

## RECENT BOOKS

### PAMPHLETS AND PAMPHLETEERS

ART news from Russia not so long ago was an exotic bloom, difficult to raise, transport and handle. Crusading fervor has a way of flattening out the landscape; where every new symphony or song is tops, a major work is not easily distinguished from a minor and sometimes the tragic merges with the comic. Criticism has been published inside Russia, we know, but certainly not for export. Another thorny barrier has been the density of idiom, and I don't mean of the Russian language, but of international dialectics. However, that obscurantism has plenty of adherents elsewhere. One of the great fiascos of all time was the barbarously literal, 1935 production of *Mother* (Brecht-Eisler, out of Gorki) right on Fourteenth Street.

Russia's entry into the war has miraculously improved all press relations. Now the Soviet Embassy in Washington manages the exchange of information with intelligence and great dispatch. Its news sense is lively and actual, its timing and feeling for angles almost American. The bulletin just issued, *Soviet Art in War Time*, a deluxe, glossy-paper affair, shows indeed a precocious adaptation of our most advanced advertising technics. Here are candid camera shots of soldiers' and sailors' jazzbands; for sex appeal, ballerinas, sopranos, Oriental beauties, girls in uniform; and for human interest, children and artists with beards. Except for a few clichés of Bolshevik English ("Hitlerite Army," "Fascist Hordes") the text is in straight American journalese.

Russia-at-war has a great advantage over Britain and America. While we still can't decide whether to suppress or exploit the arts for the duration, Russia, confident of her performance on the field of battle, has made up her mind. An impressive number of artists are openly "reserved" and in this bulletin their civil status is frankly glorified. A leading quotation is by Shostakovitch, and the leading article is a piece of impressionistic writing by the late Eugene Petroff about the *Seventh Symphony*. This priority shows an accurate assessment of publicity values, since the composer is now, perhaps, the best known living Russian after Stalin. There are pictures too of Prokofiev and Miasovskiy, of Khatchaturian and Dzerzhinsky, and pieces by and about them. The young pianist, Emil Hillel, a Russian Eugene List without benefit of uniform, is seen entertaining men at the front. I wish I could reproduce here the photographs of an extraordinary dance, *Fritz and Hans*, created by Red Army men, a fiercely Russian burlesque on German soldiers facing December weather.

### III

Not from Moscow but, of all places, London comes now a booklet dated 1942, in the good old pre-war style. *Twenty Soviet Composers* is Number One of the Key-Note series published by the Workers' Music Association, an organization headed by Alan Bush and including, among others, Benjamin Britten, Lennox Berkeley, Alan Rawsthorne, Edward Dent. The author, Rena Moi-

senco, is listed simply as B. A. Leningrad. Not all the composers are known on this side of the Atlantic; according to the Association's foreword, the choice was restricted to recent "Stalin Premium Winners," a title not further elucidated. All twenty accounts generously detail the composers' opera libretti. The Shostakovich biography I found more interesting than the rest for its discussion of his difficulties with the Soviet press. Shortly after the American production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk*, when those difficulties were mystifyingly reported on page one of American newspapers, MODERN MUSIC tried, without success, to obtain the facts direct from Leningrad. On the assumption that Madame Moïsenko writes with a certain authority, I here reprint several of her statements.

"Shostakovich, after the *First Symphony*, became a fervent student of works of the West European composers, Hindemith, Schönberg, and Stravinsky. The young Soviet composer found himself unable to adopt a sufficiently critical attitude towards their harmonic language and new principles of musical form which purposely tended to break away from a realistic type of musical thinking. . . .

"The opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk*, 1932, and the ballet, *Clear Water Springs*, acquired tremendous popularity with musical audiences in the U.S.S.R. These works were strongly criticized by leading Soviet music scholars for their obvious musical formalism and naturalistic aspect of subject matter. His music was subjected to the severest enquiry from Soviet musicologists and was pronounced to be false to Soviet artistic ideals. . . . Shostakovich struggled with his problem. . . . After months of deep, internal self-examination, he succeeded

in finding new artistic means for the creation of compositions totally different in quality from those earlier ones. . . ."

