



The Mature Art of Noväes and Morini

THOUGH we are sometimes prone to forget, it is not only the boy, but also the girl who grows older; and if the world is very fortunate they grow older to become such people as Guiomar Noväes and Erica Morini, who made the concert hall a happier place to be in for their performances during the pre-Christmas period. It is just as well that there was no competitive piano or violin playing in the immediate aftermath of theirs: it wouldn't have sounded too well.

What was most gratifying about the two performances is that I have never heard either lady play better; and there is yet no reason to suppose that either has exhausted her capacity for growth. Mme. Noväes, particularly, who had an afternoon to herself in a Town Hall recital whereas Miss Morini played the Brahms concerto with the Philharmonic and Bruno Walter, gave us some samples of subtlety of thought and mastery of articulation which made most of the comparable performances of the season sound clumsy and heavy handed.

This was particularly true of a series of works early in the afternoon by Couperin ("La Tendre Nanette"), Daquin, ("L'Hirondelle"), and Mozart (Rondo in A minor). The case against the suitability of the contemporary grand piano for such literature suddenly became non-existent, for two reasons: Mme. Noväes knew exactly what sound she wanted for the ornaments of Couperin, the accents of Daquin, and the filagree of Mozart, and how to make the piano produce that sound. Such muscular control and physical coordination are less eye-filling than that required for Liszt, perhaps, but decidedly compelling to the ear. Gratefully, too, her oversized audience responded in appropriate measure.

In this sequence (which led to Beethoven's Dinmör sonata opus 31, No. 3, a Chopin group, and Schumann's "Carnaval") Mme. Noväes also demonstrated rather convincingly that the common notion of a "classic" or "romantic" literature is so much nonsense. Providing a performer has her degree of sensitivity (which is to say, providing she is a Noväes) tone coloring, dynamic variety, gradations of sound values are as welcome in a Mozart Rondo as in a Chopin Im-

promptu. Indeed, when she had finished spinning a time-suspending spell in the Mozart one wondered why the notion that piano writing only began with Chopin ever was accepted.

Her Beethoven was on a slightly lesser scale of values than seemed to me wholly appropriate, though just as powerfully conceived. What was lacking was not sound per se, but a sharper impact in the bass, a brighter ring in the treble. But it would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful playing of the adagio, in which the martial note was conveyed by bass tremolandi that suggested not merely drum rolls, but the rolls of muffled drums.

If Mme. Noväes's art could be summed, in a word, as contemplative, Miss Morini's would have to be described as dynamic, requiring such a work as Tchaikovsky or Glazounow to contain its pure nervous energy. To adjust its values to the broader scope of Brahms is no small undertaking, and it is not yet wholly achieved. But her strength of musical purpose and keenness of understanding rank more highly than ever in the aftermath of her recent performances of Brahms. There were some moments (such as the opening entrance of the violin) in which more energy was being expended than was rewarded by tonal production, but the ultimate impression was wholly favorable to Brahms, as represented by Miss Morini. In terms of violinistic control the adagio moved with as much inner rhythm as the finale, where the results were much more evident. As always when Walter conducts, the Philharmonic was another, and better, orchestra than under the direction of anyone else.

THE season's second "Don Giovanni" at the Metropolitan found George London as the Don, and Lisa della Casa singing Elvira for the first time in this theatre. (As before, the other principals were Margaret Harshaw, Roberta Peters, Cesare Valletti, Eric Kunz, and Lorenzo Alvary). Don Giovanni is decidedly a Londonish part, to which he brings highly suitable physique, an intelligent vocal character, and a proper dramatic relationship to the people around him.

The idea of a blonde Elvira seems

standard at the Metropolitan now, though it imposed an odd transformation on Miss de la Casa's decidedly brunette personality. Vocally the part is at odds with her stage temperament, which is artful rather than aggressive, and not so shrewish as this role demands. Her musical intelligence was never at fault, but her gift for detail and finesse was sacrificed on behalf of a dramatic accent she does not possess—at least in terms of this oversized auditorium. Valletti was once more a decidedly good Ottavio, as Rudolf was a highly qualified conductor.

A good deed which is not to be discredited because of increasing familiarity is Thomas Scherman's presentation of Berlioz's "L'Enfance du Christ," which, with its third occurrence in Carnegie Hall, has become a welcome amelioration of some otherwise trying manifestations of the holiday season. Retaining the same vocal quartet—Mary Davenport, alto, Leopold Simoneau, tenor, Martial Singher, baritone, and Donald Gramm, bass—from year to year also has its virtues, especially where Simoneau is concerned. His is a vocal art of uncommon resource, and in such music as this close to preeminent among current performers.

Scherman's command of this music continues to grow, and he conveyed, this time, some new causes for esteeming it among the best of Berlioz. Of high rank, in this respect, was the overture to Part II, describing the "Flight Into Egypt," which moves in an atmosphere of simplicity and effect oddly akin to some celebrated passages in the much later "Boris" of Moussorgsky.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

