

NEWS FROM OVERSEAS

A PRAGUE'S-EYE VIEW OF AMERICANS

Prague, June 1946

MUSICAL life in Czechoslovakia not only failed to deteriorate during the war, as might have been expected, but on the contrary gained in intensity and even more, became, under the occupation, the strongest activating force of the national conscience. No other art offered such a possibility for uncontrolled expression. For the Czech people music was the only common public medium of resistance, while through it the creative artist found the meaning and substance of his being.

This was perhaps the only advantage of the war: it returned honesty and naturalness to the creation of music, gave it a goal, a point for concentration. To this condition we owe Novak's *May Symphony* and *De Profundis*, J. B. Foerster's *Cantata Number 45* and, from the younger generation, Dobias's *Stalingrad*, Kaslik's *Morana*, Kabelac's *Don't Retreat* and Stanislav's *Red Army Symphony*. Bohuslav Martinu represents, on the other side of the world, the new fighting type of Czech traditionalist.

The Nazis, of course, excluded from concert and radio programs all "enemy" music, permitting us to hear only German and Czech compositions. Thus the possibility of comparison with works of other nations was greatly limited. Time has shown, however, that our musical development was undamaged. The activities of the Czech Philharmonic and other orchestral and chamber groups, under the guidance of the Association for Contemporary Music, enabled the public to keep in perpetual contact with new works.

The termination of the war allows Czechoslovakia once more to view artistic events of the world, to enter into free competition. The first post-war international music festival, "Spring 1946 in Prague," arranged to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Czech Philharmonic, finally brought satisfaction after so many years of a forced, one-sided diet. A series of ninety performances of all kinds gave us music of the United States, England, France and the USSR, with representative nationals performing works of their own countries.

Through the American compositions we learned that the western

hemisphere is becoming independent of European influences, finding its own manner of expression and producing real personalities. The jazz influence has receded; a strange instrumentation, hard of contour, and a comparatively sober harmonic scheme seem the characteristic features of the new American works. Rhythmic invention and the special style of orchestration are elements which might almost be termed "classical" Americanisms. Personalities who fascinated us most were Roy Harris, of the older generation, Samuel Barber and Leonard Bernstein of the younger.

Especially interesting in Harris's *Third Symphony* is the structure, whose formal principle lies in the logical and expressive combination of certain instrumental groups. The work lacks, however, the sharp and violent vitality which the rest of American music seems to have. Barber's characteristics are a sovereign knowledge of the technique of composition and an extraordinarily developed sense of how to construct wide planes and to contrast his thoughts. In this last respect his *Second Essay* was captivating. The ingenious *Excursions*, performed by the pianist, Firkusny, are excellently conceived for the instrument.

Young Bernstein, who also introduced himself as a very able conductor, does not belong to the group of cool constructivists. He is immensely musical and temperamental; his almost elemental vitality is like a trademark which gives his work backbone. The "*Jeremiah*" *Symphony* reveals this spontaneity and its inspired content gives it the quality of profound feeling. His stylistically uniform *Violin Sonata*, interpreted by Carroll Glenn and Eugene List, also deserves praise. No definite conclusions about the composer's profile emerge from William Schuman's *American Festival Overture*. He seems to be a definitely adroit workman whose music lacks individuality in performance.

Just as with the ballet suite, *Billy the Kid*, performed here some time ago, we could gain no serious impression from Aaron Copland's grotesque *El Salon Mexico*. Despite the charming use he makes of folk material and his instrumental inventiveness, we cannot believe that music, to be American, must be composed in this way and we look forward to the more important works of this composer, already famous here.

At the two English concerts, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, Benjamin Britten excited most attention with his *Four Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*. Britten is certainly the greatest hope of contemporary English music. Interesting also was John Ireland's *Piano Concerto*; its solo part has real style. The other composers lacked invention, temperament, orchestral color. A concert of works by Canadian composers, well conducted by CBC Director Jean Beaudet of Montreal, revealed absolute dependence on French and American influences.

An outstanding feature of the festival was the series of Russian con-

certs, which gave Prague the first chance to hear Soviet music. Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*, considered in his country to be his best achievement, was a disappointment. It fails to reach the monumentality and inner expressive power of the "*Leningrad*" *Symphony* or the sparkling wit and humor of the *Ninth Symphony*. But we were surprised by Kachaturian's *Piano Concerto*, with its entirely individual harmonic scheme, its neat use of popular melodies and Oriental rhythms, combined in a severe form.

The real peak of the festival, however, was reached in the French concerts under Charles Münch. Honegger's *Symphony* for string orchestra, composed in 1941, was, for its form, its full-bodied string texture, its invention and elaboration, the finest of contemporary works performed at any concert. Very remarkable also was the program of quarter-tone music, at which compositions by Haba and his pupils were played.

The closing evening of music, during which Firkusny performed Dvorak's *Piano Concerto*, was broadcast into Prague's streets because of the public's immense interest. This was the festive termination of the first peacetime display of the world's artistic efforts for us. In varying form, it will be repeated in Prague every year.

O. F. Korte

MODERNISM REVIVED IN ENGLAND

London, June 1946

THE first thing which strikes anyone returning to London after an absence of some time is the enormous increase in musical activity. Nearly twice as many concerts are being given here as before the war. Further experience however shows that, while the popular demand for music has certainly increased, the standard of performance has not always been maintained. Too many public concerts are presented with inadequate rehearsal, under mediocre conductors, and many of the new orchestras merely consist of different combinations of the same players. The loss of the Queen's Hall through bombing leaves only one orchestral concert room, the Albert Hall, which owing to its size and acoustic qualities is more suitable for circuses or boxing matches than music. As a result many concerts are now being given in theatres, which are not always adequate acoustically and in any case are only available on Sundays. The majority of these programs too follow the usual routine of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and little else. Nevertheless conditions have improved a good deal in the last year or so, and the visits of a number of distinguished foreign artists both from Europe and America have done much to encourage enterprise. In fact London music has become international again for the first time since 1939.

The composer who has chiefly come into the public eye here during