### III

If Russia is no longer Editorial Problem Number 1, Latin America seems to be the replacement candidate. Under our present policy, news from the south comes in on a flood tide. But the effort to see that our friends shall always put their best foot forward gives that news the same grey cast of good intention and high purpose which once obliterated the details of the overseas picture. Official handouts affirm the variety of life and art in the southern hemisphere. Official treatment tends to destroy the effect. Then, too, Latin-American writers have a way of going back to first principles; they wear us down before breaking up the terrain into high or low relief. Two extensive bulletins, *Music in Latin America* and *Notes on the History of Music Exchange Between the Americas Before 1940* have just been issued by the Pan American Union in Washington, D. C. They look impressively full, the reference material is elaborately catalogued, but like most such compendiums, they are without incisive profile. What is this insatiable dullness that consumes the annotators, compilers, researchers, collectors of Latin Americana?

### III

While on the subject of pamphlets, I want to mention here the extraordinary monograph Edwin Denby has prepared for the March issue of *Dance Index*. With no actual memory of Nijinsky, he has so annotated a group of rather dimly reproduced photographs that the fabulous artist springs brilliantly to life before our present eyes. Dancing gives everyone pleasure so easily; few of us can tell why afterwards, since there is no referable evidence in time or space.

For this baffling task Denby has a remarkable equipment, not merely in his learning and sensitivity, but in an almost incredible power to concentrate on the physical impression before it fades. With the photographs as a guide, we begin to see how he puts that equipment to work. An inspired anatomist, he explores the potentials of the dancer's neck, arms, thorax, waist, pelvis, legs,

feet, hands and face, until at last no longer by science but by magic the body seems to detach itself from the flat half-tones and float through the air. Of course I should mention too the distinction of Denby's style, the care with which words are joined to gives us his own rich experience in this ephemeral world.

*Minna Lederman*

#### INTERPRETATIVE STYLE

**F**REDERICK Dorian's *History of Music in Performance* (W. W. Norton, 1942) offers to a musical public unacquainted with the fundamental traditions of interpretative styles a valuable insight into the general origins of these traditions. These sources have already been minutely studied by various musicologists, but Mr. Dorian, presenting them in a simpler over-all fashion, more readily assimilable, has made a worthy contribution. Musicologists, like other highly-specialized scholars, tend to operate in a sphere almost hermetically sealed to wider circles. There have been notable exceptions, but one wishes there were many more. Music, however ideal and complex, is an eminently practical art. Rarefied or matter-of-fact, abstruse or transparent, its products live ultimately only through the efforts of practicing musicians. If such musicians are notoriously unconcerned with matters of theoretical and historical import, all the less reason for scholars to retire into a self-inclosed sphere of specialized research; all the more reason to refine their research at times to that point of final simplicity where its fruits become readily accessible. Such directives to musicological research would surely not lower its own standards. "Popularizers" undertaken in the spirit of Mr. Dorian's work help to raise the general level of

musical culture.

It is refreshing to find that Mr. Dorian has given the central figures of our musical past a proportionate fullness of treatment. The almost fatal fascination that the "petits maîtres" of the dead past have for Messrs. the musicologists is notably absent. Interesting above all is the fact that the major creative figures emerge here as the major sources as well of interpretative styles. That is as it should be — in more senses than one. First of all, because such figures as Palestrina, the Bachs, father and son, Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, were in actuality the foremost interpretative artists of their day — a fact whose true significance is often slurred over. Secondly, because the composer must in the last analysis determine the stylistic values of the sounding media through which his compositions attain their authentic life. It is no accident that the main currents that shaped the art of composition formed at the same time the styles of instrumental expression. Neither is it only a happy coincidence that masters like Bach, Mozart or Chopin should excel in both the arts of creation and of execution. Their supreme command of both arts is no doubt an attribute of their genius. But that genius should kindle our insight into the perfect inter-dependence of the two arts.