

golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art, and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling."

Israel Citkowitz

YADDO—A MAY FESTIVAL

IT is to be hoped that the future may look back upon the First Festival of Contemporary American Music, held at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York, April 30 and May 1, as an event of the first water in the annals of music and that it may prove to be the first of a notable series which should take its deserved place along with the several famed and widely heralded European festivals.

To review in detail, item for item, all the eighteen works performed at its three concerts would be boring. Better hazard a classification to which they readily lend themselves: the successes and the near-successes; the experiments and misfits; the embryos. It is pleasant to be able to place twelve of the eighteen in the first group; in a way even more gratifying to recognize three out-and-out experimenters (obviously the misfits could belong in no other group, though of course experimenters are not necessarily misfits); most promising of all to find two so young that only the classification "embryonic" fits them, and of these one belongs in the first as in the last group, and is in a measure also an experimenter. Among the successes there are several indeed which could likewise be called experiments, but are placed in the first class because they so notably succeeded.

A criticism of these works as a whole would apply equally to most music now being written anywhere, would indeed be rather a pronouncement on the present status of music. For the festival is of a piece with any comparable group of new music the writer has heard in the last five years; American music need no longer step aside for Europe.

But this music of the present is apparently most concerned with texture. The experiments deal in the main with texture; the successes are successes in the management and manipulation

of texture. This preoccupation too often relegates to a secondary place the equally pressing demands of form and content. One recognizes the possibility of new forms. But old or new, one may demand in a form one strong focal point toward which everything leads or from which it recedes. I failed to find it in conspicuous degree in any of the more extended works at the festival. Thus they gave the impression of being too long. Such a criticism cannot be made of the shorter works; each presented its idea and stopped, not attempting to develop or contrast ideas; they were often little models of adjustment of content to form. They too, are a sign of their time.

In a conference between composers and "critics" Aaron Copland referred to the wide-spread feeling that "when the great American masterpiece arrives, it will be universally recognized as such." I believe no one felt this festival ushered in such a masterpiece. However, several works did create a high degree of enthusiasm. Outstanding was Copland's own *Variations for Piano*. As elsewhere in Copland's music a short motto—four notes in this case—serves as a basis for a series of developments in rhythmic and harmonic texture. Overtone-chords, clangs from among the higher harmonics, rhythms which have their roots deeply grounded in American soil and which have been made to fructify by Stravinskian nourishment, give him his material for development. The treatment is economical in the extreme, the steely gray surfaces resplendently polished. Withal, he achieves manner and mood gaunt, spare, at times astringent, always forceful and with a sense of latent, perfectly controlled power. A stronger focal point would probably have dispelled the faint suspicion that the last phases of these variations were in a measure redundant.

Second in popular acclaim was Walter Piston's *Sonata for Flute and Piano*. There is little experimental in this music. Its three short movements are full of felicitous melodic and rhythmic invention, stand in well-nigh perfect adjustment of form and matter, and give pleasure neither abstruse nor sophisticated nor mannered.

From which one must pass to the songs. For voice and string quartet Virgil Thomson made a setting of Max Jacob's *Stabat*

Mater. Thomson has here written a melodic line of virgin purity and of a seemingly artless expressiveness rare in these days. Definitely and subtly his strings prepared the mood for the opening, *Ne pleurez pas Madame*. As definitely and as persuasively, voice and supporting strings followed on to the well-considered, equally well-placed and equally effective climax. Paul Frederic Bowles provided five songs to words of his own. For these exceedingly sensitive songs the accompaniments were no more than backgrounds in the truest possible sense of the term, a harmonic touch here, a sonority there. No attempts at stylization for piano, no figuration, no counterpoint; just a plain background of shrewdly mixed sounds. One remembers particularly a few miraculous chords on the words "clouds" in the second song, in which the effect was so wondrously wrought that one actually seemed to be seeing color rather than hearing sound.

Wider in scope were the seven songs of Charles Ives, revealing imaginative power of the first order. The melody is strikingly unconventional and economical, with marvelously apt certainty of expressive touch. The accompaniments often contain shrewdly chosen bits of realistic suggestion,—as the sturdy rhythm of the dissonant chords in *Walking*, the exhilarating accelerando in *The Seer*, the virtual piano solo during the recited portions of the cowboy ballad *Charlie Rutlage*. I know of no finer example of a purely musical humor, almost Rabelaisian in character, than that of the burlesqued treatment of the "religioso" final verses of this ballad. And with what touching sincerity and gentlest of impressionistic accompaniments Ives got to the heart of the genuinely religious in Whittier's lovely hymn, *Serenity*.

