



New Works in the New School, Missa by Thomson

THOUGH all the works were new to New York, there was an eerie sense of familiarity to the program presented in cooperation with the Fromm Music Foundation in the auditorium of the New School in mid-May. For all the changing fashions in aural sensations (using the term merely to describe the listening process) exemplified by Ernst Krenek's "Quaestio Temporis" for chamber orchestra, Stefan Wolpe's "Piece for Piano and Sixteen Instruments," and Ralph Shapey's "Dimensions for Soprano and Twenty-three Instruments," they all rang a series of changes on the old problem—how to be meaningful though new, or new though meaningful.

Krenek's "Quaestio Temporis" utilized a relatively slender complement of components (somehow, it is almost inevitable that one speak of this "music" in hi-fi terms, for it has taken many of its values from extended frequency response). That is to say, aside from electric guitar, xylophone, vibraphone, piccolo, and a substantial *batterie*, the instruments were ordinary ones. The fragmentation of silence by sound (which, after all, is no more nor less than what music amounts to, altogether) was here in a Webernish mode—jagged, intermittent, discontinuous—though devoid of the nice judgment and constantly creative impulse which gives the latter his stamp of artistry. Aside from a lumpish sonority or two, I found the tonal froth rather insubstantial for the amount of effort expended. Krenek, looking very well, was present to conduct.

Wolpe's pursuit of the elusive guerdon "style" went in another direction. Here the stated purpose (each work was paralleled by a series of statements in the printed "Remarks by the Composers") was to maintain an uneasy equilibrium among the concentric rings of instruments whose focal point was the piano. It is a kind of joker in the tonal card pack, which "initiates action or ramifies or multiplies it"—to resist no longer the temptation to quote.

Sound sparkles, or crunches, or squeals angrily as the gears mesh and the instruments act and react, but do not completely interact until the final thirty measures, in which the full ensemble plays together for the first time. Here tonal blend (or the absence of it) is the thing. Sure there were lots of new intervals (syllables) combined to make chords (words). But unlike the

suggestions of the parallel thus established, there was no "Guide to Vocabulary" to provide a lexicon to meaning. The round of sound, presumably, had a bearing, life, and meaning of, and for, itself alone. It had, let the record read, a kind of puckish whimsicality rather less tedious to the ear than the windy, plump, fat sound that my ear recalls as the typical disturbance created by Krenek, but this was skimpy to sustain interest in its formalistic exercise.

RALPH SHAPEY, who expertly conducted Wolpe's "chart" (as today's jazz musicians realistically term the scores they work from) was also represented as creator of the following "Dimensions" for soprano and twenty-three instruments. To deal with externals is almost a compulsion where internals are so much a matter of speculation. Here the immediate impression was visual, with nobody directly before the conductor. Rather, the stage wall from far left around to far right was ringed by players. These included winds, percussion, and brass, with Bethany Beardslee, the soprano who has made a speciality of emitting unrelated pitches to order, occupying a podium at the zenith of the semicircle, stage rear.

As I interpret Shapey's annotation—hardly less a challenge than the wordless vocalization of Miss Beardslee—each block of sound was to be experienced for itself, "a self-involved unit of individual proportions related, interrelated, and unrelated images organized into an organic whole." As the directional factor in the arrangement of the ensemble strongly conditioned the listener's awareness of a sound source, the results suggested the aural discipline of stereo reproduction. In fact, the element of personal participation being so sharply reduced, it could all have been as successfully rendered by further reduction to the form of pre-recorded tape.

Assuming, that is, that the machine could cope with it. By an ironic chance, the one designed to do just

that, for subsequent transmission via FM Station WBAI, broke down, thus depriving me of the opportunity to hear a broadcast of Arthur Berger's "Chamber Concerto" which came at the end of the lengthy session. Better luck next time, machine.

At a far distance from this preoccupation with resonance was the ordered organization of it by Virgil Thomson in the form of a "Missa pro Defunctis" performed under the composer's direction at a concert of the Oratorio Society in Carnegie Hall. As the musical past makes clear, the Mass can be either a deeply devotional experience or one with overriding aesthetic values. The best, of course, combine both in such prodigality of identification that the "common lot" transcends either, and sectarian boundaries as well.

The evidence was, as this experience accumulated, that whatever its aesthetic values, it did not command the "common lot" sufficiently to involve the devotional as well. The prevailing atmosphere of calm, composure, and radiance was an attractive pose, for a time, but I could not find more than a snicker of nervous apprehension in the treatment of the "Dies Irae" ("Day of Wrath") in terms of muted trumpets, a spattering of snare drums, and a recourse to the traditional "Reveille" as symbol of the arisen dead.

There is shape, outline, and content to the aesthetic experience, as such, whether in its manipulation of a varied harmonic language (which finally comes to rest on a resounding D major chord), in its artful combination of instruments and voices (the double choir was heard, variously, as male or female, or one or the other or both, in combination with the orchestra) or in its resource in matching word to tone. Unfortunately the performance did least honor to this primary skill of Thomson, for the values of the Latin text were choked, swallowed, and otherwise obscured by the vocal ensemble. Perhaps there was clarity of sound in the enunciation that reached Thomson's ear on the podium, but it did not prevail for any appreciable portion of the audience. Thus the judgment would have to be that the work was only half heard, and but half of the half spoke an intelligible discourse.

