

# SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

"200 Were Chosen" and "Johnny Johnson"—Three concert series—Glamour girls and boys

**A**GAIN and again during the showing of *200 Were Chosen*, E. P. Conkle's play about the farmers who were settled in Alaska last year by the federal government, the neck hairs of the audience rose in bristling wrath at some specially outrageous display of government bureaucracy or, more especially, at the spectacle of the naked force of the army deciding the issue of a question which had every right to be solved by reason alone. And again and again the onlookers exulted in some new expression by the heterogeneous lot of hardened individualists of their love of work and the tools of work, and of their inchoate but gradually crystallizing sense of collective interest and collective power. Mr. Conkle, plus Sidney Harmon and the Actors Repertory Company who produced it, plus director Worthington Miner and the acting company, have rung a lot of bells in this production. Long may they chime.

You probably recall the newsreel and newspaper fanfare when the 200 went off to Mantanuska Valley—indeed, if you have been around much, you probably recall that you had a sinking feeling about these folks who were going off so high-heartedly, to be at the mercy of the army and of a situation where picket lines and leaflets could not help them to obtain redress of inevitable grievances; and you probably recall the news of a scarlet-fever epidemic and the vague reports of "trouble" which was ascribed to "agitators." Well, here's the whole small harrowing heroic story. Where Mr. Conkle got his dope doesn't appear, but in the main it rings painfully true.

Which doesn't mean the play is painful. Rather, it is very easy to watch and to get excited about. You may feel a small sense of annoyance that no one character sees the situation plain, but it is a safe guess that the piecemeal vision, finally patched together, while it is somewhat unconventional drama, is pretty close to life.

It would be hard to praise the acting company too highly. There are a dozen fine performances, among which must be included those by Anthony Ross, Paula Bauersmith, Will Geer, Charles Jordan, Neill O'Malley, and Aldrich Bowker. Perhaps it would be legitimate to complain that Miss Bauersmith, whose lank auburn grace dominated most of her scenes, and Mr. O'Malley, were too frequently permitted or directed to stand erect and motionless at center-stage, smiling steadfastly or dead-pan, while someone else made a speech to them. But such a complaint would be drowned out in the applause.

The Group Theatre's *Johnny Johnson* is one of the strangest items ever to come to Broadway. Here is a play about a pure idea, so to speak, clothed in human flesh and bone, who does his work well, falls in love, volunteers with the U. S. army in the World War,

succeeds in stopping it for a brief moment, gets himself, as a consequence, sent to the booby hatch, whence he emerges finally to fade out, a street-corner toy seller, on one of Donald Oenslager's horizons. And the whole job is done now in simple realistic dramatic narrative, now in didactic song, almost troubadour style, and now in frank and arresting symbolism. It is something like a Dos Passos novel in its variation of pace and device. Johnny Johnson is that unreal man who is completely honest with himself and his neighbors and has limitless confidence in the power of the pure truth in its verbal form to win through against any odds. His effort as a private soldier to stop the war by explaining to the Germans and to his own buddies that it's cockeyed, and that since neither of them want to fight, all they need do is stop, is the sharpest expression of this point of view. Of course in this effort, as in others more comical, he is decisively defeated by the world organized on a non-verbal basis of force. Whether Paul Green intended this as the lesson, or whether he merely wanted to follow through to their logical conclusion the efforts of a simple man to do right, is difficult to say. What can be said is that the Group Theatre's new production is often highly comic, often touching, hauntingly captivating when Kurt Weill's songs are being sung (albeit none too well), and sometimes telling in its satire on the willingness of *Homo sapiens* to let himself be led around by the nose. Lee Strasberg has done a fine job of handling a difficult script, and Morris Carnovsky and Russell Collins give memorable expression to their roles.

A. W. T.

## MUSIC

**C**HALK it up to the credit of the imaginatively sensible program makers of the W.P.A. concerts, the iconoclastic Mr. Hirschmann, and the catholic Mr. Lange: rusty bolts have been forced and a long-barred window

flung open to let a breath of fresh air into the septic atmosphere of New York's concert halls. The Sunday papers still publish interminable lists of programs as unappetizing as dog-wagon menus, and there is no end to the parade of musical stooges who sweat and scream on the stage for bored and adoring audiences. "He plays so fast!" "With such expression!" But there are three series where there is real music making and vital musical absorption, where houses are sold out to attentive audiences without the use of headline names, polite blackmail of friends and relatives, or prodigal papering.

The musical gospel according to the Bachs from the W.P.A., the full richness of the Beethoven and Brahms chamber repertoires from Hirschmann's New Friends of Music, the forgotten giants and contemporary experimenters from Lange's chamber orchestra. . . . One can have nothing but praise for the first two series, as admirably carried out as they are soundly planned. The Philharmonic-Symphony Chamber Orchestra, however, only partially fulfills its potentialities. The series is too short (five concerts) and the tickets are too expensive. And this year's policy of giving old and new music on the same program works out less effectively in performance than on paper.

