

## CROSS CURRENTS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MUSIC

- MAHLER: *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (Eugenia Zareska with L.P.O. under van Beinum). Decca.
- MEDTNER: Society issue Vol. I (Second Piano Concerto, piano pieces and songs. Philharmonia Orchestra conducted Dobrowen, the composer and Oda Slobadskaya). H.M.V.  
Vol. II Piano Concerto No. 3, Sonata Vocalise, Improvisation.
- IRELAND: Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano (Frederick Grinke and the composer). Decca.
- DELIUS: *Brigg Fair* (R.P.O. conducted Beecham). H.M.V.
- BAX: *The Garden of Fand* (R.P.O. conducted Beecham). H.M.V.
- STRAUSS: *Metamorphosen* (Vienna Philharmonic conducted von Karajan). Columbia.
- DEBUSSY: *Jeux, poème dansé* (Orchestra of the Augusteo Rome, conducted de Sabata). H.M.V.
- RAVEL: Concerto for piano left hand and orchestra (Robert Casadesus with Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy).
- RAVEL: *Alborado del gracioso* (Dinu Liputti). Columbia.
- STRAVINSKY: *Le Sacre de Printemps* (Concertgehouw of Amsterdam under von Beinum). Decca.
- STRAVINSKY: Concerto in D for strings (Halle, conducted Barbirolli). H.M.V.
- ROUSSEL: *Petite Suite* and Fauré *Pavane* (Orchestra de la Societe du Conservatoire de Paris, conducted Munch). Decca.
- BRITTEN: Interludes from *Peter Grimes* (L.S.O. conducted Sargent). Columbia.
- BRITTEN: *The Rape of Lucrezia* (English Opera Group, conducted Reginald Goodall). H.M.V.
- BARKELEY: *Divertimento* (London Chamber Orchestra, conducted Anthony Bernard).
- BUSH: *Dialectic* for string quartet (Aeolian Quartet). H.M.V.
- ELIZALDE: Violin Concerto (Christian Ferras with Orchestra conducted Gaston Poulet). Decca.
- TIPPETT: String Quartet No. 2 (Zorrian Quartet). Decca.
- BARBER: Symphony No. 1. Columbia.
- BLOCK: String Quartet No. 2 (Griller Quartet). Decca.

One can no longer complain about the quantity of Modern Music being issued by the recording companies. One can complain of a certain capriciousness in the selection of works, and one would like to see some systematic attempt to record what one might call the established classics of twentieth-century music. But I suppose the recording companies might retort that they do not know what the established classics are and that, in the multifarious variety of twentieth-century techniques, they are not sure who could tell them. Surveying the miscellaneous bevy of works listed above one must admit that there is some excuse for caution. Have the musical idioms of a mere fifty years ever before shown such baffling diversity? How can one hope even to establish any chronological development, when one considers the dates at which these works were written? Will they appear quite so ill-assorted to the historian of the future or will they have been ironed out by time not to a coherently consistent style like classical baroque or Mozartian *galant* but at least to a grey monotone of Twentieth-Century Music? I have just been attempting to write a chapter on the Techniques of the Twentieth Century for a work of musical history. I should be interested to know whether a historian of the twenty-first century will find this task as difficult as I did.

The first six works on the list belong in spirit and technique to the last years of the nineteenth century, though the last of them was written in 1945. The Mahler has a classical maturity of utterance because although an end, it is the end of a great and specific tradition. It is not among the most important of Mahler's works, but one has only to put it beside the Ireland Sonata to realize the value of an inherited tradition which is also an inherited civilization. I suppose the Ireland is remarkable 'for the time at which it was written', yet it has no more than a period air at this date; it seems weak and sugary and 'Edwardian' in large inverted commas. One does not think of referring to the Mahler as 'Viennese' in the same slightly patronizing way; one accepts Mahler's idiom as a part of the European tradition. It needed a genius of Delius's stature to overcome the provincial inspidity of Edwardian musical culture; and he did so only by turning his back on his society, creating a music that yearned for a vanishing world. *Brigg Fair* is a quintessential Delius piece making a characteristic use of variation form. The Bax work is similar to the Delius in technique and in intention, only whereas Delius evokes memories of the countryside and his own childhood, Bax deliberately evokes a fabulous never-never land—the Celtic twilight in which, as a *Radio Times* note once charmingly put it, 'Bax has been lost for the last twenty years'. It is, perhaps music of remarkable talent as compared with Delius's genius, but Bax's talent has seldom manifested itself with more luscious imaginativeness. This is a fine example of an unfashionable kind of music. Like the Delius, it is superbly played and recorded. The early Ireland work is also admirably performed. In the Mahler the singer is a little aggressive.

