

## FESTIVAL IMPRESSIONS—AMSTERDAM, 1933

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THE festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, held this year in Amsterdam from June 9th to June 15th, was not better than its predecessors of several years past; it appeared to be worse. That there were neither revelations of genius nor manifestations of independence from the prevailing tendencies of our times was no surprise. But a greater amount of music than heretofore seemed uninspired and technically weak. Freshness and spontaneity were almost entirely lacking and one looked in vain for a bit of amusement among these sober and self-conscious problem-children. The Central Europeans again brought forth works of an almost unrelieved post-Schönbergian hue.

One knows the difficulties of choosing the works for such a festival. Even the most competent group of musicians, meeting together for three days and in that time having to examine nearly a hundred pieces of contemporary music, cannot do their work very thoroughly. And it seems impossible in such an international gathering to wholly eliminate the play of politics. Must the festivals continue then to be as unenlightening and as dull as those of the past few years? . . . We think not entirely so.

There is, we believe, a fundamental fallacy in the attitude of the society toward contemporary music—if it is possible to speak of an “attitude of a society” which is, after all, composed of varying individuals each with his own tastes and principles. At the time when the Society was founded, eleven years ago, there appeared to be an approach to music which was indeed entirely new: the harmonic experiments of Schönberg seemed to open up unlimited vistas, the linear counterpoint of Malipiero and the audacious rhythms of Stravinsky led us to believe that the language of music was undergoing, and must continue to

undergo, inevitable and constant change. Art, we thought, must "progress;" along with bigger and better commercial enterprises we must have music more and more experimental. Varese, when asked whether his music was like that of Schönberg, appeared annoyed and answered that his music was far more "advanced." The question of the "progress" or mutations of art is one which cannot be briefly settled, since there is both truth and fallacy in almost any statement one may make on the subject. One thing, however, appears certain: and that is that the types of music which appeared new in 1922 certainly do not appear so now. And it is precisely the 1922 brand of novelty which, by and large, is being served up to us at the festivals of the I.S.C.M.



It is, we admit, far easier to choose music because of its obvious peculiarities than because of its intrinsic, and therefore more hidden, values. And in a period of experimentation as concentrated and as intense as the one through which we have but recently been living (and which is probably unprecedented in the history of music) the task of a jury was incomparably lighter than it is nowadays, a time which appears, rather, to be one of pause and stock-taking. I hold little plea for Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* (its obviousness and rather exterior effectiveness made it, in any event, out of place on these programs). Still there seems to be a tendency on the part of at least a certain group within the Society to belittle all the works which "sound well" and which fulfill the standards that they have set out to attain; and to favor, on the other hand, the unformed and the halt, the precious and the snobbistic. The fetish of an unintelligibility which is no longer unintelligible, seems still to prevail. There is little sense of a newer consciousness towards clarification, as opposed to mystification; of a renewed interest in form and a realization of the infinite possibilities which, through a deepening and a widening of the emotional content of a work as well as through a more careful and a more skillful handling of the purely musical ponderables, still remain open within the conventions left to us by the past. There is too much interest in "language" and too little in that more subtle thing

called "content." It is that, the writer believes, which gives to the I.S.C.M. its present anachronistic character.

A few more festivals such as these last ones and the I.S.C.M. will be dead. This would not, of course, be the death of "modern" music; for art does not allow itself to be capitalized. As soon as we build a Temple over one set of rocks the flow seems to go in some other direction. But we must be careful not to allow ourselves to become too comfortably installed among the novelties of the past; and above all not to cling to outworn conceptions of "novelty" as such. Meanwhile the I.S.C.M. is in a dangerous way; we can only hope that the coming festivals will be better, for the services of the Society to the cause of contemporaneous music have been incalculable.



Among the better works were: *Piano Concerto* by Paul Kadosa (Hungary), *Symphony No. 2* by Bertus van Lier (Holland), *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Opus 8, by Eduard von Borck (Germany), *Concertino for Piano et Orchestre* by Marcelle de Manziarly (France) and *Partita per Orchestra* by Goffredo Petrassi (Italy). Disappointing were the *Passacaglia i Coral* by the Spaniard, Robert Gerhard and the *Pater, Cantata for Soli, Chorus and Orchestra* by the young and gifted French composer, Jean Car-tan (who died prematurely some months ago). Both of these composers had made better impressions at previous festivals.

I have purposely not mentioned among the above the two American works: Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations* and Ruth Crawford's *Three Songs for Alto*, with accompaniment of oboe, piano and instruments of percussion. These works are known in America and need no reviewing here. They were admirably interpreted by Victor Babin and Madame Hans Gruys, respectively; and both works seem to have made an excellent impression.

An interesting experiment on the side-lines, so to speak, of the Festival proper, was the performance of the opera *Halewijn* by the Dutch composer, Willem Pijper. The work, in the end, does not quite "come off;" but it impresses nevertheless by its seriousness and its integrity and by a macabre quality which one did

not expect in a work distinctly "national" in character. Surprising too was the beauty of the language. In this medieval setting (the opera is based on an old Dutch legend and is distinctly reminiscent of *Pelleas*) it gave the impression of a sort of Chaucerian German.

The Festival closed with a concert of the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Chorus; Willem Mengelberg conducted magnificent performances of the *Symphonie des Psaumes* by Stravinsky and the *Missa pro Pace* by Rudolf Mengelberg.