

LONG RANGE POLICY FOR RADIO

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A LITTLE more than two years ago the Columbia Broadcasting System issued its first commissions for American works written especially to be broadcast. By now twelve such pieces have been introduced; the most recent, *Beauty and the Beast* by Vittorio Giannini, a radio opera with libretto by Robert A. Simon, was presented by the Columbia Workshop on Thanksgiving night.

Today what can we say of these Composers' Commissions? Are they isolated manifestations with impermanent effect, or landmarks in American musical history? Undoubtedly the radio public has not risen up to call the American composer blessed because of the twelve works. There has been no avalanche of fan mail, nor have the reviewers been unduly exercised about the scores. Nevertheless, this much is true—the enterprise as a whole has helped network program departments to formulate a repertory policy which, though still in a fluid state, may take at least a viscous form upon further exposure to the elements.

Composers generally are disappointed at the limited reaction to America's first attempts at creating for radio. Some are not happy about the works themselves. Nobody is elated at the bland disregard with which most of the music critics treated the performances.

However the Columbia Broadcasting System will continue to offer every possible opportunity to American composition. I shall attempt to state why, as a radio medium, we feel this policy is inevitable. I cannot of course speak for Ernest Laprade and Frank Black of the National Broadcasting Company, nor for Alfred Wallenstein at the Mutual Broadcasting System, but their program records will also show that a broad repertory, with emphasis on native and contemporary works, is coming to be characteristic of American radio.

The British Broadcasting Company, under the musical directorship of Sir Adrian Boult, has calmly insisted for years upon regular inclusion of British works on BBC programs. Although ardent chauvinism is not precisely sweeping audiences over there, the man in the street has learned to recognize the names of his more famous compatriots in music, and even takes pride in them. He now expects that British shall stand on the same ground as other music, and be judged in the same way. The BBC's policy in this respect, however, was not an invention of the company. It was an outgrowth of efforts by such men as Sir Henry Wood and Sir Thomas Beecham in the concert-hall field, where they never for a moment stopped to apologize for a work merely because one of their countrymen had written it.

Today in the United States also, the radio public is neither elated nor scandalized to learn that an American has written the music it hears. As a matter of fact the composer's nationality is no longer a matter of great importance—which is a sign of healthy tolerance. This happy condition is the result not of a single project but of many campaigns, personal and institutional, for a recognition of creative music written here. Radio stations have long been aware that no serious music draws much fan mail. But it appears that in America serious American music draws a little better than serious European music—not much more, but enough to be noticeable.

If the broadcasters face some inertia in the public they also meet an almost organized indifference in the press. Few music critics can take the time or are allowed to take the space to write about new music on the air. But there are some exceptions, such men as Irving Kolodin of the *New York Sun*, who write intelligently and persistently about radio performances, and act upon the theory (not generally held by critics) that the importance of new music does not dwindle to the vanishing point because the piece is broadcast.

This season the Columbia Broadcasting System will not commission new works, for several reasons. In the first place, a number of pieces have met a warm response. Repetitions during the coming months are therefore in order. While premieres are

dramatic, in many cases they do not serve the public need as well as follow-up performances. Second, a number of American composers are now aware that the Columbia Broadcasting System (and NBC and MBS) is willing to perform their music, if and when it is practical for the apparatus. Scores have begun to flow into the radio studios by the dozens, which is a perfectly natural and highly significant development. Last summer Howard Barlow announced that he would play at least one American work on every Sunday afternoon concert by the Columbia Broadcasting Symphony. He was flooded with scores, not all of which he has had time to read. Some he performed, some he returned, some are now scheduled, and others are under consideration. This immediate period then will be devoted to performance of works already written and adaptable to radio performance; it also provides us with the opportunity to mature our plans for the future new commissions.



Of course, no policy for music repertory should be determined by personal likes in the program department. The directors can hardly expect that broadcasts of American music will consist exclusively of masterpieces, and most of them are, indeed, prepared to admit periodic errors of judgment. They simply make the best selections they can and let it go at that.

The chief emphasis in American music used to be on orchestral works. Now songs, chamber and cue music are just as important. Of course the various radio networks have pet composers, and in view of business history this is not precisely surprising. At CBS Bernard Herrmann writes music for dramas on commission every month, and efforts are made to produce his independent compositions; Mutual has Morton Gould and promotes him at every opportunity; NBC likes Gian-Carlo Menotti, and there are several besides who have had more chances with the NBC Music Guild than through all other media combined.

What gives the radio network its tremendous opportunity to perform American music is chiefly the circumstance of the sustaining programs. For here no box office consideration is necessary. A musician is allowed his head to do the work he believes in. No available evidence indicates that a radio broadcast made

up exclusively of old war horses has more drawing power than a program including a first performance.

All art is in a sense unpopular, though of course, all good art is potentially popular. Broadcasting offers a great bottomless maw, down which music disappears at an incredible rate. There may be enough popular classics to feed a symphony orchestra for ten years without much repetition. But no radio network can be supplied for the same period of time without surfeit—at least to the performers if not the public. And music may become boring when familiar pieces are played *ad nauseam*. A broadcasting company's musical staff must take precautions not to get bored. The enormous quantity of works performed creates a tendency toward a wide repertory.

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But when all this has been said, it must be admitted that a policy of performing unfamiliar music—little-known, old, new, contemporary, and above all American music—rests on an act of faith, and a very recent one at that. Radio repertory has been broadened only within the last two or three years. True, Stokowski could broadcast what he pleased before that time. But other artists are just beginning to receive encouragement to follow their own musical taste and judgment. Commercial programs still pursue the dictates of advertising men who properly insist that the music they do on such costly hours must be sure-fire. But sustaining programs, it is now conceded, not only can afford to experiment; they are honor-bound to do so. And when the experiments prove popular, they become commercial. The new policy on radio music is not yet firmly established because it is too young, but give it five years to go and then see what happens.

One curious manifestation of advancing radio taste is the rise of popular composers who turn out music much more interesting than the jazz of a few years ago. An excellent example is the work of Raymond Scott; many earnest composers would do well to study Scott's music for the microphone. He is a radio product first, last and all the time. His method of composition is to record and re-record the same piece over and over with emendations and improvisations until he arrives at a definitive version. For the non-Scott fan, I recommend the records of *Egyptian Barn*

Dance, Powerhouse and Bumpy Weather Over Newark as starting points for a study of new directions in jazz.

Radio affords a rich new field for hearing new music and for getting new music performed. Composers may take it or leave it, but there it is. If they want the maximum and the most tolerant audience, radio has it. Many still think this medium unworthy of their best efforts and its technic beneath their notice. They can pin their faith on Koussevitzky, who goes on year after year fiercely doing his duty, God bless him. But there cannot be too many outlets for art. Radio is willing to perform music by a great many living Americans. Perhaps we won't be able to evaluate the results until 1943, or 1953. Meanwhile it's exciting.