

A DEBUSSY RECORDING

DEBUSSY: *Images*; *Gigues* and *Rondes de Printemps*, played by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pierre Monteux (H.M.V.).

The attention of readers is called to this important recording of two movements from Debussy's last and greatest orchestral work. They are particularly interesting with reference to the development of Debussy's talent, for although they appear at first hearing to be rather improvisatory and rhapsodic, they soon reveal themselves as most subtle and complex examples of musical organization. They are at once less static and more linear than the very beautiful earlier *Nocturnes*; *Gigues* is a more difficult piece to listen to than *Fetes* from *Nocturnes*, but in the long run it is richer and more rewarding; its linear details though still short-breathed are both intrinsically more subtle, and more subservient to a structural purpose.

As Debussy's music grows riper structurally it also becomes less of a by-way in European music, more central to the French tradition. A detailed study of the late songs, sonatas and the orchestral *Images* makes clear that his developing interest in Couperin and the great classical tradition was evidence of a profound if unobtrusive modification in his attitudes to his art and experience. Moreover it is not merely the titles of these *Images* which remind one forcibly of Roussel and even Milhaud—he links up not merely with the past but with one of the central lines in contemporary French (and European) music also. Debussy's influence on contemporary music goes much deeper than the conventionally accepted impressionistic 'effects'; I'm inclined to think that as his late work becomes better known (it is not, for obvious reasons, as popular as the earlier things) we shall see Debussy not merely as one of the supreme geniuses of to-day and yesterday, albeit in the literal sense eccentric, but also as one of the really big figures in musical history. If I might put it in a personal way, until recently I was convinced that, despite Debussy's phenomenal genius and artistry, Fauré was the more central and important composer; now, though my admiration for Fauré has not decreased, I am not sure.

One hopes that these records will sell well. The performance is authoritative with all the flexibility of contour which a French orchestra might give it and which is even more important in this relatively linear music than in the impressionistic works of the period of *La mer*. The American recording is on the loud side as usual but beautifully transparent and free of what one used to regard as the inevitable American crudities; the terrific vitality of the *Rondes de Printemps*, and its structural intensity, come across brilliantly, and prove how wrong Debussy was when in his early days he said 'Nous ne sommes pas modernes' (though perhaps one couldn't expect him to be prophetic about himself). This version

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

of *Images* should certainly be completed by the recording of the other three pieces of the cycle, collectively known as *Iberia*, particularly since there is now no other recording of the work extant.

W.H.M.

TIPPETT: Concerto for double-string orchestra (Private recording by Messrs. Schott and Co., conducted by Walter Goehr).

This is perhaps the earliest of Tippett's completely mature and representative compositions. The exciting polyrhythms of the first and third movements afford easily accessible evidence of the technical manifestation of the characteristic Tippettian buoyancy and show how organic is the link which he forges between idioms as apparently remote as that of the Gibbons string fantasias (with their extraordinarily subtle rhythmic ellipses), and the cruder sophistications of jazz. Such a merging of the contemporary in the traditional is of great significance for our music's future.

The slow movement begins with a long lyrical 'celtic' tune, modal and pentatonic in feeling, which indicates how for all his European sophistication Tippett preserves contact with the native English line represented by Vaughan Williams. The melody is extremely moving, and evidence of a simple lyrical power which Tippett does not frequently draw upon, but the movement as a whole seems to me less satisfactory than the two quick movements which flank it; there is some disparity between the nature of the melody itself and the tonal and rhythmic complexities to which it is submitted in development.

The recording is adequate. All those interested in contemporary English music will wish to acquire the records though they may for the time being have difficulty in doing so, as the records are in short supply.

W.H.M.

[Reviews of the British Council recordings of *The Dream of Gerontius* and *The Planets* are held over till the next issue].

