

OVER THE AIR

By CHARLES MILLS

THE British-American Festival, a weekly offering from C.B.S., has improved in quality and is already one of the outstanding features in the presentation of contemporary music on any network. Quincy Porter's *Music for Strings*, a short suite for string orchestra, was easily the most distinctive and inspired piece heard on the series. It would be difficult to imagine a more effective item for radio entertainment than this suavely managed and finely felt work, unpretentious in size, completely successful in realization of its direct simple purpose. Porter operates rhythmically in a four-square manner strongly reminiscent of Bach and Handel, but the melody and harmony in this music are of a quality at once fresh and intriguing yet gratefully normal and unforced in effect.

Two works given their first performances anywhere by this Festival, *Sinfonietta* by Alexander Semmler, and *Sonata for Chamber Orchestra* by Richard Arnell, showed more aspiration in design than capacity in execution. Semmler's instrumental craftsmanship has facility and flexibility but a fluent delivery is not always a sure guarantee of excitement or interest. The best portions of this piece were the first and last movements, bright, hard and running in character, quite convincing in an energetic way. The more reflective slow movement seemed melodically impotent rather than melancholy, and harmonically barren and grey. Arnell's piece was

perhaps more interesting in design and plan, but seemed even less satisfying as a whole.

Over-worked intervals, melodic fourths and the like, can become as dull as a scale exercise unless aroused to life by a more inward necessity than was expressed in this sonata. There were moments of exhilarating promise and skillful maneuverings, but little evidence of real warmth or convincing musical instinct.

Two works by Benjamin Britten heard on this series served to exhibit how scant his growth has been in recent years. A *Sinfonietta*, written when he was nineteen years old, proved to be a fairly colorful and imaginative affair. Structurally very weak and thematically extravagant, it nevertheless has a certain flair, inventive and energetic but more impetuous than compelling. Indeed, in most respects this work shows the same real talent and over-anxious carelessness that mar his recent *Diversions on a Theme for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra*. Of course this is essentially entertaining light music and not too pretentious. One hears his usual bag of tricks and clever orchestration, but there are always many musical disappointments, even in the fun, and one remains with the wish that this quite nimble wit had risen above the slap-stick level, at least to theatrical, if not sophisticated heights.

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A more naïve and homespun brand of humor was essayed in Douglas Moore's

Village Music, a slight suite in four movements, scored for small orchestra. There is a kind of quaintness in this piece, though not much fun; a slight stiffness seemed to gum up the works, like a minister at a barn dance. For radio, there was too much percussion in the noisy second part. The successful movement was the simple, unaffected nocturne, a small expression but wrought with tenderness.

Edward Burlingame Hill's *Sinfonietta*, also heard on this Festival, is a fine work in all departments. Needless to say, it is not strongly contemporary in style or idiom, but the music remains fresh and very interesting. In its more textural qualities of sonority and color it makes an excellent radio piece. Presented here, too, was a cute but stale piece by Mary Howe, called *Stars Whimsy* and Vaughan Williams' overture to *The Wasps* of Aristophanes, which is instrumentally well-made but formally stiff and somewhat monotonous.

Another fine C.B.S. series has been the League of Composers' concerts. Undoubtedly the most auspicious broadcast in this set was the world premiere of Randall Thompson's one-act opera *Solomon and Balkis* (commissioned by the League and C.B.S.). It is not surprising to find the Columbia chain alive to the radio possibilities of a work of this character. The performance and transmission of this somewhat complex piece was in general excellent, in spite of certain ensemble sonorities which seemed over-heavy for the microphone. The music, somewhat eclectic, was always warm and sincere. Thompson's quality seems eminently right for a lyric medium of this sort. The opera is reviewed in detail elsewhere in this issue.

Another League concert offered Karol Rathaus' *Adagio for Strings*, well-written, sombre in mood and compact in structure. A bit too grey in register and sonority, it had nevertheless some striking features to offset that effect. A rather overlong string tremolo became dangerously weak, and indeed was only held up by a kind of fierce conviction in the harmonic content, which seemed to be its strongest element. Also heard here was a fugue from the *Fourth Symphony* of Charles Ives. This music sounded excellent instrumentally, especially fine in certain cadences where deep horn tones emerged from the dark string fabrics. As a fugue, it showed strong, noble control; the counterpoint is well written in a sober, puritanical way. Bernard Wagenaar's *Sinfonietta*, an attractive and amusing piece, is not too serious in content, but gratefully interesting in scoring, harmonically alive and natural throughout. An original and poetic use of single harp tones, highly "pointed-up," makes a very glamorous little effect over the microphone, and adds greatly to the hypnotic and somewhat ritualistic atmosphere probably intended. This tendency of Wagenaar's toward elegant colorisms can sometimes lead to danger; in the last movement of the *Sinfonietta* the over-extravagant scoring is just barely held up by a very sound and convincing harmonic underpinning.

