

FORECAST AND REVIEW

HOME THOUGHTS

COMING from Paris to the United States is like going from Paris to Spain. This is hardly the place to tabulate the incredible resemblances of the two countries in other than musical matters, but the musical resemblances are not the least striking.

The triumph of popular music over individual effort, for one thing. And what popular music! What melodic precision, sharp and spectacular and elegant! What richness and fancy in the harmonic accompaniment! What exactitude! How sweet and how suave and how god-awful monotonous.

And the efforts to break down that monotony, the efforts of serious, educated men, generation after generation of them, to create a music that will be stronger than the popular thing, that will break through the monstrous hypertrophy and the sophisticated humdrum. Heroic efforts which only end by fattening the popular ogre, because the popular ogre can learn from anybody. But nobody ever learns anything from him.

The things he knows are too far concealed, the racial root too intertwined with every poisonous entanglement for the serious, the passionately sincere man to find his nourishment there. The serious man is too provincial too, too unwilling, unable let us say, to have confidence in his fellow-countryman, too skittish, reserved, isolated, yes, too provincial, to come to an understanding with his fellows, to work with anybody for anything beyond a few simple money-making or advertising schemes.

There are a half dozen or more composers in each country, of high sincerity and of the most distinguished technical mastery. They mostly live in isolated places where the mob cannot tear them to pieces, but where there is also no Communion of Saints. None that I know live in either Washington or Madrid. A few live in New York and Barcelona.

Now New York and Barcelona are not capitals. They are large sea-ports, jumping-off places for Europe, receiving-points for foreign merchandise, centers of violence and talk. A man can work there in a garret alone or meet the incoming boats, but there doesn't seem to be any less of mutual suspicion than in Kansas City or Valladolid, Galveston or Granada. New York is certainly the chief musical center in the United States, and Barcelona is the chief musical city of Spain. Yet in neither place is there anything faintly resembling a school or a local style of composition. They are good cities to give concerts in; but as directive influences, molding environments for composition, they are inferior to Berlin and Paris and Vienna and Prague and Rome.

To return to folk-music, or the popular style, the music that is in the air. In Spain it lives on Moors and gypsies. The passion behind it is exotic and picturesque. It is at its best mixed with dancing by the Moorish Andalusians or by the gypsies. In America it belongs to the Negroes, is equally exotic, almost more picturesque; and the Negro remains the master of it, as of its bodily expression. Jewish immigrants of the second generation have been able to exploit it commercially. Farther than that it retains no vitality. It is over-developed, over-sophisticated. It is like the music of Ireland and Hungary, complex, elegant, and limited to the expression of erotic nostalgias and to an occasional comic usage.

All this is the defect of the essentially musical nations, the peoples of abundant and facile musicality. In Germany, in France, in Italy, in Russia even, where musical instinct is weaker, less accurate, and hence less imitative, music grew up with the intelligence, not separated from it. Let us not forget, too, the directive discipline of the Church in those countries. Spain remained pagan until the sixteenth century, too late to form musical expression into an integral part of the Spanish mind.

These things strike me, coming to visit my native heath after some years' residence in France, where music is not a universal talent or even a very widely indulged national pastime; but where the co-ordination and inter-dependence of all the mental faculties is sufficiently understood so that any talent, even a mu-

sical one, is capable of being developed into a vehicle for expressing the whole man, and where that expression is capable of being understood in terms of the whole civilization of which it is a part.

Virgil Thomson

THE EMPEROR AT THE OPERA

IN setting *The Emperor Jones* to music, Louis Gruenberg has brought the play into high relief. He has spurned the composer's time-honored privilege of obliterating the librettist. The play's the thing, he seems to have said, wherein to catch the conscience of the emperor. At every point, the music is subservient to the text. But this self-effacing score is composed with a sense of tempo and dramatic action that produces a nearly perfect synchronization. It is all the more remarkable when one considers the lack of conventional form in the play. The only unity is the dis-unity of fear and flight, the only outward means of unity are the continuous beating of drums and the firing of gunshots to lay the Emperor's fears. The rest is panic and disorder, a crescendo of disintegration. The play itself is a virtuoso description of the very formlessness of fear, and Gruenberg has fully matched the virtuosity of O'Neill. As might have been expected, it is now proved that we have the technic to create American opera.

To say that Gruenberg's setting has produced a play with incidental music, is perhaps to accuse him of not writing an opera. But it was the best possible kind of opera to make of the play. And since it is a play with incidental music, it is as such that it must be judged.

As a play, it is half a play. It is only a nemesis. The first half of the tragedy, whereby one's sympathy should have been aroused, is omitted. As psychoanalysis, it fascinates only insofar as one is fascinated by psychoanalysis. Dogmatically, as an experience of fear, it fails, because the things that frighten Jones do not in the least arouse a similar emotion in the spectator. To be sure, in the first scene, the audience has been told about Jones' experiences. It has, however, not shared in them vividly.