

AMERICA IN BERLIN

EUROPE has been until recently quite unfamiliar with American music. Not much effort was made to go behind the slogans "negro music" and "jazz." But continental skepticism had nevertheless been disturbed by new American works on the international festival programs. Transatlantic music literature could not be forever ignored; too many names constantly recurring on the programs of the United States have been making sporadic appearance in European offerings.

Although aware that it was impossible to reveal every creative tendency of the American scene, the Berlin group of the International Society for New Music, with the support of the American section, undertook in December 1931 to present a cross-section of contemporary American effort. Four works were given by the Berlin Symphony Orchestra under Ernest Ansermet's sympathetic direction—a *First Symphony* by Aaron Copland and one by Roger Sessions, Carl Ruggles' *Portals* and Louis Gruenberg's *Jazz Suite*.

Copland's *Symphony* justified the reputation which had preceded him—that he was an imaginative and inventive musician whose emotional background derives from the naturalistic elements of romantic music. The three movements abound in fruitful conceptions, happily shaped and developed. The *Scherzo* is a model of construction. Its climaxes are compellingly developed; the instrumentation, with its masterly use of individual tonal combinations, is exceptionally colorful. The last movement is not quite up to the *Scherzo*; here there are certain weaknesses of construction, the springs of thematic invention sometimes dry up and the effect of the attack is artificial rather than organic. But such objections are minor beside the really splendid and individual conception of the first movement, whose sharpness and purity are validated by the emotional as well as the personal elements of Copland's original art. Although conceived only as a *Prelude*, its mood prevails, in a certain degree, to the end of the work, and thus the absence of a corresponding slow movement of the usual pattern is not significant.

Sessions' *Symphony*, though a less impressive work, succeeds

in maintaining the interest of the listener from the first note to the last because of its variety of charm, the solution of stylistic problems, and its forceful striving for form. Sessions' leaning toward the modern Central European school is obvious, in contrast to Copland's, whose style conceptions tend toward modern France. This *Symphony*, which had already astounded European musicians at the international music festival in Geneva, offers several points of attack which may be grouped under the heading of a too great partiality for the specific turns and characteristics of Stravinskian inspiration.

This influence is most clearly revealed, of course, in the rhythmic features of his style, whose frequent time changes are not always the result and component elements of a melodic metrical conception, as with Stravinsky, but in many cases a conscious disguise of a rhythmically simple event. In spite of this, he has a remarkable rhythmical vigor of his own, which is manifested in the lively first and final movements as well as in the slow middle section. Sessions emphatically refutes, by his completely un-padded and ascetic orchestral tone, the superficial European view about the arid sonority of American orchestral music. He deliberately avoids any mixing of colors and gets a sharp orchestral tone of unusual richness. In this respect, as well as in relation to the concentration of expression, the first movement of his symphony could be regarded as tendentially significant. An extremely sharp and inflexible thematic rules this movement, is slightly relieved in the course of development, only to move vigorously to the finale with tenseness and energy. Sessions reveals a creative strength and power here that promise great things for American music.

Portals by Ruggles revealed too little of this composer for the formation of a clear picture of him. It was interesting as a demonstration of the fact that Schönberg's world of ideas is not necessarily foreign to America. While Ruggles is far from being an exponent of Schönberg's technic and composition, we are inclined to see in him a composer who stands closest to the highly individualized expressionistic method. *Portals*, at all events, indicates a sympathetic personality, earnestly struggling with its problems of style.

Gruenberg's *Jazz Suite* discloses nothing new of this composer, already well-known in Europe through his *Daniel Jazz*. It is a well-sounding work, but its external tonal development bears little relation to its inner substance. Jazz is about finished in modern European music, and certain tendencies show that it is gradually being supplanted in American "art-music."

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CONSIDERING that London knows so little of what America is contributing to modern composition, it was a great misfortune that the concert of contemporary American music (under the auspices of the London Contemporary Music Centre) on December 16, should have coincided with a symphony concert devoted mainly to modern British works. The few who attended, however, if not profoundly moved, were amply repaid, for the music gave us a new experience.

Aaron Copland opened by playing a very short *Sonatina* by the young Mexican, Carlos Chavez. Though it is simple both in its unsophisticated direct thought and diatonic contrapuntal texture it is not of the stuff that appeals at a first hearing in a concert room. To those who are temperamentally disinclined to the idiom it is definitely dull; to those who are able to appreciate the work it does not seem to say anything which has not been said better or with more interest before. But on acquaintance its peculiar kind of intimacy insinuates itself on one.

The *Sonata* for oboe and clarinet by Paul Bowles has an equally sure sense of style, but the workmanship is not yet accomplished enough to deal with such a combination and rather matches the immature and superficial mode of thought.

More interesting than either was the *Piano Variations* (1930) of Aaron Copland (with the composer at the piano). In much of the technic it is quite a development of the style of Stravinsky's *Symphonie pour Instruments à Vent*, but there is a passion for dissonance only equalled by Bartok. There is nothing of Schönbergism about it, but sometimes an equal difficulty for the listener in getting hold of the thought of this composer presents itself. So few, indeed, are the concessions made to the audience in the presentation of the thought, so bare is the statement, that