In contrast to the fluidity, and at the same time stiltedness, of much modern song one is struck by the expressiveness of these pieces. The processes of pastiche are there in full, and well digested, but what is so apt to become a Chinese game of "classical scholarship," in this case gave us a thoroughly alive and expressive work.

A series of *Three Divine Sonnets* to poems of John Donne by Douglas Moore were less successful. The vocal lines, if we had not known the nature of the poem, might easily have been imagined as telling of the beauties of some mermaid on the coral isles. This discrepancy, however, was not a condition of the third piece. The piano score, again excepting the third, was very ornate and concerto-like.

Of three songs by John Edmunds, *The Isle of Portland* and *Loveliest of Trees*, were in his unaffected and sensitive lyric vein; the third, *Jerusalem*, a dry and formless exercise in heterophonic counterpoint. Edmunds' sense of melody is very pleasing when he doesn't hide it under a bushel of polyphony. Among other pieces sung on the same program were *Three Fables* by Marcelle De Manziarly and *Cinq chansons polonaises* by Poulenc all in the post-Ravel style, and three very fine songs by Paul Nordoff. *If There are any Heavens* had a very carefully controlled radiance and a free-floating phrase that gave it a genuine ecstatic quality. *Lacrima Christi* made use of a tense and oppressive figuration that was very moving.

Another new Britten work, *Ode To St. Cecilia* was given an expert rendering by the Collegiate Choir directed by Robert Shaw at Town Hall.

I did not find this as interesting as the Michelangelo sonnets, but it is difficult to guess what the whole work would sound like. The excerpts had clarity and charm and a surprising way of shifting about common chords, slightly after the Max Reger fashion. It certainly is well written for the choir and one looks forward to a complete performance. This appeared on a program devoted to English choral music, and a word must be said about the strength and importance of this field. Perhaps because of their well known devotion to the oratorio the English have been able to carry their tradition of choral composition into the contemporary style with strength and more success than any other people. Seldom does the music become unvocal; usually it has an integration and purpose seldom found in today's choral music. All this was very clear throughout the program but particularly in Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* and in three beautiful works of Peter Warlock who perhaps comes out on top for the expressiveness of his registration and the atmosphere of his pieces.

## III

Perhaps the best way of describing Miklos Rosza's *Variations*, played by the Philharmonic, is as a series of tableaux. We first see the shepherd of the fields playing his solitary English horn; over here a middle-European Cleopatra combs the harp-glissandi out of her hair. But suddenly the savages stalk in on parallel fifths and for a while there is a terrific orchestral battle. Again the heroine, the shepherd and so on. This is all achieved with utmost symphonic facility and resonance, but somehow it doesn't come off as a piece of music.

I went to an All-Soviet Concert at Carnegie Chamber Hall hoping wistfully to hear some new composers, or even retrospectively some Miasowsky. But no, the U.S.S.R. is still represented to our ears chiefly by a certain well worn polka and assorted Prokofiev. Shostakovitch's *Cello Sonata* is, for me, rather long but does have some fine movements. A really interesting dance-like scherzo which forms the second movement seemed to have music of more account than any other piece I can think of by him. The piano and cello were carefully matched and each instrument had gay tunes in the most telling relationships to one another. The other movements were diffuse and long. The cellist spent much of his time applying and removing mutes. The concert ended with an amusing trifle by Prokofiev, *Overture on Yiddish Themes*. Wouldn't it be possible for our Soviet friends to send us more Miasowsky and a selection of works by lesser known composers? It would certainly increase our interest in their musical

art and might even quiet the audience down so one could hear what goes on up on the stage. I have an old-fashioned desire to listen to the music being played. In short, let's have concerts, not club meetings.

Muriel Kerr played, at Town Hall, the *Piano Sonata Number Two* by Anis Fuleihan. It was the strangest combination of musical events; a slight impressionistic touch, much Liszt, and the several "wrong notes" of neo-classicism all put together. I was able to hear the form of each movement clearly, however; and this saved it from completely falling apart. All-in-all it seemed like a bicycle ride through musical lands of the near-present. Four piano works of Theodore Chanler played by John Kirkpatrick at Times Hall I found very lovely, *Prelude and Fugue in D Major*, *Prelude in C Minor*, and *Toccata in E $\flat$  Major*. These works were written at various times but all congeal to give a similar and stable impression of a sense of style. Each was clear and clean and imaginative. They are obviously the result of intense thinking about the polyphonic type of organization, and though absolutely uncompromising are beautiful achievements. What most impressed me was the refinement of detail. Each voice proceeds in a logical but unexpected manner; and for a change, the whole tessitura of the pieces lies rather high. I don't know whether or not it was due to Kirkpatrick's seraphic performance but I was sure that this was precisely what would happen if one should turn the crank on Paul Klee's fabulous *Twittering Machine*.

Lou Harrison

## AMERICAN SYMPHONISTS IN LOS ANGELES

WITHIN the interval of a month, Los Angeles audiences have made the acquaintance of three American symphonies, which is something of a record for this community. Wallenstein played Paul Creston's *First* and Robert Russell Bennett's *Four Freedoms*; Janssen gave a hearing to William Schuman's *Third*. None of the three is a completely satisfying work, and all are marred by some degree of pretentiousness. There is pretension in Bennett's assumption that the framework of a stylish manner can encompass the idealism of the *Four Freedoms*, even when that idealism has been diluted and provincialized in the Norman Rockwell paintings which served as inspiration. There is pretension in Schuman's noisy insistence that we watch him contemplate himself in an epic role for four solemn movements. And there is pretension, though of a more subtle variety, in Creston's use of the symphony as a vehicle for ideas which lack the sub-