



MUSIC TO MY EARS

Piano a la Francois, TV "Fidelio," "Slask"

WHEN Samson François made his first appearances here in 1947, he seemed the forerunner of a succession of young French pianists who would, literally, succeed to the places of honor held by such distinguished artists of the past as Alfred Cortot, and of the present, as Robert Casadesus. François's reappearance in a Carnegie Hall recital after his long absence was, of itself, a gratifying affair; but it brought the melancholy reminder that there have been none better and few as good from France in the interim.

On the earlier occasion the blond, be-moustached François seemed determined to dress the part of an eccentric (a *fin de siècle* tail-coat and tennis shoes) while preserving every respectability in his performance. This time, the only eccentricity was in the choice of music by Debussy, Liszt, Chopin and Prokofiev—in that order—with charm displacing the emphasis usually assigned to substance, and the interests of the audience rather secondary to the performer's pursuit of his own inclinations.

However, if this is the price for savoring François's particular kind of flair and fervor, it is not too high, not when he lavishes us with such silvery sounds as he provided in three "Études" from Debussy's dozen of 1915. Each—"Pour les Agréments," "Pour les Sonoriétés opposées" and "Pour les Accords"—has its technical point to make, but François made it also a point of departure for an expression in sonority, pace, and mood altogether Debussyian. Perhaps it is his destiny to pick up the torch of "Claude de France" where it was dropped by the late Walter Gieseking.

For the following sequence of Liszt, François exchanged the silvery tonality for platinum (and a bit of brass), thrumming his way from the "Sonnet à Pétrarque" (No. 123) to the Rhapsody No. 4 with a strong affinity for the composer's musical idiom, if somewhat less than total command of his bristling pianistic patterns. François was at his most beguiling in the A flat Valse Impromptu, which was all grace and seductive elegance, at his least persuasive in the "Eroica" study from the "Études Transcendantes" in which the pedal did the work not completed by the hands. It was all full of internal brilliance if some external blurring; but what a source of interest and vitality by contrast with his opposite numbers! (not only in age but in interpretative em-

phasis). There was some sensitive Chopin (B flat minor Nocturne, A flat Polonaise, D flat and C sharp minor Valses) before he plunged into the seventh sonata of Prokofiev. Here is a rare and valuable pianistic personality who needs only to find his program (this one was too whimsical and wilful, really) to find his audience.



AS ALMOST anybody acquainted with it will agree, Beethoven's "Fidelio" is less an opera than an emotional experience. As utilized by the NBC-TV Opera for its return to regular activity after a year of mostly stand-by service, the stress seemed all on making the most of its operatic shortcomings and the least of its emotional opportunities. This was due less to any lack of understanding by Kirk Browning of its dramatic content or by conductor Peter Herman Adler of its musical significance, than to the essential premise of this series that a cast should be chosen first for visual appeal, second for vocal power.

There are some roles in which such a compromise may work, but Leonora, is not one of them—witness its affiliation with such singers as Lotte Lehmann and Kirsten Flagstad. Superficially, Irene Jordan may seem to qualify better than most, for she is reasonably slim, and her voice ranges accurately through the required span. But the procedure which has transformed her from a mezzo to soprano has also depersonalized the sound, substituting an artificial kind of toneless timbre for the rich vibrance of a freely produced tone. In other words, all she lacks is the only thing that makes the effort of singing worthwhile—emotional communication.

From my viewpoint, the opera might as well have been called "Marcellina", for the one really satisfying performance was Judith Raskin's in the role of the jailor's daughter. Chester Watson, who sang Rocco, also performed with dramatic savor and sonorous sound, something which could not be said for John Alexander as Florestan, Lee Cass as Pizarro, or Kenneth Smith, as the Minister of Justice. All were, to some extent

or other, overwhelmed by the requirements of Beethoven's unremitting quest of character portrayal rather than enactment of a part. The excellent camera work permitted Browning some illusions of space and grandeur not possible in the opera house, and the color was consistently suggestive. However the orchestra was skimpy in strings for a proper sonority and too often subordinate, aurally, to the vocalists. A new English translation by Joseph Machlis sufficed, save where it had Jacquino saying things like "Oh dear! What shall I do?", or Leonora crying "I am his wife" in that overwhelming moment whose German states, quite clearly, "Töt erst sein Weib!"

Giulietta Simionato's appearance in Carnegie Hall with Carlo Bergonzi was one of those "I do" "You do" affairs, in which the mezzo and the tenor passed each other half a dozen times in the wings going on and off stage, but only paused on stage together long enough to perform "Pietoso al par del Nume" from Donizetti's "Favorita" and a duet from "Aida." So far as Simionato was concerned, the evening added to other experiences — live and recorded — a glimpse of her talents as a Mozart singer. To judge from Cherubino's "Voi che sapete" and "Non so più cosa son" from "Nozze di Figaro" they are considerable, through she showed more of her distinctive traits in flirting lightly with "Non so più" than she did in slurring some phrases of "Voi che sapete." However it is difficult to discuss a performer of her breadth and intensity in terms of this or that aria. Bergonzi showed a rare command of *messa di voce* singing in two Tosti songs as well as his arias. George Schick was the pianist.