Nicolai Berezowsky's *Introduction and Waltz*, for strings and Nicolai Lopatnikov's *Symphonietta*, Opus 27, for orchestra, both heard on a League concert, probably represent these two composers in their most slight and facile moods. The Berezowsky piece opens with a vaguely impassioned dignity and suavely transforms itself into a gracious, senti-

mental lyricism that gets almost too ripe in certain carefully guarded little indiscretions. The ending, a set of solidly punctuated cadence-chords, seemed curiously stiff and formal, a sort of stylistic faux pas coming from this master of musical etiquette. The Lopatnikov piece exhibited some very springy scoring and a gymnastic energy in the first movement but too many repeated notes for trumpets lessen one's respect for his brass writing. The second seemed more evocative than inward, but proved to be the best of the three parts; its somewhat dreary mood was well managed with finely drawn lines for solo woodwinds. The last was too toy-like for excitement, not delicate enough for charm; an excess of piano, xylophone and percussion spoiled the best effects. Some very nice unison work in woods alternating with strings antiphonally failed to add strength to this choppy and uneven piece, which somewhat resembled a Shostakovitch riot.

C.B.S. presented a beautiful performance by the Budapest string quartet of the *Quartet* by John Alden Carpenter. In spite of the highly derivative nature of this work (impressionistic French) it has too much glowing warmth and imaginative invention to be dismissed as amateurish. The textures of the first movement are indeed sensuous and grateful to a sultry degree, but there is enough thematic organization to strengthen to some extent any excess of hedonistic processes. The second movement, strong in economy, seems less successful formally, a bit monotonous in its monothematic treatment, over-subtle in the introduction of varied elements. A decidedly lower level was reached in the last movement with its Spanish melodic designs, early jazz rhythmic patterns and instrumen-

tally clever tricks. It might make an amusing short piece but seems definitely inferior as a finale to this particular quartet.

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Mutual's finest offering was easily the brilliant performance by Nathan Milstein and the Philadelphia orchestra under Eugene Ormandy of Stravinsky's *Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra*. This amazingly fruitful exploration of the possibilities of the violin in fresh combinations with the orchestra and of new and exciting treatments of violin technic, is surely among the most important achievements of Stravinsky's neo-classic period. Certain elements of dryness heard in previous performances were non-existent in this exhilarating interpretation by Milstein, whose tone and clarity in all registers are a joy.

Alfred Wallenstein's Sinfonietta presented a *Concerto For 'Cello and Orchestra* by Rudolph Forst. This work is vigorous, rhapsodical rather than formal, and creates and maintains tension fairly successfully. The slow movement which seemed a little over-done in melodic sentiment and various impressionisms scattered about only increased this looseness of lyricism. Interesting string writing and very competent orchestration marked the outer movements however, and some fine climaxes in the last part showed real drive and strength. Another work heard on the Sinfonietta program was *March Grotesque* by Joachim Stutschewsky. This proved to be frightfully undistinguished, sequential and repetitive in form and completely derivative. Dai-Kong Lee's *Introduction and Scherzo* seemed slighter on a second hearing than at the first; the performance, conducted by Quinto Maganini, lacked sparkle and zest.

Symphonic Strings, under Wallenstein, offered Carleton Cooley's *Eastbourne Sketches*, a fairly competent job of orchestrating mediocre materials composed of sentimental or nostalgic melodies, chromatic sliding seventh chords and a lot of other clap-trap. The last movement contained some brilliant virtuoso string writing. A much more gratifying item was Frank Bridge's *Suite in E-minor*, though goodness knows the English can stretch sobriety almost to the breaking-point, in the deliberate evasion of anything remotely hinting at passion.

Mutual's Russell Bennett offered his own *Railroad Cantata* with the amusing and familiar Casey Jones tune used to fairly good advantage. The instrumental railroad effects were not too obvious and came off fairly well, which is more than I can say for this series of programs as a whole. Mutual is taking a very progressive step in the scheduled American opera project, which begins soon.

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It would be nice if N.B.C. could scrape up something during the summer to keep in step with these advances in our national culture. Judging from past performance this fond hope seems remote indeed. The most exciting work heard over its networks was an interesting performance by Toscanini of Aaron Copland's brilliant *El Salon Mexico*, which stays fresh and attractive after as many hearings as you like. It will no doubt long remain one of the most popular show pieces in the concert field.

Wallingford Riegger's *New Dance*, for orchestra, was beautifully performed by Fritz Reiner as guest conductor with the N.B.C. orchestra. The rhythms and

sonorities in this colorful work are very intense, often quite amusing, the scoring in general quite good, as a radio item it is not without a certain charm, a nice, light and spirited whimsicality. Also heard here was a less original, but equally appealing work, *Janitzio*, by Silvestre Revueltas. This piece, slightly on the loud side, with perhaps a bit too much percussion for good radio transmission, is fresh and extremely vivid in texture and scoring.

Another very extravagant orchestral composition, more restrained in mood but no less gaudy in color, was Francisco Mignone's *Symphonic Impressions of Four Brazilian Churches*, well played by the N.B.C. Orchestra under the composer's baton. There were many eloquent moments in this massive work, but also some confusion and little stylistic unity. Surely a very fine talent lives behind these pages, but it has not been completely expressed in the execution of this large piece.

William Primrose, violist, and E. Power Biggs, organist, gave the world premiere of Leo Sowerby's *Poem for Viola and Organ*. The quality of this reflective reverie was largely romantic in spirit, plush and mellow in mood, but very beautifully written from the standpoint of balance, grateful sonorities and instrumental blending. The combination is very interesting, for radio especially; Sowerby's piece exploited all the suave silkiness of the medium to his own good advantage. The result, doubtless too nostalgic and slushy for general contemporary taste, came off with a certain admirable sincerity and a sense of careful workmanship.