

SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

THIS appears to be a lean year for records, and the future looks bleak. Even before cutting down, the companies had been retiring into safe shells. There has been plenty of Brahms, but no more Berg. The only items I should like to have commented on have been Debussy's *Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp* (Victor) and the *Festival Overture* of William Schuman (also Victor), but since neither has arrived to date they both must be passed over.

The Ives' *Fourth Violin Sonata*, "Children's Day at the Camp Meeting," has been published by Arrow Press, and also recorded, under sponsorship of the League of Composers, by New Music Recordings. The record is not very satisfactory, for it is harsh and unnatural, and even Szigeti's performance seems to me rather unsympathetic. It must be said that it is not easy to make this music sound. As usual with Ives, the acoustic values exist more in fancy than in fact. The violin part is meager, while the piano covers the whole keyboard. The piece is short, using only two sides of one disc. It is also one of Ives's lesser works. It has all the nostalgia for Sunday, Moody-and-Sankey, pre-radio peace. Perhaps because of my Presbyterian childhood I remain untouched even by the famous foot-notes. I too have sweltered on a hot Sunday afternoon, singing hymns in a red brick church, and I have never cherished the memory, but then, that was in Canada, among log cabins, without the glamor of Alcott.

Virgil Thomson's *Sonata for Violin and Piano* is published by Arrow Press. The simplicity of this music is far different from the appeal to the pure-in-heart of the Ives sonata. It is urbane, continental, intelligent; its four movements are terse and neatly constructed. But I find them cold and deliberate. For me Thomson's music needs words to give it its real quality. Then it is unique. Here the technique, which is of little acoustic moment, but depends much on diatonicism and conjunct motion, barely sustains interest. I can't help feeling that music is before anything else an art of glamorous sonority. Rose Lee Finney's *Fantasia* for piano (Arrow Press) is a well-planned and energetic work on neo-classic lines, with moments of real musical charm. My only complaint is that the score too often gives the impression of an abstraction, a transposition to the keyboard of music that could be better stated in other terms. This is no doubt intentional, but the piano is a pretty monotonous instrument to listen to for purely musical values. You simply have to pull out the stops once in a while, that is, if you want your music to have the sensuous appeal necessary to project any distance. Copland has done this so well in his piano works, plangently in the *Variations*, more mystically in the *Sonata* which Boosey and Hawkes have just published. Here the writing is thin, but placed so that it is amazingly resonant. From the standpoint of motion it is less interesting to a pianist than the Finney *Fantasia*; from

the sonorous standpoint it is superb.

Orchestra scores lean towards the utilitarian. Music Press gives us a diatonic and guileless *Village Suite* by Douglas Moore, four short movements for small or full orchestra that should appeal to student orchestras. Mercury publishes

Four Sketches by Darius Milhaud, *Eclogue*, *Madrigal*, *Alameda*, *Sobre la Loma*, also scored for small orchestra. Nothing new is said here, but the music is characteristic Milhaud in its allure and orchestral approach.

WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

IN *Russian Soldier* (Fokine-Prokofiev-Dobujinski) at the Ballet Theatre you sat and watched a Russian soldier dying on a battlefield as a pretext for a darling Radio City spectacle in brightly harmonizing colors. "How perfectly lovely," the suburban lady next to me exclaimed when he was dead. She was seduced probably by the coy folksiness of the show — eternal Russia, tea-room style. As for me, before the war the piece might have slipped by as vulgar and adroit. Presented now, with a title so full of immediate associations, it is obscene. The balletomanes, less irritable than I, expressed their opinion by reviving Samuel Barlow's classic pun, "Standing in tears amid the alien corn," and adding another, "I was bortscht to death." About the score (the suite, *Lieutenant Kije*), it went on indefinitely with no modesty whatever; a smart workout for all the old gags about the good earth. Fokine says he fell for it. Prokofiev says it's travesty music. It certainly is heartless.

I grant that my disgust with *Russian Soldier* is more a matter of general viewpoint than of dance viewpoint. And I still take something of the same mixed point of view when I object violently to the coyness of the piece, apart from its

subject. I object to it in itself but more because I find coyness has been the keynote of the Ballet Theatre. Its management has consistently specialized in the large-scale cute. In light pieces it tries for a knowing giggle. In versions of serious classics about tragic love, it injects cute "period" effects. Up to this spring the Ballet Theatre has never been able to put on a serious and poetic work on its own initiative under any circumstances. As novelties it has given us over and over again some sycophantically simpering piece, the very kind of ballet our fathers and mothers drove off the stage in the great dance wars of thirty years ago. The history of management teaches that only poetry confers prestige on entertainment; and that without prestige ballet can't get private citizens to pay its deficit. Another fact is that a company loses its self-respect without serious new works, without a sense of fresh poetry in the routine; and the management is responsible for the development of its dancers. Certainly the Ballet Theatre has plenty of talent in its company; besides having a kind of touchstone in Markova, who is one of the most poetic dancers of our time.

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This seems to me a quiet moment to