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LITERATURE AND SOCIAL ISSUES

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—Interlocutor.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23rd—8:30 P. M.

WEBSTER HALL—119 E. 11 ST.

All tickets are 50c—Reserved section for those buying in advance at NEW MASSES, Workers Bookshop, 50 E. 13 St., Bookfair, 133 W. 44 St., New York City, Modern Book Shop, 216 Halsey St., Newark, N. J.

about whether this country will ever produce a composer of major proportions, let them stop worrying, for right in their midst is the brilliant and immensely endowed Marc Blitzstein.

LEAGUE OF COMPOSERS CONCERT

You rarely hear anyone mention, "*Les Six*" any more. But about 1922 the entire music world was agog about a group of six French composers who sardonically violated every accepted precept of music. These *enfants terribles* labored under the motto "Shock the bourgeoisie," and in the main succeeded. Their attitude derived from the atmosphere of post-war disillusionment in which cynicism and novelty flourished. This group regarded "great ideals" with deep disdain and claimed only ordinary things were worth while. Their definition of ordinary was very flexible and could extend to writing about bar rooms or vacuum cleaners. To these composers the grandiloquent music of the romanticists and the abstractions of the Debussy impressionists were identified with the smug middle-class audience whom they disliked intensely. The spearhead of this group, Darius Milhaud, wrote such items as "An Oxen on the Roof," and a song cycle which utilized a mail order catalogue for its subject matter. Nevertheless, his music possessed a certain rude, rugged strength, both appealing and skillful. "*La Creation Du Monde*"; "*Soldades de Brazil*" (written after a visit to Brazil); "*Poemes Juifs*," and the opera "Christophe Colomb" were compositions that succeeded in establishing Milhaud as a prominent musical figure. During the Popular Front period, he associated himself with progressive trends. He wrote music for important films and composed a piece called "Death of a Tyrant."

It was therefore with great eagerness that many of us looked forward to the concert sponsored by the League of Composers at the Museum of Modern Art where an entire evening was devoted to the more recent of Milhaud compositions. Eagerness was soon transformed into keen disappointment when it became clear as the evening unfolded that Milhaud was slipping backward. Here was music that was hardly shocking, but on the contrary was mild and repetitious. I doubt whether it would offend even the most conservative listener. "*Le Voyage D'Ete*" (1940) was a song cycle written to an insipid text. Floating, vague, and dull, it sounded like a lifeless shadow of Debussy. Just as flat was "*La Cantate de l'enfant et de la Mere*" (1938), which employed the services of a *diseuse*, a string quartet, and a piano. Again the text covered such a trivial subject that it would have been ridiculous to attach music of any import to it. And none ever came! The bulk of the evening's music was of a similar caliber except for two vigorous excerpts from "Christophe Colomb" and some fine piano pieces played by the composer at the tail end of the program.

Milhaud is unquestionably a gifted composer. As a reaction from the days when he

sowed his wild oats, he seems to be drifting towards some form of neo-impressionism. This is dangerous because creative artists who refuse to go forward find themselves riding in reverse. Stravinsky, the outstanding composer of the early part of the century, hit the backward route via neo-classicism. As a composer he is today virtually sterile. Milhaud must recognize that his most accepted works were concerned with subjects that said something. He can never hope to progress if he fusses with trivialities in order not to offend the very audience he once took such delight in shocking. There is a vast audience capable of enjoying a music that deals with the vital currents of contemporary events and people. If Milhaud continues working along the lines he seems to be following at present, he will soon sink into oblivion. For the composer of "Soldados de Brazil" that would be a tragedy.

LOU COOPER.

"Arsenic and Old Lace"

A review of Joseph Kesselring's new mystery play.

IF YOU can buy a ticket, go to the Fulton Theater and see *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the indescribable mystery play by Joseph Kesselring, which has been announced hereabouts for at least a year, and has finally arrived. Nothing like it has been seen before on land, sea, or in the air, let alone on the stage. You should know that from the title—which is perfect.

On the off-chance that you haven't read the daily reviews, I am not going to tell you the plot. Those daily reviewers who did tell the plot did you and the playwright and the actors a distinct disservice. For the fun involved in this one is so dependent upon the element of surprise inherent in the script, that to tell the plot is to spoil much of the fun. Suffice it to say that it has to deal with multiple murder done in an old Brooklyn mansion, and that, if you can imagine murder being funny, it is the funniest play you will see this year, bar none.

The ingenuity of the playwright, which is considerable, has been (if possible) topped by the production—a beautiful ensemble directed by Bretaigne Windust in a Raymond Sovey set, and performed by a galaxy of superior performers. It would be difficult to single out any single actor for special praise, for the performances of Josephine Hull, John Alexander, Jean Adair, Anthony Ross, Helen Brooks, Allyn Joslyn, Edgar Stehli, and the original Boris Karloff form a collectivity that does not permit of ready analysis.

Without saying any more, I insist that this is a rave review of an excruciatingly funny mystery melodrama (thoroughly superficial to be sure) that should put you in stitches at regular three-minute intervals, and leave you limp at the final curtain. In these days, no small boon.

ALVAH BESSIE.

"Dramatically staged . . . very exciting in performance. Mr. Blitzstein's music, joyous and dramatic by turns, gives the characters flesh, blood, humor, love, loyalty, indignation, courage and all the qualities of lively, likable human beings."
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REV. MAX C. PUTNEY—Exec. Sec'y Berks County Civil Liberties Comm., arrested for "conspiracy" on his way to a protest meeting of the committee.

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