

## ROCHESTER SEES "ANTHONY COMSTOCK"

THOSE who reiterate that the public does not like American music should visit Rochester sometime during the American Festival and observe that public taking this music to its arms!

I unfortunately missed the first two concerts of works by Stoessel, Saminsky, Rogers, Wagenaar, Inch, Rudin, Laurence Powell, La Monaca, and Hanson. The third program was a

piano recital by a brilliant young graduate of the school, Irene Gedney. Her playing cannot be eulogized according to its merits here, but must be waived for a discussion of the music. The *Variations in A minor* by Edward Royce have been made familiar by Harold Bauer and, though harmonically conservative, are a fine structural example for others of our young composers. They are brilliantly effective, difficult of execution, but the difficulties are well worth overcoming. Three works of Griffes were played, the *Sonata*, and, as encores, an excerpt from *Roman Sketches* and a *Scherzo*. Griffes composed in the grand manner. He is sometimes obscure, sometimes exceedingly popular in style, but there is always a broad sweep, an emotional directness, an understanding closeness to life that are overwhelming—the magic touch of a completely creative nature.

Gruenberg's *Polychromatics* is an effective light suite, wittily conceived, not strikingly original, belonging to what I call the neo-jitters school of American music. But this suite and the groups of short pieces which followed it by Lazar Weiner and Morton Gould, are adroit and brilliant piano music in the modern vein. The last of Gould's *Three Conservative Sketches* is a whirlwind Satirical Dance, intensely pianistic, revealing a technical virtuosity in composition, rivaled only by the virtuosity required to interpret it. Aside from this and the Griffes encores Miss Gedney played Howard Hanson's early and ingratiating *Clog Dance*, and a clumsy piano arrangement of a lyric excerpt from his *Romantic Symphony*.

The next event was a concert by the Rochester Philharmonic under Hanson's baton—a program of provocative unevenness. Whatever Hans Spialek's orchestral technic in *The Tall City*, it cannot gloss over its paucity of invention and tediousness. Werner Janssen's *Dixie Fugue* had potentialities rather lost in groping. It seemed confused and missed fire at the points where fire was needed. The composer's skill is unquestioned, but his choice of idea perhaps too arbitrary. On the other hand Mark Wessel's *Holiday* and *Song and Dance* are fairly vigorous and attractive. *Holiday* is a free rondo on old fiddler tunes such as *Devil's Dream* and the *Arkansas Traveler*. The *Song* is wistfully beautiful and the *Dance* a successful finale based on jazz.

Wessel's technic has grown, but for creative vitality he still has to live up to a peculiarly haunting concerto for horn and orchestra from his pen a few years ago. *Selections from McGuffey's Reader* by Burrill Phillips is subdivided into the *One Hoss Shay*, *John Alden and Priscilla*, and *Paul Revere*. These essential elements of American education are viewed through the eyes of a young modern; the Shay's fiddle tunes are alternated with jazz and accompanied by zylophone triads, while the sentimentalities of *John Alden and Priscilla* have an unmistakable tint of blue. The actual crumbling and apotheosis of the Shay are so effectively handled, one can hardly credit the rumor that the day of program music is over. Phillip's orchestral technic is superb.

The high spot of the evening was Bernard Rogers' *Three Japanese Dances*. This is the most successful orchestral work so far by this gifted man. It is in delicate miniature, subtle, exquisite, sensitive, and, with the exception of the closing *Sword Dance*, conceived with an economy of material possible to a distinguished creative imagination. The first is called *Dance with Pennons*. The second, *Mourning Dance*, is eerily sombre—a flute solo accompanied by gongs and cymbals, with an off-stage voice singing, unaccompanied, a verse of Masfield's Japanese drama, *The Faithful*. *The Dance of Swords* is in high contrast, using every percussive resource of the orchestra.

Two ballets were presented the last evening by Dr. Hanson and the Philharmonic Orchestra, the choreography by Thelma Biracree. William Grant Still's *Sahdji* was produced in Rochester two years ago with great success. The chorus takes an active part in the legend and at intervals a chanter recites old African proverbs. Still has a fine sense of the theatre, and this African legend is tense and dramatic. The score is simple, replete with the orchestral color for which Still is famous. It has definite inconsistencies of style. Harlem and South Carolina drop in on the African Choral wails and tom-toms frequently, and there are moments when the material seems tenuous. Voluptuous simplicity characterizes the melodic line, and the work never lacks emotion. It is perhaps not lasting, but very good theatre.

The other ballet, *Anthony Comstock, or a Puritan's Progress* is the highly original work of Martha Alter. Miss Alter is a

pupil of Gow, Bingham and Goldmark, and recently in Rochester of Royce, Rogers and Hanson. She writes in a clean-cut manner, with force, sentiment, and humor. The scenario, for which Gerald McGarrahan was a collaborator, treats of the life of Anthony Comstock, that self-appointed censor of public morals. The conflict between nonconformists and censors is the underlying subject of the ballet. It opens, after a sombre overture, with a gay street scene in front of a bar and book store in the Seventies. Gay country dances to tunes in early American style are followed by an ingratiating steam calliope type of melody to which dance three "Gay Ladies." Comstock and his grey clad supporters arrive to take the joy out of life. An art dealer is arrested because there are naked cupids on his picture; a book buyer, exquisitely danced by Evelyn Sabin, is censored for her purchase. A dance by a Satyr symbolizes the gay, withal evil spirits in people which the Comstockians strove to quell. Comstock tries to stop the students from drawing at the Art Student's League in his middle life, and just before his death he has a vision of an angel who triumphs over the Satyr. The music of this scene is most moving and presents Comstock in his other role of suffering human being as well as ludicrous kill-joy. He dies, but the struggle between two points of view continues, and is represented in a finale.

Miss Alter treats her subject with great finesse; her music is scintillating and polished. The composer is without question a distinguished talent, and my opinion, shared by many musicians present, is that this is the most significant major work produced so far in this country by a woman.

The production was remarkably well handled for an amateur group with dancers who were not amateur dancers but trombone players and budding pianists recruited from the Eastman School. Dr. Hanson and Miss Biracree are to be congratulated.

*Adelaide Hooker*