

Music. To a non-musical person nothing seems more fruitless than reading a collection of criticisms about concert and opera performances, belonging to the past. To the enthusiast it is a fascinating and rewarding experience, for there is no better way of sharpening one's own critical faculty than by pitting it against the considered opinion of another. Viewed thus as an abrasive, B. H. Haggin's "Music in the Nation" (noted below) fulfils its function admirably. As our reviewer points out, Mr. Haggin has little use for contemporary music. Fortunately, others take a kindlier attitude, and for them the publishers this year have issued several excellent guides, among them "Schönberg and His School," by René Leibowitz, and a newly revised edition of "Music Since 1900," by Nicolas Slonimsky, reviewed in this issue on page 56.



—Walker Evans.

B. H. Haggin: "... aridities, ugliness, and horrors."

Judgment in a Tight Little World

MUSIC IN THE NATION. By B. H. Haggin. New York: William Sloane Assoc. 376 pp. \$5.

By CECIL SMITH

MR. HAGGIN'S new book is a collection of articles about music that have appeared in *The Nation* in the past twenty years. The punning title is an appropriate symbol of its presumptuous and, to my mind, frequently irresponsible contents. *The Nation*, as its own staff will be the first to admit, is quite a different affair from "the nation." On the strength of Mr. Haggin's title one would naturally expect to encounter a sympathetic, informed concern with the creative impulses, representative institutions and personalities, and qualities of taste and appreciation that characterize the musical life of the country. Instead, he is confronted by a tight little world of the author's own imagining—a world dominated by a handful of subject deities (Bernard Shaw, Toscanini, Beecham, Donald Tovey, Mozart, Berlioz, Schnabel, Webster Aitken, and Franz Rupp) and a rather larger group of alleged frauds, nihilists, ungifted pretenders, and members of the great unwashed (Olin Downes, Arthur Judson, the radio networks, the record companies, Deems Taylor, Heifetz, Stokowski, practically all musicologists except Tovey, and practically all living composers).

The fundamental defect of Mr. Haggin's writing is his failure to admit that every critic must discipline his opinions by referring them to the checks and balances of some reality outside his own mind. Mr. Haggin apparently sits at home listening to records (preferably of Mozart quartets or unappreciated works by Ber-

lioz), reads books by Shaw, Tovey, Beecham, and Newman, and scans the daily press in order to upbraid Mr. Downes or to grapple with the enigma of Virgil Thomson, whose brilliant presentation Mr. Haggin cannot reconcile with conclusions he thinks are calculated aberrations. It takes a good deal—at least a Mozart quartet by the Budapest Quartet at the YMHA or a "Figaro" performance at the Metropolitan—to get him out of his armchair and into the living presence of music and musicians. Since he agrees with Shaw's practice of refusing to meet and talk with practising musicians, he is cut off from first-hand knowledge of their aims and problems. It is no ivory tower in which he lives, exultant over the infallibility of Toscanini, displeased with most of Brahms's music and happy with all of Mozart's, and scornful of his journalistic contemporaries. It is a marble mausoleum, no closer to the actual "music of the nation" than the Lincoln Memorial is to the Truman Administration.

Though he is quick to denounce other writers for comparable oversimplifications, Mr. Haggin bases his critical technique largely on a transparent, and rather naive, schematic contrivance. He invokes the bugaboo of Correct Opinion and then seeks to controvert it with highly personal, "illuminating" judgments—which he himself praises immoderately in various essays on the proper nature of criticism. When his notion of Correct Opinion—as is often the case—is as much his own invention as the attitude with which he opposes it, the result is a tempest in a teapot.

The gap between Mr. Haggin's statement of critical theory and his impulse to put that theory to work in the interests of living music is

made clear by bringing together two passages from the book:

The theory:

The critic does have certain obligations to the artist—the obligation to bring an unprejudiced and receptive mind to the artist's work, to keep that mind entirely on that work, and to report honestly what it finds there; the obligation, in other words, to write a criticism of the work, not to misuse it and misrepresent it in an exhibition of the critic's own cleverness, his wit, his learning, his pet ideas, his amusing style.

The application:

Then there is Aaron Copland's equally wide-eyed, incredible-as-it-may-seem, how-can-such-things-be talk about the "fantastic notions" with which "newspaper writers and radio commentators who ought to know better" have, apparently for the sheer hell of it, misrepresented modern music and prejudiced the public against it—with which Copland tries to persuade us that we haven't ourselves heard the aridities, uglinesses, and horrors of Hindemith, Bartók, Berg, Schönberg, Stravinsky, and the rest—with which he tries to get us to hear in those aridities, uglinesses, and horrors an "enriched musical language" and a "new spirit of objectivity, attuned to our times. . . ."

