

RECORDS and SCORES

By COLIN McPHEE

RECORDS

CONTEMPORARY music is certainly no beneficiary in the economy drive now being pushed to new peaks by the record companies. A minimum of good new works is selected for recording. On top of that, the modern music that has been inscribed is doled out for review with excessive and at times inexplicable caution. Penny-pinching has always been the policy of lesser recording companies around New York. It is something new and decidedly 1941 for the houses of RCA-Victor and Columbia to begin canily counting discs and reckoning their weight in wax. Occasionally this brave resolve loses its force, a cog slips and waste runs riot. Thus we have recently received, among several unsolicited, though I am sure very popular, items, the *Venusberg* music (Gieseeking playing most unimaginatively), the Chopin *Barcarolle*, and the aria from *Madame Butterfly*; no remonstrance against haphazard generosity checks the flow of early Sibelius or conventional jazz. But let us try, as we have for several months, to get Aaron Copland's *Music for the Theatre* from RCA-Victor, then down come the clamps.

Copland's *Music for the Theatre* was written in 1925, the result as everyone knows (except apparently the Victor Recording Company) of a commission given by the League of Composers. It was long past time for this piece to be recorded. I am not one of those for whom it has grown tame with the years. Instead it seems as fresh and vital today as when

I first heard it. Having borrowed Copland's own copy of the record, I find that it has been given an incredibly bad performance – acoustically, rhythmically and dynamically. A new recording probably cannot be hoped for right away, but that appears to me more urgent than if the work had never been released.

Excerpts from Marc Blitzstein's *No for an Answer* have been put out in an album by Keynote Recordings. This well-varied assortment of numbers is difficult to estimate by purely musical standards. Everything depends upon the mood established by the text, which can, at times, give a very simple phrase an irresistible pathos. My taste inclines towards such numbers as *Francie*. Joe and his girl Francie are alone in the club at night. They have been parted for months, and are now together again. Francie speaks, softly, intimately, and is interrupted from time to time by a single phrase sung by Joe. This sad and frustrated dialogue is handled with a restraint that I find much more eloquent than the belligerent bitterness of the choruses, which baffled me by their irregular metre and abrupt changes of tempi, their harshness and deliberately banal harmonization. The music does not touch me any more than does a sermon by a Presbyterian minister. But for me there are enough moving episodes in the series to compensate for the choruses.

I should now like to quote from a Victor leaflet to one of their latest al-

burns. "The necessity for a recorded volume of American piano music has long been recognized. . . ." By whom? I wonder. With a few rare exceptions, American piano music has been so completely undistinguished as to make such a longing the expression of a yearning, blighted soul. Miss Jeanne Behrend, whose musical taste is responsible for this particular collection of uninspired morceaux, rides the American rocking horse with vigor in her preface to the album. Chasins, Gershwin, D. G. Mason, MacDowell, Carpenter, Guion, Randall Thompson, Freed, Dett, Mrs. Beach and several others form the roster. With the exception of the Gershwin *Three Preludes*, which have the Gershwin flavor, though terribly refined, and Randall Thompson's short piece, which has charm and makes sense, the rest is written (did they actually bother to write it down?) under the influence of piano music at its worst — the belated and monotonous Chopinisms of Scriabine, the bright coquettishness of Cyril Scott. Why no Ives, no Copland, no Harris — to mention a few who have done something significant in piano music. No, this is an album whose only positive virtue is ethnological interest, a record of uninspired American improvisation.

The Good-Neighbor policy is making itself felt in the recording field with a rather precipitate eagerness. Victor has released an album of Brazilian music, devoted to the works of Villa-Lobos, which includes the *Bachiana Brasileira Number 1*, for eight celli, the *Nonetto for Chamber Orchestra and Chorus*, and the *Quatuor for Harp, Celesta, Flute, Saxophone and Women's Chorus*. All of these were produced here last year, at the festival of Brazilian music in the

Museum of Modern Art. I still maintain as I did then, that they represent the least attractive side of Villa-Lobos' strange and uneven work. When he writes such exotic music as the opening to *Choros Number 9* he seems to me most original and interesting as an impressionist. As a master of pure musical form, as a composer who wishes to express himself in chaste, logical terms, he is weak and unsatisfactory, as the *Bachiana Brasileira* testifies. For such an album I would have preferred other pieces.

An album of South American chamber music, selected and arranged by Nicolas Slonimsky was released some time back by Columbia. This includes a number of short works that serve very well as introduction to what is going on in Chile, Peru, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay. With the exception of Villa-Lobos in Brazil, and André Sas, with his *Cantos del Peru*, the composers reflect their interest in Europe rather than the new world.

SCORES

Schirmer leads the way in publications for the moment, although with nothing of any special interest from this department's point of view. A number of early Griffes songs have been exhumed and engraved, although they can serve no other use than to clutter up singers' programs with more impedimenta. Four rather neat songs by Naginski have also been published, of which *Richard Cory*, written in a sophisticatedly popular style, has a certain distinction and effectiveness. *Visions et Prophéties* (for piano) of Ernest Bloch seem more like caricatures (if one may use so irreverent a word) of that composer's style. They form a set of five short pieces for piano, which

add nothing to either the literature for piano or to the luster of Bloch's name.

Boosey and Hawkes have just published Copland's *Quiet City*, while *Music for the Theatre* now appears in pocket score (Arrow Music Press), which latter is good news for music students.

WITH THE DANCERS

— BY EDWIN DENBY —

MISS HANYA HOLM and her group presented us with a serious surrealist alchemistic fantasy. First a prologue: dancers in androgynous red tights and beautiful long blonde wigs did some calisthenic weaving and leaping. Then the main part: Several dancers appeared in elaborate costumes, a nest of light-bulbs on the head for instance. The audience recognized these as "surrealist" and tittered. But after the dancers came on, all they did was wiggle a bit, stand around, walk off, come back on, and do it all over. They looked afraid of messing up their pretty, fancy dresses. It was timid and dull; and it could have been dismissed as a minor mistake, if the program had not implied that this was official surrealism. Official surrealism, which kept clear a few years ago of Dali's decorous and cute Monte Carlo ballet, has its own terrific eighteen years of history; its cruel Peeping-Tom thrills – the thrills of a Peeping-Tom who gets to see only the empty part of the horrifying bedroom. I looked up an old Dali ballet libretto, from the pre-House Beautiful period of surrealism, published in George Hugnet's official *Petite anthologie du surréalisme* (1934). At a quiet moment, for instance, a dancer,

The lovely, restrained music of the *Quiet City* suite always gives one a sense of relief. This simple and moving music is for strings, English horn and trumpet, and has all the quiet eloquence one remembers from certain parts of *Our Town*.

who had unbandaged his arm, sops a piece of bread a lady has sat on, in a glass of tepid milk, and then – his face expressing a sweet and infinite nostalgia – he presses the wet bread under his armpit. At the end, while a chorus of legless cripples dressed as Japanese are yelling the tango *Renacimiento* (among other things), a woman with opulent breasts and metal shoes is savagely treading a heap of bread, as though seized with a delirium of the feet incident to wine-pressing; when a lot of motorcycles tied to ropes come roaring through the backdrop, and several ventilators and sewing machines fall from the top boxes and are crushed on the stage. The curtain falls slowly.

Miss Holm had another new number in her familiar agreeably fluid style in which the body is kept well in balance and the movement correctly produced from the small of the back. Some people find this agreeably lyric, and others, agreeably innocuous. I think it is all right, but it seems rather more proper than anything I know outside the theatre. Miss Holm herself is obviously an excellent dancer, and I would like to see her in a solo.