

## SCORES and RECORDS

By COLIN McPHEE

1923 - 1943

THE last two decades serve well to mark the span of an important phase in the history of American music. These years have seen the rise of the American composer as an independent, assertive craftsman with a determination to form for himself a style that reflects America rather than Europe. They have seen the rise and fall of an experimental period that curved upwards to a peak in the arhythmic timbre-poems of Varese and descended once more to safe and sober diatonicism. It was in the early part of this time-period that two significant publishing organizations appeared, the Cos Cob Press and New Music. The aims of these two presses were by no means identical, yet both were intent on publishing new music by young composers whose tendencies utterly disqualified them for consideration by the other publishing firms of the time. Nevertheless, slowly and deliberately, as publicity accumulated, the established houses began to include unorthodox works by Americans. Today there are a dozen firms on the lookout for new American works.

Not all these houses have the same attitude. Boosey-Hawkes is primarily concerned with performances and success and whether the work will "pay." G. Schirmer, with a different cultural background, often takes chances. Arrow Press, after absorbing the Cos Cob Press from Edwin Kalmus, is co-operative. Music Press is newer; here the composer finds money and receives bigger royalties.

Both editing boards are highly discriminating. Nothing much that is progressive may be expected from Carl Fisher or Ricordi. Gray has a series of contemporary organ pieces that includes many American names. New Music still continues as a subscription quarterly; the editorial board is haphazard in taste but, I am glad to say, does not believe that the time for experimentation is over. Then there are the firms of Axelrod, Birchard, the Juilliard Edition (American Music Center), Marks, Mercury, Mills, Schirmer of Boston, the Society for the Publication of American Music (G. Schirmer), and others. Chavez, Copland, Cowell, Harris, Ives, Schuman, Sessions, Piston, Thomson and Varese all figure more or less prominently in these catalogues. All I seem to remember from the year 1921 A. D. is that G. Schirmer published Bloch and Griffes. Otherwise the catalogue of Americans was made up largely of Richard Hageman, Mrs. Beach, X, X and X. There was nothing the matter with some of these composers. They seemed to write chiefly songs, which were often sincere and effective, and with a far better regard for the voice than have many composers of today. But the music was anonymous and anachronistic, and any distinction in style derived directly from European Romanticism.

It was around the middle 'thirties that the recording companies began to consider the financial possibilities of the American composer. With due caution

certain works were selected until, at the end of 1941, there was already the nucleus for a library of significant American music. With the outbreak of war for America all this ceased almost immediately. The bright young people who liked this music were already scheduled for roles which precluded the possibility of buying records. Those left could be counted on to subscribe to one more master-interpretation of Beethoven, Brahms or Tchaikovsky.

A lot of music was recorded that was bad, inept, inane or simply putrid. But after one has sifted and selected there remains a list that gives a vivid if not complete cross-section of creative tendencies in America in the past fifteen years. Some of these discs are superb from every angle; others are poorly performed or recorded. All are of interest. I do not pretend that my selection is complete; it simply represents what for me are the high spots. Here it is:

Bloch: *Schelomo*; the *Violin Concerto*.

Blitzstein: the albums, *The Cradle will Rock*; *No for an Answer*.

Chavez: the *Indian Symphony*; *Antigona*.

Copland: *Piano Variations*; *Salon Mexico*; *Music for the Theatre*.

Harris: *Third Symphony*; *Johnny Comes Marching Home*.

Ives: *In the Night*; *Barn Dance*; *General Booth Enters Heaven*.

Piston: *The Incredible Flutist*.

Varese: *Ionisations*.

Schuman: *American Festival Overture*.

But there is another branch of American music that is by no means secondary in vitality and significance. Duke Elling-

ton is celebrating his own twentieth anniversary in the jazz world with a concert this month in Carnegie Hall. It is obvious that there are many Americans who prefer their music hot or sweet, and that for them, as in primitive societies, music has only two facets, it is either recreational or ritualistic. Since the only ritual left today is that of Present Arms! There remains diversion, and here jazz, swing, boogie-woogie, blues and all nostalgic songs have filled and will continue to fill the bill completely and satisfactorily. In this world, austerity, piety, rhetoric and heroics are the stops of the Ancient Mariner, and it is only those temporarily trapped in some concert-hall who cannot choose but hear. To give an account of the development of jazz, the growth of its kinesthetic appeal in the past twenty years is something I am not prepared to do. Its rhythmic elements, not necessarily Negroid, from time immemorial impelled tribes and races scattered over the world; today they have the same galvanizing power, can still awaken similar motor-impulses throughout the forty-eight states of the Union.