The Musical Bookshelf

Cumbersome prose increases the opacity of an already difficult subject in *Schönberg and His School*, by René Leibowitz (Philosophical Library, \$4.75). Whether it is worth the reader's while to put up with the Leibowitz form for the sake of the Leibowitz content depends first on his affection for twelve-tone composition, second on his ability to follow complex

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THE LITERARY SUMMING-UP

(Continued from page 7)

and Dixon line and for all its ponderous appearance a readable and timely text.

Of the more than 9,000 books published in 1949 I believe that at last count *Publishers' Weekly*, the almost-*Variety* of the book trade, had counted 1,517 as novels. Of them all the one which in my circle engendered the most heated discussion was John O'Hara's "A Rage to Live." Arguments ran pro and con as to whether it was his best or worst book, whether it was a good book or a dull one, whether it depended upon good writing and sound characterization or upon sex alone for its undeniable popular appeal. This novel, which *The New York Times* describes as "the personal history of a Pennsylvania female"—which is, I suspect, only another way for saying it is the story of a typical O'Hara bitch—at least stirred up a lot of fun in the cocktail set from John Bleeck's on West 40th Street north, west, and south. Mr. O'Hara's own *New Yorker* let its reviewer tear it to pieces, thus setting off sparks such as the *New York* literary set hadn't enjoyed since the 1920's. As to the book's qualities, I respectfully bow out.

It would be unfair to pick any one or two novels and say didactically that they were the best, but any year that produced Guthrie's "The Way West" and Clark's "The Track of the Cat" must be marked off as a successful year. One of the delights of reading during 1949 was to discover that Mr. Guthrie was most definitely not a one-book man. "The Way West" was in many respects a more mature novel both in its conception and execution than the remarkable "The Big Sky." And, similarly, Mr. Clark showed a marked literary advance. His integration of the family he was writing about was of such intense and finished quality that it raised the novel above the symbolism he was trying to express.

As I said earlier, some of the established authors (into which class both Mr. Guthrie and Mr. Clark now move) were disappointing. I think especially of the waste of talent that went into the writing of "The Heat of the Day," Elizabeth Bowen's melange of love, mystery, and war. Nor did Sinclair Lewis do very well with his story of the Midwestern frontier, "The God-Seeker." Bruce Marshall's "To Every Man a Penny," another story about another priest, this time a Parisian, ran disappointingly thin,

although the master has not entirely lost his light ecclesiastical touch.

On the other hand, some of the old timers showed that their hands had not lost their skill. At the time I read it I felt that John P. Marquand was at his best with "Point of No Return" but now I am not so sure. At any rate, his study of a New York banker, with Essex County and Boston (but definitely not Harvard) background, was deft and literate, a joy to read. Another who did not disappoint was Ludwig Bemelmans, happily moved from Hollywood to his native Tyrol to describe life among the innkeepers of the ski country before, during, and after the Occupation. A novel which I felt did not receive the attention it deserved was "The Green Room," a civilized love story with Jamesian overtones, by Hamilton Basso.

The war seemed to have been

pretty well ignored by the authors of the class of '49 but the home front was not. There were three novels about Washington, both ante- and post-World War II. John Dos Passos ended his New Deal trilogy with "The Grand Design," which received more ideological than critical attention, as was perhaps to be expected in the light of what happened in November 1948. Elizabeth Janeway explored official Washington with a fair amount of success in "The Question of Gregory" but her perception of her political characters was not as acute as in her previous study. In this category the best novel was Merle Miller's frightening story of a victim of a Washington witch hunt, "The Sure Thing." Although not without many technical faults, the book cut deeply into the official mind and with true sensitivity laid bare the effects of a past mistake in judgment upon a young man of talent.

From England came two importations with the frantic blessing of that little London clique which seldom sees far beyond the *Horizon*. The first

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

AN ENGLISH POET (1772-1834)

After identifying the fifteen well-known literary characters briefly described below, print their names in the spaces just above the descriptions. The initial letters of the characters' names will spell the name of a famous English poet. Allowing twenty-five points for the name of the poet and five points for each character identified, a score of sixty is par, seventy is very good, and eighty or better is excellent. Answers are on page 35.

1. _____
He demanded a pound of flesh in payment of a loan.
2. _____
He converted Sadie Thompson and then wished he hadn't.
3. _____
Heroine of "What Every Woman Knows," by James M. Barrie.
4. _____
This lawyer had the habit of wringing his clammy hands.
5. _____
After conquering his pride and her prejudice, she married Darcy.
6. _____
This one-legged sea cook led a mutiny aboard the *Hispaniola*.
7. _____
This plumber's daughter became a lady's maid.
8. _____
The winner of a wrestling match in "As You Like It."
9. _____
This Exmoor maiden was brought up by a band of outlaws.
10. _____
She left her own wedding to elope with young Lochinvar.
11. _____
He was banished from Padua for duelling in the streets.
12. _____
He was chased by the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow.
13. _____
She gave Samson a haircut.
14. _____
His strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure.
15. _____
A backsliding preacher created by Sinclair Lewis.