Fine songs also, again with string quartet accompaniment, are Robert Russell Bennett's *Captivity*, *Rejection*, *Escape*. Low-toned, downcast moods dominate the first two, great exuberance the last. Yet one found them inherently less interesting than the songs of Ives, Bowles or Thomson.

Roger Sessions' *Sonata for Piano* was one of the outstanding works of the festival. The long, expressive, almost Chopinesque melody of the two andantes shows him frankly unafraid of a tune. This type of fearlessness is not always to be found in a composer who writes meticulously polished Stravinskian fast

movements. But cramping evidence of the care with which he writes is not absent from Sessions' finished product.

Through slow movements and fast, Roy Harris' *Sonata for Piano* is a virile racy music. The composer does not strain for originality but achieves it most naturally. Large sections of the sonata are bi-tonal. Harris has very evidently not yet won full technical mastery or complete technical fluency. Parts of the sonata are definitely clumsy. Yet one cannot be sure that a conquering of this clumsiness would not remove one of the most appealing factors in the homely beauty of this music.

Carlos Chavez' two pieces *Unidad* and *36* once more proved him a master of intense and brilliant utterance in the development of arresting folk-material.

Wallingford Riegger had set himself a difficult task in the writing of four movements for flute unaccompanied. His *Moderato*, *Vivace*, *Molto con sentimento*, and *Allegro ironico*, were notable. The pieces, short and pungent, were pleasing in their adjustment of form and matter.

Of Gruenberg's *Four Diversions* for string quartet each establishes competently and felicitously its own single mood and is through; the moods in themselves are attractive and interesting.

Nicolai Berezowsky's *Quartet* showed him the composer of energy and fearlessness which he has proved himself in other music. Yet despite his skill it is not clear that he has given sufficient attention to content.

The most daring of the experimenters proved to be Marc Blitzstein with a *Serenade for String Quartet* cast in the form of three successive Largos! One also feels this music to be one of the misfits. Why Serenade? And why three Largos? The matter of this music often has a darksome Hebraic cast suggestive of Ernest Bloch. Blitzstein makes the dangerous attempt of having each of his three long movements proceed on a given, unbroken, unvaried level. The first Largo attempts to place powerful emphasis on every single note. The thing simply cannot be done. Any psychologist will tell Blitzstein that the mind refuses to receive more than three impulses without grouping them. The second Largo was cast on a level as low as the first was intense and insistent. Here one must ask just how he proposes to make

either texture or matter interesting. With the title *Accompaniment to an Imaginary Song*, this movement might find reason for being. As absolute music, hardly. But the ingenuity of his attempts to conquer the unconquerable leads one to suspect him of an inherent talent above the ordinary.

Something of the same attempt at summoning plain, unvaried, insistent moods was also to be found in the *String Quartet* of Israel Citkowitz. He was less persistent, less systematic in this than Blitzstein and he showed less technical mastery, but is also undoubtedly talented. The second *String Quartet* of the Mexican, Silvestre Revueltas, was cacophonous in the extreme, hardly stylistically unified nor technically consistent. Once more an inherently strong nature needs more skill and more judgment.

Oscar Levant's agilely rhythmmed *Sonatina for Piano* was a success even though it is the first work he has ever written. He will justify watching in the future. The two embryos are Vivian Fine, with her Schönbergian *Four Polyphonic Pieces*, and Henry Brant with his *Suite for Flute and Piano*. Both are said to be about eighteen years old. Both have natural inventiveness. Both need more skill, more definiteness of purpose, more awareness of just what it is they are about.

The festival was most happy in the choice of its performers. Mrs. Ada MacLeish sings with precision and finesse, warmth and understanding. The musicianship of Messrs. Laurent and Sanroma is too well known to be the subject of repeated mention and the other interpreters were more than competent. Only the medium of such outstanding performance makes it possible to arrive at clear judgments about the music.

Alfred H. Meyer

ALL-AMERICA ON THE AIR

THAT great imagined audience which takes its music from the air has been treated by the tireless Leopold Stokowski and his valiant Philadelphians to an exhibit of modern American composing. This exhilarating parade occurred on the evening of April 2, when listeners-in via the almighty "mike" were invited to consider works by the late Charles Tomlinson Griffes