#### WINTER OF 1942-'43

This season G. Schirmer has published three choral works by Milhaud, for mixed voices a capella, *Cantate de la Guerre*, *Cantate de la Paix*, and *Les Deux Cités* which is in three parts: 1. *Babylon*, 2. *Elegy*, 3. *Jerusalem*. These are all short works, simple and direct in style, effective, but to my mind rather dry and uninteresting. I much prefer the grace and lyric charm of the *Chansons de Ronsard* for voice and orchestra which Boosey and Hawkes has recently brought out with a reduction for piano. Schirmer also publishes a group of short choral compositions by William Schu-

man, some a capella, others with piano accompaniment. The choral writing in these pieces is always fresh and imaginative, resonant in the *Prelude*, transparent and deft in the *Four Canonic Choruses*. I like especially the robust and vigorous *Holiday Song*, with its bright atmosphere of out-doors. Less arresting but sure to appeal to choruses, are Samuel Barber's three *Reincarnations* for mixed a capella chorus, also published by Schirmer. The same house has brought out three new songs by Chavez. The longest, *Nocturna Rosa*, I find the most interesting. The vaguely surrealist symbolism of the text is given an almost liturgical vocal line, while the episodic accompaniment is mainly an acoustic amplification of the voice. In the same style is *Segador (The Reaper)*, though more fluid and relaxed. All three songs have the unmistakable Chavez flavor, the restrained melodic outline, the predilection for incisive resonance. Arrow Press publishes three very short songs by David Diamond, three miniatures that are sensitive and quietly intimate. Boosey and Hawkes gives us a song by Eugene Goossens, *British Children's Prayer*, which I find rather embarrassing. Its values are dramatic rather than musical.

Turning to piano music we find New Music with an issue containing short piano works from Brazil. Villa-Lobos is represented by two brief and childish pieces, *Melodia da Montanha* and *New York Sky-Line*. These are musical portraits in which the melodic line follows, literally and rigidly, a chart (The Millimetric Chart) on which, like the course of a fever, is drawn the outline of mountains or a city. Apparently, in the second piece middle C is the Battery, and the final chord the Empire State. Other

notes in the melodic line must surely indicate City Hall, Roxy and the Planetarium. More use is made in this collection of local rhythmic idioms than in the Latin-American album by Schirmer (reviewed last issue), but that is about all that can be said. Arrow Press publishes *Three Preludes* by Dai-Keong Lee that have certain exotic qualities. But I find the music promising; its style is not yet determined, but it is lively and fresh, and written with evident zest. Other piano pieces include Paul Creston's *Prelude and Dance*, and a *Toccata* by Leo Sowerby (Mercury). Arrow Press gives us the piano score of Virgil Thomson's *Filling Station*, which will be welcomed by the dancers, and Associated Music publishes the new Hindemith *Sonata for Two Pianos* (1942), recently performed here for the first time. To my mind the best that can be said about this work is that it enlarges the field of two-piano literature, but both acoustically and musically I find it a complete disappointment. At first sight the writing seems to have an admirable simplicity, a purely contrapuntal fabric that brings something new to the art of two-piano pieces. This is only in part true. On performance the writing turns out to lack resonance, is for the most part colorless; the contrapuntal texture is dry and gritty, and gives the impression of a pedantic sequence of fragmentary new entrances. There is a bright and glamorous introduction, *Chimes*, that has a facile shimmer, but one wonders why all this glitter should be a prelude to the following abstractions.

Benjamin Britten's *String Quartet* (pocket score, Boosey and Hawkes) is to my mind his best work so far. It is the most concentrated, the most organ-

ized, the most deeply felt. The writing retains all of Britten's genius for brilliantly exploiting the strings, but gone are all the baroque elements, the embellishments and glissandos. What I like about this work, too, is the variety, and the nice balance between contrapuntal and harmonic writing. Britten is always unpredictable, and you never know when he will once more go off the deep end. But a few more works like this and

Britain will have the composer that was so brightly promised in the early cantata, *A Boy Was Born*.

Other scores to arrive, but for which comment is reserved until next issue are string quartets by Harrison Kerr and Eugene Goossens, the *Quintet in B-Minor* of Diamond and orchestral works by Slonimsky, Van Vactor and Robert Ward.

## FILMS AND THEATRE

By PAUL BOWLES

**A**LTHOUGH *In Which We Serve* is a good picture, there is no doubt that a better score would have made it a more finished one. It is something of a mystery why, with so many more important elements here, Noel Coward should have been so eager to risk spoiling things by writing his own score. For he must be aware that however many facets of dramatic ability there are to his personality, serious musical composition does not figure among them. The score is of negligible value. Its thematic and harmonic material is undistinguished; few men in Hollywood would turn up with such a corny leit-motiv. An opportunity to write some important film music was completely thrown away in the case of the recurrent flashbacks. A group of men struggling in the sea after being torpedoed recall moments of their respective lives; there follows a series of waterlogged memories which make up the greater part of the film. The sinister repetitious phrase, (like a cracked gramophone record, or the final sinking into anesthesia,) was effective in the episodes

which began with the losing of consciousness. But the music here was as prosaic as elsewhere. A harp glissando now and then, to bear out the water theme. The music track was very bad technically: it buzzed and rasped. That may have been beyond Mr. Coward's control. But the ineffective score was not. Where were Britten, Walton, Addinsell?

It is too much to have to describe in detail the inanities of another Bagdad picture. This one had chaotic symphonic sounds every minute of the time it ran. The music came from the Russians generally, with Borodin and Rimsky Korsakov leading. The stomach dances were a little better than usual, and there was actually no harmony at certain moments. The sets, costumes and dialogue were all early Beverly Hills. The title was *Arabian Nights*, and Frank Skinner signed the score.

*Spring Song* is an amusing Soviet version of the familiar musician-movie theme of the die-hard classicist who is finally converted to popular light music. The same old plea is made for music