

## SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

THE H. W. Gray Co. has had the idea (under the urging of William Strickland) of inviting a number of American composers to write short works for organ. The first volume, intended to inaugurate a series in which longer pieces will appear later on, has just come out. It includes music by Aaron Copland, Frederick Jacobi, Douglas Moore, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, Leo Sowerby and Bernard Wagenaar. Although I am not decided as to the function of the organ, plain or elaborate, in modern society, I find this an interesting venture which may give new life to a dying Fafner. The music in the present album certainly should appeal to organists with any interest in new music. Sessions and Sowerby are represented by brilliant virtuoso pieces. The others seem more drawn to the meditative side of the organ. Moore has a *Dirge*, Wagenaar an *Eclogue*, Jacobi a *Prelude*, Copland an *Episode* and Piston a *Chromatic Study On The Name Of Bach*. They all form a very gentle and persuasive introduction to contemporary American music for the easily alarmed organist. Let us hope it will prove an effective wedge for later works on a larger scale.

Associated Music has published a short piano piece by Henry Cowell, *Sinister Resonance*, in which the composer produces entirely new effects by direct contact of the hand with the strings of the piano. It is too complicated to permit me to give a clear idea of the processes involved in one sentence. I would prefer

to quote the first direction, taken from the full page of introductory notes.

"On the lowest string of the piano press firmly with the third finger of the right hand, cutting off the string at the point toward the middle which sounds the indicated tone F. Then run the finger along the same string, cutting it off to produce the other tones. The whole passage indicated by Number 1 is played on the same string. The tone is made by playing the key (the lowest A on the piano) over and over with the left hand, and obtaining the pitch by cutting off the distances with the left hand on the string. To obtain higher tones . . . cut off closer to the performer, and vice versa."

These are only a small part of the directions, which also include instructions on playing harmonics. To quote further; "On the piano, tones produced in these fashions are weird and unearthly. Through them one may explore a new tonal realm, hear sounds not reminiscent of those of any other instrument."

### RECORDS

The past two months have touched a new low level in the recording (as also in the printing) of significant contemporary music. There are plenty of re-recordings of early twentieth century music, and, of course, the usual classical numbers. The beautiful *Little Organ Book of Bach* is now complete, in three volumes, with E. Power Biggs at the baroque organ but this is the chief item of interest in the catalogue of earlier

music. In the brief list of present-day music the only record we can refer to with enthusiasm is Bartok's *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet and piano (Columbia). This is certainly one of that composer's important works — three concise movements of sharp and highly percussive music. At the same time it presents for this listener the typical contradictory qualities found in most of Bartok. He is extremely interested in the sensuous quality of his music. His search after the most refined, highly individual timbres inevitably succeeds. His form is ingenious and perfect as a bird-cage made by a Chinese craftsman. And yet, in this work, there is something for me strangely unsatisfying. It seems keyed at too high a pitch; there is too much tension, and, as the rhythmic energy is nervous rather than physical, so is the sensuous quality a purely intellectual one. We are in a remote, abstract world, where warmth and humanity are strangely wanting. I think that such complete control of one's medium defeats its own ends. In *Contrasts* we can admire much, but are baffled rather than moved after hearing it. Of course I make this statement only in relation to my own feelings

about music as something far more hedonistic and relaxed if it is to give pleasure. Nevertheless, this recording is definitely an important addition to the library of contemporary music. It is to be hoped that it is only the first release which will give us Bartok's later work.

After this highly organized and brittle music the *Romance* for orchestra by Sibelius (Victor), sounds incredibly banal and vulgar. There seems to be little one can do about the Sibelius situation except to keep reiterating that his music is false and bombastic, with a popular and reactionary appeal which becomes more and more dangerous. Victor also gives us *Belshazzar's Feast* by the same composer, an orchestral suite of four pieces of incidental music to a play of that name. Gentle Orientalism à la *Peer Gynt* characterizes this innocuous music which can contribute nothing, even to the most ardent Sibelius fan. Nor, unfortunately, is the Victor album of re-pressings of two orchestral works by Fabini, *The Country*, and *Isle of the Ceibos*, a more welcome advent. This is simply inflated, familiar "symphonic" music which could just as well have been written in California as in Uruguay.

## IN THE THEATRE

By SAMUEL L. M. BARLOW

A NEW member of the Académie Française pursues a classic ritual: he eulogizes his predecessor, dusts off the chair with a reverence approaching necrophilia, and sits down to enjoy immortality. So it seems proper that in my first review I should begin with a bow to Virgil Thomson who has recently done

what he would call a pretty thing but what I would call momentous. He has opened a whole new field to music criticism; not that the field was forbidden, — it had of course been staked and plowed in MODERN MUSIC, — but the newspaper critics had never jumped the fence. I know of no other critic on one of our