"SLASK" (pronounced "Slonskh") is not only the Polish name for Silesia: it is also the "house name" for the Polish State Folk Ballet which introduced itself in the City Center all vitality, talent, and youthful exuberance. Raising its voices in choral and solo song more often than is customary with dance groups, it provided a kind of mingled diversion whose components were good humor, high spirits, disarming charm. There would not be much profit in itemizing solo performers or individual dancers (save to note that in Josef Ledecski it has a kind of Polish Milton Berle whose high voltage smile made direct contact with the audience) for, after a while, it became evident that "Slask" provides the raw materials for a fine program rather than a fine program itself. More contrast and variety, the disciplining discrimination provided by creative direction, are needed to give these delightful youngsters the artistic assistance they require for best use of their abundant talents.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

The Puzzle of a Preaching Poet

By Granville Hicks

VACHEL LINDSAY has long been out of fashion. His reputation began to decline during his not very long lifetime, and it has never been revived. No poetry could differ more from that which is currently esteemed than his. He was exuberant and open, whereas the moderns are disciplined and intricate. He was a preacher, and though it was often difficult to say what he was preaching, there was no mistaking his fervor. He was enthusiastic and hopeful; the moderns are secretive and dark.

Yet interest in the man persists, and three biographies have appeared since his death in 1931. The first, published in 1935, was by Edgar Lee Masters, a fellow-poet and a friend, though not an intimate friend. Then, in 1952, young Mark Harris wrote a fictionalized biography, "City of Discontent," sympathetically emphasizing Lindsay's rebelliousness. And now Eleanor Ruggles has written "The West-Going Heart" (Norton, \$5.95). Miss Ruggles has had the cooperation of Lindsay's widow, his sister, his son, and daughter, and has apparently had access to more family documents than Masters was able to consult. Her book corrects Masters's at some points and supplements it at many.

The story of Lindsay's life is full of puzzles. The first of these is the duration of his apprenticeship. Born in Springfield, Illinois, in 1879, the son of a doctor, he first attended Hiram College with a view to adopting his father's profession. Then, deciding to become a painter or a poet or both, he went to schools of art in Chicago and New York. Three long walking trips in various parts of the country continued his education, and he spent many months in the parental home, reading, writing, and painting. He was thirty before he had developed anything like his characteristic style, and he was thirty-three when he won recognition with "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven." A year later he called on Percy Mackaye, who reported that he looked like a boy—"a country boy."

His innocence was unassailable. He was steeped in the traditions of small-town, Middle Western, evangelical America. Both parents were deeply pious, and his mother, a domineering woman, was nothing less than a crusader. To the extent that he insisted on being what he wanted to be, in the face of their dismay, he was a rebel,

but the break was never complete. In his early twenties he lectured for the Anti-Saloon League, one of his mother's favorite causes. In 1917 Jessie Rittenhouse "spent a night with the Lindsays and after breakfast saw the family Bible brought out and heard a chapter read by the doctor. Then father, mother, son, and maidservant got down on their knees facing their chairs, while Mrs. Lindsay prayed." "At thirty-seven," Miss Ruggles writes, "Lindsay was not backward in proclaiming that he was still a virgin."

The Booth poem was published in *Poetry* for January, 1913, and "The Congo" came along soon afterward. Immediately Lindsay was famous. To be sure, even at that early date his fame rested in part on his performance as a reader, but it is easy for us to forget how seriously he was taken as a poet. Not only in this country but also in England, where he went in 1920, he was acclaimed as the great native American genius. W. B. Yeats was one of the earliest admirers across the Atlantic, and John Masefield and Arnold Bennett were among the Englishmen he impressed.

The reaction soon set in. There was some reason for it, for his work, even in his best years, was uneven, but he would have lost ground in any case. He was, in fact, just about as unacceptable to the Twenties as he is to the Fifties. While the expatriates were streaming off to Paris, he remained centered in Springfield. While they were repudiating America, he was cultivating his own brand of patriotism. ("I am a 100-per-cent American in deadly opposition to George Horace Lorimer and H. L.

Mencken," he wrote in his diary in 1922.) He never turned against the small town but asked only how it could be made better.

The Twenties were not happy years for Lindsay. He was aware of the falling off of his reputation, and, naturally, he thought it unjust. Reading his poetry to large audiences remained for him an exciting experience, as well as a welcome source of income, but he resented the fact that he had to read the same old poems over and over again. His boyishness vanished, and his health declined.

In 1925 he married a woman half his age. There had been, Miss Ruggles reveals, a long series of girls and women in whom he had been interested, but he had never brought himself to the point of marriage. Now he married precipitately, and the evidence seems clear that for a while he was happy. By this time, however, his physical and mental decline was well advanced. The responsibilities of marriage and parenthood increased the strain to which he was being subjected, and his condition deteriorated rapidly. In the last years of his life he was the victim of paranoid delusions, and his relations with everyone, especially his wife, were difficult. He committed suicide on December 5, 1931. (This was not generally known until 1935, when Masters, with Mrs. Lindsay's permission, described the circumstances of the poet's death.)

Miss Ruggles tells the story carefully and in detail, and that is all she has tried to do. She is less warmly appreciative than Mark Harris, and, unlike Masters, she has no thesis to expound. She does, however, undermine Masters's principal theory, which is that Lindsay was destroyed by the materialism of American civilization. Miss Ruggles makes it clear that, although Lindsay was hurt by neglect and misunderstanding, his decay began within himself. No Freudian would hesitate to find an important clue in Lindsay's relationship with his mother, but Miss Ruggles merely presents the facts without drawing a conclusion.

The author also offers little in the way of critical comment on the poetry. Some of the poetry does survive. Even Allen Tate included two of Lindsay's poems in "Modern Verse in English," which he edited last year with David Cecil; and F. O. Matthiessen gave an ample selection in "The Oxford Book of American Verse." Lindsay speaks to us out of the innocence of the years before the First World War, but there is, as W. B. Yeats observed on the occasion of their first meeting, a strangeness in his poetry that lifts it above provincialism. And there was, as Miss Ruggles shows, a matching strangeness in his life.



Vachel Lindsay — unassailable innocence.