To say that old music should be heard with cleansed ears and refreshed minds is not to imply that we must be as little children to reënter a lost paradise. The straight evolutionary theory of music history (as thoroughly discredited as it is still widespread) is responsible for the too-common idea that the old-timers were naïve, spontaneous, and charming pioneer-prophets of more complex and sophisticated later composers. (Some of the greatest of the oldsters were perhaps too sophisticated, even decadent; far from jolly adventurers or humble foundation builders, they were century enders rounding out an epoch, marking a definitive completion of a particular stage of development from which their successors had to revolt and strike off at a new angle.) If we think that their idiom is simple it is because the modern harmonically trained ear—analyzing what it hears vertically—tends to find only transparency and a lack of color. The polished craftsmanship, the intricate thinking are not revealed until we are able to follow simultaneous horizontal lines and weigh the exquisite placement of the parts. Not until then can we appreciate the "infinite richness in a little room." Within the strict limitations is an astonishing variety, a nuance of color and delicacy of mesh whose subtlety is quite lost on ears stopped with the thick wax of Wagnerian sonorities and Debussyan ninths. And while many contemporary composers are more closely akin to the older men than to their immediate ancestors, they must make use of



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the new resources at their disposal or become pedantic archeologists. Even the most intelligent and alert audience cannot make the necessary sudden adjustments and do full justice to both old and new.

If the Lange series cannot be split into two, the moderns might well be left to other and probably more sympathetic hands and the present restrictions removed to give Lange the role to which he laid claim in his memorable first concert of last season. As exponent of the neglected instrumental ensemble works of seventeenth-, sixteenth-century, and earlier giants, he has the opportunity of contributing immeasurably to our musical experience.

Even as it is, the fresh air is eddying in. Barbirolli and Koussevitzky must have caught a whiff of it, for their scheduling (within a fortnight) of five unfamiliar symphonies of Mozart, Haydn, and Schubert is something of a record. The Boston Symphony's first New York visit gave us the Mozart No. 29 (K. 201) and the Haydn No. 102, which, with an excerpt from *The Fairy's Kiss* of Stravinsky and Messiaen's *Les Offrandes Oubliées*, certainly do nothing to detract from Koussevitzky's reputation as a catholic program maker. Barbirolli confirms a similar if lesser reputation with the Schubert No. 2 and Haydn's No. 97, plus Mozart's No. 33 (K. 319) announced for Sunday, November 29.

It is perhaps too much to hope that these symphonies get the same treatment as a modern "novelty." The usual fate of such revivals is that of a filler-in, an agreeable and approved interlude in which the players run through their notes and the listeners through the program editor's with the same disdain of the music's deeper implications. Haydn is the great musical martyr in this respect. He has been sentenced for eternity as Papa Haydn, and all his tonal testimony in rebuttal is never weighed in evidence. I should like to preface every Haydn performance with the true talk of Michel Brenet: "The smallness of the frame, astonishing at first and at which some are inclined to smile, envelopes the minutest details in an atmosphere of intimacy in which the charm of very simple language is felt. One submits to it willingly, and it is only later, when the time comes for analysis and reflection, that one discovers how wrong was the first impression of a childish, spontaneous art. Haydn sings ingenuously, from the depth of his heart: composes scientifically with all his intelligence."

R. D. DARRELL.

## THE SCREEN

**D**ANGEROUS curves and soft shoulders are something we customarily associate with the more scientific reaches of modern highway administration, but to Hollywood, it seems, they are more of an adjunct to the trackless desert. You may remember that Marlene Dietrich's first American film, *Morocco*, ended with her dangerous curves and soft shoulders silhouetted against the Sahara afterglow; well, it seems her meander-

ings have come full circle (after cinematic sojourning in Shanghai, Buenos Aires, old Spain, and other way stations), and she is back in the desert again, in *The Garden of Allah*, looking for and losing That Something. With the circle complete, we hope that brand of Dietrich exploitation is done for. She has a lot besides wistfulness and what is sometimes known as *monyah*. Her song-and-dance act in *Morocco*, her caperings and quick-change volatility in *Dishonor* show she has plenty besides tapering legs and a ten-ton look. We say let her try a little knockabout comedy or brainwork for a while.

And the same goes for Charles Boyer, the renegade Trappist monk in *The Garden of Allah*, who is well on his way to being nailed to the cross of glamour. In the British *Thunder in the East* he came to victorious grips with a difficult, stylized role as the Japanese naval-officer husband of Merle Oberon (who is likewise in danger of glamour crucifixion; she was originally slated for Dietrich's role in *Allah*). It will be too darn bad if he and Miss Dietrich and Miss Oberon have their effectiveness (and, ultimately, their box-office value) blasted by that stereotype. Greta Garbo's history since *Anna Christie* is an example of what can happen.

Perhaps this all goes back to the old saw that a girl who's a knockout doesn't have to be bright. We have no notion, of course, how Mae West or her producers view this question, but the fact remains that to a greater extent than any other star whose vehicles are based on sex appeal, she insists on cerebration. *Go West, Young Man* continues that tradition. Based upon the stage success, *Personal Appearance*, Miss West's film keeps that story virtually intact, and adds a few touches worth adding. It can be definitely classed as a picture to be seen.

Beauty of another sort is to be seen in *The Son of Mongolia*, Amkino's new release at the New York Cameo, which was made in the Mongolian People's Republic. Peter Ellis will review it at length in the coming issue.

ROBERT WHITE.

## THE DANCE

**E**STHER JUNGER, for a young dancer, has received considerable press notice, built up a bit of a reputation, principally for her Broadway work in *Life Begins At 8:40* and *Parade*. To a certain extent, her prestige as a dancer is understandable; she moves pleasingly enough about the stage, and while she exhibits little ability to develop a theme logically and to climax, she projects a not unpleasant theatrical personality across the footlights. Her great virtue lies in her ability to say comparatively nothing with a great deal of ease; the audience may relax. If Miss Junger has plunged into the urgent currents of simple human relationships, it has been to produce a sentimental *Song For The Dead*, a completely obvious (lady-of-dubious-character) *Inertia*, a *Negro Theme* that is typically tourist, if not cartoon, and a *Soap-Box* whose