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Spotlight on the Moderns

JOHN CAGE's "prepared piano" is, in a way, a first cousin, a chic, snobbish cousin, to the one-man band we occasionally encounter at street corners or carnivals. Its chief contribution is the possibility it offers a single player to command, with far less physical exertion than the one-man band, a percussion ensemble of lovely timbres evocative of oriental drums, gamelons, and gongs. This is achieved with the fingers on the keys after damping the strings with screws, rubber pads, and such. But having arrived this far, Cage does little more to exploit the new resources than his poor relation who tinkles the bells on his head-dress and claps the cymbals on his legs simply by strutting up and down.

The set of sixteen sonatas with four interludes (played by Maro Ajemian on Dial LP's 19 and 20, \$11.90) add up to a very lengthy demonstration of the instrument that might have been accomplished in a few minutes. It is like unwinding a whole bolt of fabric when a yard or so suffices to make the texture apparent. Cage relies on unconventional sonority as a disguise for what is either ineptitude in technique and invention or perverse negation of compositional problems. Where there is structure, it is that of a first-grade teaching piece or exercise played haltingly, and it is sad to see a few striking ideas go uncomposed (as in the Fifth Sonata). The music proceeds in starts and stops, and I can only recommend the lugubrious cumulative effect as a cure for insomniacs.

I am alarmed at the risk of these remarks, for nothing is so reassuring to a self-styled prophet and his coterie as critical disapproval. But trust me, dear reader, when I say I am no stranger or enemy to progress. The titillation of novel effects wears off when there is so little to support them. Nothing could be more reassuring in this regard than the coincidence of the appearance at the same time of twenty assorted piano pieces by Henry Cowell played by the composer (Circle LP 51-101, \$5.95). These forerunners of Cage's experiments seem antediluvian indeed in their present revival. Cowell started meddling with piano strings by using the fingers on them, in contrast to Cage's damping materials. Cowell also evoked the "tone cluster," groups of contiguous keys punched with fist or fore-arm and producing sounds like those made by a baby with free run of the piano or by a trunk falling on the keys.

Next to Cage's pastels, Cowell's clusters are muddy oils. Audiences of the Twenties were amused and scandalized by them, especially by the visible gymnastics of arm action and of reaching into the piano's entrails, which prompted a New York paper to send a sports reporter to a Cowell concert. Take away the outer coat of clusters and what remains is often a naive Victorian salon piece. The eerie portamentos of "Banshee" would make fine background music for a mystery melodrama and the first tremolo of "Advertisement" is something of a find. Other pieces have their fireside sweetness. But the insistence on the rumbling bass is as tiresome as the deep arpeggios of Debussy's "Sunken Cathedral," which it so much resembles, would become if subjected to equal repetition.

The recording matches the shenanigans of the music with its own tricks, including a bonus of a seven-inch disc in a superimposed envelope that will delight those who miss the odd-sized inserts of the late *Flair* magazine. (Carrying Cowles to Cowell.) On it Cowell discusses his music, and in my copy a dip on each revolution creates a sliding retard which I thought for a fleeting moment was intentional—you have to be on your toes with these experimenters. But alas, it is a defective copy, and I am afraid our *avant-gardistes* are really a reactionary bunch, still tinkering with pianos when defects in pressing, scratched surfaces, and other record "preparations" offer so many possibilities—to say nothing of playing 33's at 78 rpm, etc.

THE world of Bela Bartók seems very far removed from that of the experimentalists, and yet in such a work as his "Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta" he coped with some of the same problems of finding new sonorities, with the one all-important difference that, far from being an end in themselves, they were among the means through which a weighty musical entity was communicated. That work was more daring, more explorative than either of the three Bartók works that make their first appearances on records in the current list. But in all of Bartók's music the calculation of sonority is a major factor, and the listener will find his expectations in this regard substantially fulfilled by the three newly recorded works: a Divertimento for String Orchestra (RCA LM 1185,



William Primrose—"exemplary."

\$5.72), the Viola Concerto (Bartók Records 309, \$5.95), and "Deux Images," Bartók Records 305, \$4.75).