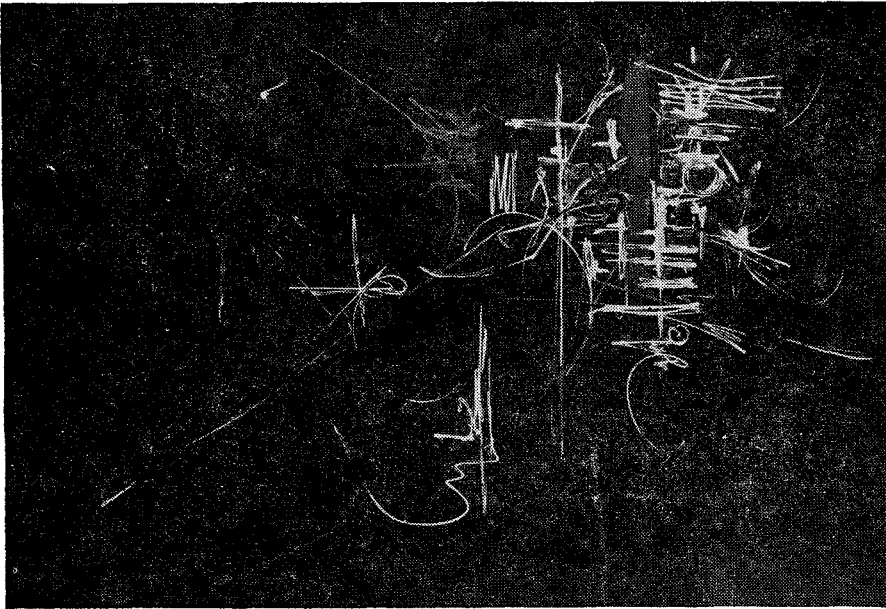
My Evensong

By Ogden Nash

WHEN I was younger
than I be
I stole from better
men than me,
I simply changed the
license plates
On vehicles of Keats and Yeats
My predecessors I read like mad,
And pilfered everything they had.
Youth is a forager, zealous,
ruthless;
Age is a keeper, jealous, toothless.
I'll be old, not when my locks
turn silver,
But when from myself I start
to pilfer.



THE FINE ARTS

Younger European Painters

—Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

"Painting," by Georges Mathieu—"turned his back on brilliant tonality."

HOW DO the leaders of postwar American painting compare in quality to their European counterparts? Is our Willem De Kooning as convinced an artist as Hans Hartung or Pierre Soulages in Paris? Is Jackson Pollock as talented as Georges Mathieu; is Mark Rothko as distinguished a colorist as Alfred Manessier? These are questions to which even a tentative answer would be welcome. It therefore seems a pity that the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York did not combine its two shows of newer painters—the current one of European artists and the forthcoming exhibition of American. Perhaps there wouldn't have been room to do justice to a dual show in the Museum's temporary quarters, later to be replaced by a building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Still, it might have been worth a try in the considerable interests of comparative judgment. Personally, I think this judgment would have come out in favor of our native artists in a number of instances and possibly in terms of overall vitality. To cite one example, I can't think of a single work by a postwar Parisian painter which can rival De Kooning's recent "Woman" in monumental ferocity. I would bet that the best of our newer men could more than hold their own with the best of their foreign contemporaries. American painting today is admittedly less assured than in Europe. By com-

parison with the almost automatic virtuosity of Parisian art it often has what one of its outstanding figures, Rico LeBrun, once called a "tremble." But it also has what Mr. LeBrun went on to describe as a hardfought intensity, all too frequently lacking in the newer painting abroad.

I suppose these questions of comparative value will not be answered for some time to come, granting the myopia of contemporary opinion to which bi-focal adjustments—one lens for Europe, the other for America—are of little help. Meanwhile the Guggenheim show of contemporary European work gives us a chance to revise on home ground impressions formed by the Whitney Museum's show of 1947, "Painting in France," a show assembled abroad by a French committee, with attendant compromises of choice. The current Guggenheim exhibition was selected by that Museum's director. From it no less than twenty-four of the thirty-odd pictures on view were purchased for the Museum's collection. This is what is known as a firm commitment. I wish I could report myself more wholly in accord with the selections made.

The fact is, however, that the show seems uneven in quality. On the checklist I excitedly put an "A" alongside Soulages' "Painting," completed in May of this year. But I marked with a despondent "Z" François Arnal's "Ostrich Egg," a picture which

justifies the mother bird's habit of getting away from it all by sticking her head in the sand. Similarly, Karel Appel's "Two Heads," Giuseppe Capogrossi's "Surface No. 25," and Jean Degottex's "No. 140" were for me less than uninteresting; I thought them downright poor. I liked only slightly better the works by Hantai, Hillaireau, Lanskoj, Lopicque, Loubchansky, Mortier, and De Vasarely. But most of these artists are completely unfamiliar, and it may be that prolonged study would reveal virtues not immediately apparent. Yet I wonder whether we have not all become too eager to find new talent in art and to expect it to appear with unlikely frequency. I mean this not as a criticism of the Guggenheim Museum's courageous show, but simply as a comment on a widespread superabundance of expected riches in art which could at some point end in disgruntled poverty.

BUT let us get back to those pictures in the exhibition which seemed unequivocally fine. For me the two most impressive works were Soulages' "Painting," already mentioned, and Georges Mathieu's big composition also entitled, in conformity to a prevailing postwar reticence as to titles, "Painting." Soulages' vigorous forms and muted color have never been more skilfully used than in this work. But I am not sure that he is really as good a painter as Hans Hartung, whose picture in the current show was executed three years ago and is less impressive than the admirable canvas by which he was represented in last spring's Salon du Mai in Paris.

As to Mathieu, his gifts are hailed by a strange variety of fellow artists. Salvador Dali speaks of him as the most interesting new painter in Paris, and indeed at times Mathieu's flashing brushwork recalls certain Dalis of the late 1930's. But Mathieu's main following is among the abstractionists, and rightly so. The rich black areas of his "Painting" are relieved only by thoroughly non-objective skirmishes of bright color, to whose liveliness no black-and-white reproduction can do justice. The picture is perhaps large for what it says, but I found myself returning to it time and again, always with pleasure.

Like many of his postwar colleagues in Paris, Mathieu has turned his back on overall brilliant tonality, shunning the example of great colorists like Matisse and Bonnard which just after the war meant much to several newer French abstract painters, as though we were to have a school of neo-Fauves. Today black appears to be as important a basic color for many Parisian painters as gray-brown was for