

sonances. The *Variations* lack variety. Copland whose characteristic gift (doing much with little) would make him the very person to do such a form supremely well, has here miscalculated. He is perhaps best in an extended work, when he can expand his three-note themes in an even and weaving flow; here, each variation is a set piece, there is a lack of *Steigerung*. The work, I feel, is too long; long inherently, since there appears to be no logical point where it could be cut.

Jan. 6. Oscar Ziegler:

A simple and elegiac *Largo* by Charles Ives, and the electric little piece called *36* by Carlos Chavez, both indifferently played, are worth noting.

Jan. 8. Boston Symphony:

What a tour-de-force the new Stravinsky *Capriccio* is! I heard Stravinsky play the piano part in Berlin last year, with Klemperer conducting; then it was a series of stinging remarks, elaborately staged, involving a fascinating intricacy; the point of attack was crispness. In Jesus Maria San Roma's performance with Koussevitzky, everything was suaver, but not vaguer; the feeling was much more that of an enlarged chamber-orchestra; the solo strings had more meaning. At one point in the last section, when two violins and a piccolo held a theme of long notes against a running staccato piano accompaniment, the difference in interpretation was epitomized; what had been brittle, like sparks flying, was humming, delicious. The work is like a Swiss watch—neat as a pin and as decorative, and containing an enormously detailed and complicated mechanism. There is gaiety, controlled with ease and point. One remembers the Liszt *Hungarian Rhapsodies* of half a century ago, and realizes something of the direction we have taken; this Stravinsky *Capriccio* should fulfill for us the same function.

Marc Blitzstein

STRAVINSKY AS PSALMIST—1931

THE *Symphonie des Psaumes* by Stravinsky will undoubtedly take ultimate high place among that composer's works. Written for the Boston Symphony on the occasion of its fiftieth

anniversary it received a magnificent performance in December at the hands of Dr. Koussevitzky and his orchestra, with the chorus of the Cecilia Society, trained by Arthur Fiedler.

The work, in three movements, is played without pause. Verses from three of the Psalms make up the text which is in the Vulgate. The first, "*Exaudi orationem meam*," is a prayer and supplication. In the second, "*Expectans expectavi Dominum*," the Psalmist exults that the Lord has heard his cry, and has brought him out of "an horrible pit." The third is the hymn of praise, "*Laudate Dominum*."

For the orchestra Stravinsky selected the following extraordinary combination: five flutes, four oboes, English horn, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tuba, harp, two pianos, celli and basses. This stimulating instrumentation is handled with his customary skill and artistry. One forgets that the orchestra which he has abandoned is the normal one and feels relief rather than regret at the complete lack of violins and violas. The massed reediness of so many oboes and bassoons and the absence of clarinets emphasize the lean and spare quality of the music.

An orchestral introduction opens the work—arpeggio figures for wood-wind, with the statement of a motive to be taken up by the alto voices. Sombre phrases of the utmost simplicity for the chorus (there is practically no chromaticism in the choral parts) are accompanied by ostinato patterns which contribute to the general atmosphere of entreaty that permeates this movement. These persistent rhythmic figures in their peculiar gaunt orchestral settings lend the work some of that earthy and elemental character found in the music which will always represent the real Stravinsky, notably *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *Les Noces*, *Mavra*, and *Oedipus*. The climax achieves an effect of great sonority, due in part to the use of the voices in unison.

The structure of the second movement offers the musician perhaps the most technically fascinating aspect of the entire symphony. Its complexity renders it difficult to follow on first hearing but this complexity is that of Sebastian Bach, to which has been added a modern contrapuntal idiom. As instrumental prelude there is a strict, four-voiced fugal exposition, subject in C

minor (oboe), answered in G minor (flute), with two counter-subjects. An episode follows, leading to an entry of the subject in the relative key. At this point the chorus begins a fugue of its own, on a totally different subject, of calmer rhythmic units. Meanwhile the orchestra continues the development of the first fugue, and the two then pursue their separate ways. A stretto for chorus alone is followed by one for the orchestra. Then an instrumental stretto of the counter-subject is begun but suddenly interrupted by a bursting climax, with the words: "*et immisit in os meum canticum novum.*" The movement ends quietly with the chorus repeating the octave E-flat and the orchestra reaffirming the original fugue subject in the bass.

Not only is the formal structure a technical tour-de-force but Stravinsky has here achieved expressive power and an astonishing fitness of music for words and underlying idea. Even if the contrapuntal idiom were not comparatively new it would be impossible to grasp all that is in this movement at a first or even a second hearing; it is a pity that Dr. Koussevitzky did not find it feasible to carry out his original plan of performing the work twice on the same program.

The third movement opens with a majestic introduction for full chorus, the orchestra sounding a tonic and dominant pedal of C. The music seems tentatively to waver between C major and C minor. The orchestral interlude which follows was baffling to many who felt that it did not serve to prepare them for what was coming. A second hearing would have shown that here is a most orthodox presentation of motives subsequently enlarged upon. Pedal figures in the bass recall the first movement. The restless orchestral passages are now and then punctuated by the chorus intoning the words "*Laudate Dominum,*" after the manner of a praying multitude. In the setting of the exhortations to praise the Lord with various instruments, Stravinsky was not so naive as to attempt a literal transcription. He gives us no imitation of the organ, of the trumpet, of the loud cymbals. Indeed, for this last reference he has written a soft, hushed passage of extreme beauty and impressiveness. The end has a strange eloquence which makes it perhaps the most expressive moment of the *Symphonie*.

Many were the philosophical speculations as to the intent and

content of this music after its performance. But the musician must be satisfied that what one gets from any work depends upon what one brings to it. In the *Symphonie des Psaumes* he will sense unmistakably those elements he seeks in real music. Stravinsky has written a piece of occasional music which has all the characteristics of a piece not written for an occasion.

Walter Piston

THE "SONES" OF CUBA

CUBA possesses both a highly original Negro folk music and talented cultivated composers who have developed some of the unique features of the primitive material into the basis of a sophisticated style. Its art is well worth consideration.

Of course, not all the folk-music heard when one travels about Cuba is of major interest. A good deal of it is saturated with the most commonplace type of Spanish song, and even shows some alarmingly poor Italian opera influence. Nothing is really Cuban here except the words and some minute distinctions of rhythm.

It is the Afro-Cuban "Sones" or songs with accompaniment of a whole set of unique native instruments, which have a genuine and exciting character of their own. Many of the words are of African origin, others are said to have sprung up in Cuba among the Negroes, having no recognizable roots either in Africa or in Spain. The instruments used are Cuban inventions. The rhythms are indigenous and although the melodies and harmonic outlines are not so unique, the whole effect of these songs is of a tonal texture utterly distinctive.

Though many lands have an original native music, it does not always follow that they have composers of originality. Cuba has at least two cultivated men of wide musical experience who use the Sones in their music or have built up certain aspects of their style from the line of musical thought suggested by these. They are Alejandro Caturla of Remedios, in central Cuba, and Amadeo Roldan, concertmaster of the Philharmonic Orchestra in Havana. Before attempting to explain just what they have done and the difference in their works, it will be essential to give a more detailed account of the Sones themselves.