

RECENT BOOKS

LAYMAN'S GUIDE AND STUDENT OPERA

WHAT *To Listen For In Music* is the title of Aaron Copland's book which Whittlesey House has just issued. The recent publication of *The Second Hurricane* (C. C. Birchard and Co.) coming soon before gives us an excellent opportunity to review the educational activities of one of our first line American composers. It is not every day in the week that the composer of distinguished music writes a book for the layman and an opera to be sung by high school students.

Let it be said immediately that *What To Listen For In Music* is, to this writer's knowledge, by far the best thing of its kind yet to appear. Copland's volume avoids most of the pitfalls of the average book on listening. The composer, perhaps more than all others, understands the real limitation of words about music. We find here no attempt to give meanings to compositions through words, nor do we find the saccharine rhapsodies our ill-equipped music critics, who so often attempt books of this kind, have led us to expect. This volume is an attempt to teach what the materials of music are and how the composer manipulates them. A noble effort is made to explain the nature of fundamental considerations in rhythmic, melodic and harmonic writing. Tone color and the basic structural forms are treated in some detail. Other chapters deal with opera and music-drama, the composer, interpreter and listener. In what similar volume are living composers considered worthy of mention by the mighty who write our books? The simple fact that this volume cites, along with the great dead, Harris, Piston, Sessions, Berg, Bloch, Hindemith, Schönberg, makes its educational value stronger. It is the healthy point of view we so badly need in our music teaching. *What To Listen For In Music*, with consistent vigor all along the line, teaches the layman what it means to be an intelligent listener. This phase of the book seems to me to be its most important contribution. It will be the general point of view which the reader will carry away with him, not a specific

knowledge of structural devices. For unless I am greatly mistaken, only a person of considerable experience in active listening could understand much of the writing. The volume should however, aid the student of music and be excellent material for the exceptional layman who will study the book chapter by chapter with the aid of records or along with some formal instruction in music. The author says frequently that the listening and not the reading experience is the important thing. This idea is given further impetus by specific suggestions of available recordings.

One of the most interesting chapters is entitled, "How We Listen." Here Copland divides listening into three different planes; the sensuous, the expressive and the sheerly musical. Through analysis, the reader begins to understand the necessity for active listening on the sheerly musical. "Don't get the idea," writes Copland, "that the value of music is commensurate with its sensuous appeal or that the loveliest sounding music is made by the greatest composer. If that were so, Ravel would be a greater creator than Beethoven." It is precisely this kind of astute observation that makes the book valuable.

In covering so wide a range of topics and opinion, there are bound to be controversial issues. It seems to me regrettable that any one should be turned away because of the following reason: "There is, however, one minimum requirement for the potentially intelligent listener. He must be able to recognize a melody when he hears it. If there is such a thing as being tone-deaf, then it suggests the inability to recognize a tune. Such a person has my sympathy, but he cannot be helped, just as the color-blind are a useless lot to the painter." To anyone with experience in working individually with students in matters of listening, this statement does not hold. There are instances of beginners who could not recognize a tune, a rhythm, or a trumpet from a fiddle but who with study became expert enough to analyze symphonic literature! However, in view of the real and broad values of the volume, this kind of criticism is perhaps picayune. *What To Listen For In Music* is an alive document written in a clear and informal conversational style. It is informative and stimulating. The abundant musical examples so clearly analyzed are surely genuine helps to listening. Few, after reading the book, could possibly doubt the author's final

statement. "Music can only be really alive when there are listeners who are alive. To listen intently, to listen consciously, to listen with one's whole intelligence is the least we can do in the furtherance of an art that is one of the glories of mankind."

The important thing about Copland's high school opera, *The Second Hurricane* is not that he carried out his intention of writing for school children, but that in so doing he did not compromise on the modernity of his materials. So often composers with the desire to write educational material or symphonies of "social significance" will issue these works with the most worthy and progressive of titles but will use musical materials that spring from the decadent world they so energetically abhor.

The music for *The Second Hurricane* had naturally to be wrought within the emotional and physical capacities of high school children. With this considerable limitation it succeeds in covering a wide gamut of feeling. The harmonic writing is very free and very explicit. The rhythms are only natural complexities for American boys and girls brought up on jazz. And the manner in which the words are set to music is sheer delight. "Composers must be able to set English to a melodic line that does not falsify the natural rhythm of the language," Copland writes in his book. The composer well understands his statement. Certainly the boys and girls who perform the opera will sing the music after school hours as something they really enjoy.

Let us hope that as a publication this work will have a commercial success commensurate with other high school pieces. If it can be demonstrated that teacher and pupil alike really want an indigenous expression to replace the insipid lush concoctions the hacks have been growing fat on these long lean years, an important step will have been made. Copland's piece may set the door ajar, to a point where it can be pushed wide open.

William Schuman

A LESSON FROM MOZART

W. J. TURNER's "*Mozart: the Man and his Works*" (Alfred Knopf, 1938) has irritated some persons and delighted others. This writer belongs definitely to the latter group; he is more than willing to overlook both the "arrogance"