The saga of Bartók's last years is a very touching one, including his death in the New York vicinity a few years ago at the height of his creative powers in unwarranted circumstances of obscurity and neglect. But equally touching are the devout efforts of his friend Tibor Serly, who has done so much as a conductor and editor to disseminate and keep alive the vast store of the Hungarian master's music, and of his son Peter, who has founded a little recording company with the chief aim of making his father's music easily available, though his activities are not restricted to this. The release of the Viola Concerto is a crowning achievement of these concerted efforts. Bartók's last work, it was left in an unorchestrated manuscript in a shorthand that took Mr. Serly many months to interpret. The orchestration took even longer, and over two years elapsed before a meticulously executed project was delivered to the violist William Primrose, who had commissioned it.

While remaining faithful to Bartók's style, Mr. Serly has, I suspect, given it a more streamlined orchestration than the composer would have written. But it works very well, and it is useless to speculate on the subtleties of detail Bartók might have conjured up. The work is in the rhapsodic vein of his Violin Concerto, expressing personal sentiment after the manner established for the genre by composers from Bruch to Bloch. It is more noble and distinguished in sentiment than his Violin Concerto, however. I am disturbed by the proportions. The first movement seems too long and the

(Continued on page 54)



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Muggsy Spanier (in 1946) and Jelly Roll Morton (in 1927) —"New Orleans to the core."

Monuments of the Great

LET us continue to inspect the monuments of the great. Some of the best hot records ever made are now being gathered on LP discs. For example, there are six sides of the late Jelly Roll Morton and His Red Hot Peppers (RCA Victor LPT 23, \$3.15). These are "The Chant," "Doctor Jazz," "Georgia Swing," "Pontchartrain Blues," "Original Jelly Roll Blues," and "Black Bottom Stomp." They were made between 1926 and 1930. Jelly Roll Morton was a New Orleans man to the core, and so were his key bandmen. He had in his lyrical head the whole wonderful mixed Crescent City musical heritage—Latin, African, West Indian, Anglo-Saxon. In his band records as in his piano performances you will hear many New Orleans strains—echoes of the cakewalk and the tango, the stomp and the drag. You will be at times, in effect, in the minstrel show, the street parade, the honky-tonk, the graveyard, the colored church, the bordello, or in some relaxed backyard in the Louisiana summer night. All this not by way of explicit musical "scenes"—Jelly Roll Morton was anything but a Ketelbey—but through the shifting traditional accents of the music.

Jelly Roll Morton believed in arranged music, as against wholly spontaneous jazz, and for the very good reason that he had numerous fascinating arrangements to contribute. But they framed a great deal of improvised solo and passage work, and the spirit of the Red Hot Peppers was profoundly spontaneous. The outstanding players included cornetists George Mit-

chell and Ward Pinkett, trombonist Kid Ory, clarinetist Omer Simeon, banjoist Johnny St. Cyr, and the tuba expert Bill Benford. At this point a word of warning may be in order for the benefit of newcomers searching their way in this field. At the first blush, to unaccustomed ears, the Red Hot Peppers may sound somewhat "old-fashioned." They have none of the bland, rich, full choir work of the swing bands, nor the massed power-play strength of the jump bands, nor the bizarre virtuosity of the be-bop bands. Among contemporary outfits, the Peppers are closest in feeling to the best small Dixieland combinations. But the Peppers have an unusually strong ragtime feeling, which suggests the past, and in general they hark back fondly to their own youth in the lyric city on the delta. In this corner, as regular readers will know, this is regarded as a great virtue. Jazz music may be moving away from New Orleans toward some more brilliant and inspiring capital, but I doubt it. In the middle Thirties when the impoverished Jelly Roll tried to organize more music along the Hot Pepper lines, the bright boys of Harlem laughed at him as obsolete. Today most of the music that the bright boys were making sounds glib and flashy and mechanical, while the Red Hot Peppers, in this estimation, wear like iron. They swing from riverboat shuffling to Louisiana pastoral, and their playing is charged with individual talent and emotion. It is richly endearing.

Their old friend Sidney Bechet, who has made what seems like an astral