Under its own conductor, T. Charles Lee, the Oratorio Society, assisted by the boys' choir of the Little Church Around the Corner, performed Berlioz's "Te Deum." In a work so dependent for full effect upon the sonorous arrangement conceived by the composer, the concert hall disposition tends to confine rather than expose the audible intent.

—IRVING KOLODIN.





Igor Stravinsky

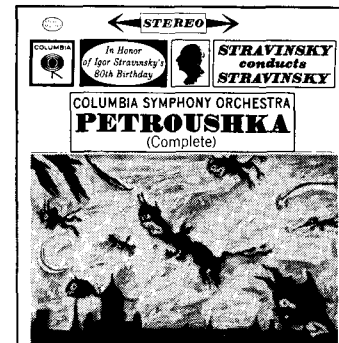
The Greatest Living Composer

In honor of his eightieth birthday, Columbia Records is proud to release five documents of his genius, new recordings conducted by the composer himself, the latest in a distinguished series that began in 1929.

Exclusively on Columbia Records 

For both stereo and monaural, new recording techniques have produced a clarity and impact seldom achieved on records. The sound must be heard to be believed.

Don't miss the art exhibition "Stravinsky and the Dance" for the benefit of The New York Public Library at Wildenstein 19 East 64th Street, New York 21, New York Through June 2, 1962





—Wide World.

"Good exercise, if not high experience."

SR/RECORDINGS

MAY 26, 1962

MUSIC IN THE MARKET PLACE

by Robert Farris Thompson 41

MAHLER'S THIRD BY BERNSTEIN

by Michael Steinberg 45

FROM SHADOW TO SUBSTANCE

by Jan Holcman 46

ORGAN MUSIC FROM SYRACUSE

by David Hebb 47

RECORDINGS IN REVIEW

by the Editor 48

RCA'S HOME AWAY FROM HOME

by Joseph Wechsberg 53

MUSIC IN THE MARKET PLACE

By ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

THE TWIST, a corporeal corkscrew activated by the music of rock-and-roll, continues to exist. The press has proffered in a single season a multitude of announcements damning or praising the phenomenon on grounds largely nonmusical and non-choreographic. On the other hand, so much trash is associated with the twist that a certain amount of nonaesthetic criticism is in order, to clear the air. In this capacity Donald Duncan, who edits *Ballroom Dance Magazine*, and Geoffrey Holder, the choreographer, offered yeoman service. Referring to the New York twist as "the biggest nothing dance of the century," Duncan took aim at the sensation-seekers and swung from the ground up:

No doubt it is boring to sit around night after night in El Morocco or the Stork Club looking at the same old lifted faces . . . Forthwith, like a cloud of chinchilla-clad locusts they descended upon the habitat of . . . the switchblade set.

Holder described, through an eye equally acid, the sector of centrally influential events on West 45th Street:

"synthetic sex turned into a sick spectator sport, not because it's vulgar. Real vulgarity is divine. But [because] people [are breaking] their backs to act vulgar."

In both cases the argument, when shaken down, implies that the meaning of the twist is the uses, sensationalist and sexy, to which it has been put. The irony is that the twist is a dance in which there is little or no bodily contact between partners; erotic misadventures are hardly feasible. What probably excites cafe society is the opportunity to listen to, and even participate in, a given segment of the jazz dance which, however ludicrously diluted, is still exciting in terms of the hotcha boredom of the house bands at the clubs which they formerly frequented. Moreover, the noisome juncture of exhibitionism and nonsense which justifiably irritated Duncan and Holder is happily uncopiable elsewhere. The twist, as danced in Fort Worth or Seattle, is simply good exercise, if not high experience. And even at the center there exists the possibility that, as the twist bums mature and turn profes-

sional, their vitality may be channeled into forms less tainted by publicity.

In the meantime, how can we rank, qualitatively, the music which fuels the twist? Quite low, I am afraid. I have studied the songs which Mr. Chubby Checker submits to the public on the Parkway label ("Twist with Chubby Checker" and "For Twisters Only"). I am, of course, always willing to examine further efforts of Mr. Checker, whose real name incidentally is Ernest Evans, but I think I ought to say that to judge from these discs it does not seem likely that his work will ever be suitable for serious discussion. The music which surrounds his nondescript singing might be provisionally defined as broken-down rock-and-roll, and since rock-and-roll is, in the main, broken-down blues, a sense of loss doubly dispirits the ear.

The work of Joey Dee, a slight young man from Passaic, New Jersey, is more palatable, relatively speaking. "Fanny Mae" ("Doing the Twist," Roulette R 25166) is a good-natured imitation of rhythm-and-blues wherein Di Nicola ("Dee" is a stage name) even cites the special three-line stanza form of the blues. He sings the lines noisily and