There is an element of nostalgia in the music of Medtner too, but it is less strongly marked than in Delius's and Bax's work. He is still composing in a full-blown nineteenth-century romantic style which is 'late' in its almost superabundant richness and luxuriance but makes no concession to modernity. The noble bearing and staggering virtuosity of his music suggest a more sensitive and rhythmically subtle Rachmaninov and one hopes that these records will help to introduce him to the wider public which would certainly enjoy his music if it had the chance to hear it. One must deprecate, however, the ludicrous claims that have been made for Medtner in literature accompanying this recording venture. In Volume I the songs are beautiful and finely sung, the piano pieces rather dull, and the concerto highly impressive if you like that kind of thing, with a powerful first movement that must be accounted a good piece of music by any standards. In Volume II the third concerto, written as recently as 1945, is less opulent, more fashionably austere than the second, but contains no music up to the level of the earlier work's first movement. The Sonata Vocalise is an experiment in the combination of a wordless coloratura part with Medtner's habitual intricate pianism. It is well written, but overlong for its musical substance. All the Medtner records are worth hearing for the composer's muscular and heroic piano playing, even if you find the music uncongenial.

The Strauss *Metamorphosen* is interesting. Written in 1945 it is none the less a continuation of the technique and æsthetic of *Tristan*, comparable with Schoenberg's moving *Verklärte Nacht*. Its technique is that of a continuous harmonic and melodic generation from a few seminal motives. The polyphonic texture of the writing for twenty-three strings is of extraordinary opulence, and the repeated use of enharmonic transitions imbues the voluptuous chromaticism with a strange, ghostly unreality. It is a 'tragic' complement to the ghostly comedy of the Oboe Concerto reviewed previously. Powerfully melancholy and valedictory, it is, in relation to *Tristan*, an epilogue to an epilogue. It is extremely disturbing music though the disturbance is hardly pleasurable and perhaps not very 'valuable'. Certainly I wouldn't agree with those who call it a *great work*. But it should be listened to. It marks the end of an era; and its technical virtuosity dazzles. The performance seems sympathetic.

In the next batch of works we may group the Debussy, the Ravel and the Roussel. *Jeux* is one of Debussy's last works, against the conventional valuation of which I've often put in a protest. In this piece, however, the composer's peculiarly episodic and sequential structural methods are employed in so exaggerated a manner that the music seems unconvincing without the stage business it was designed to accompany. It is worth study, however, for its abundance, indeed superabundance, of effects of texture and sonority; what a magnificent composer for the films Debussy would have made! This highly sophisticated use of line and colour is found too in both the Ravel and Roussel. The Ravel Concerto

has always seemed to me one of the most fascinating of the composer's later elegantly exotic works, and this version is strongly to be recommended. The Roussel Suite is somewhat self-parasitic and pedestrian, at least after the first movement. The fill-up of the lovely Fauré *Pavane* is inferior to the recent Columbia version in that it omits the brief but effective choral part.

These works—the Ravel Concerto most convincingly—show an attempt to discipline chromatic resource by a re-creation of classical structures. The Stravinsky *Sacre*—this time undoubtedly one of the established masterpieces—was also a reaction against chromatic disintegration in so far as it insisted with fanatical violence on the validity of metre. In the long run, such insistence had much the same effect as chromaticism; it destroyed traditional ideas of tonal coherence, and after it Stravinsky was forced to tackle the problem of the reintegration of line. We can observe Stravinsky trying to solve this question of formal integration in a chaotic world, all through his 'neo-classic' works of which the Concerto in D is a recent but not very distinguished example. In so doing he has created some fine music, notably the *Symphonie des Psaumes* and the *Symphony in Three Movements*, but we may doubt whether his re-creative genius has ever manifested itself with quite such authority as did his destructive genius in *Le Sacre*. It is interesting that at this date the relation of *Le Sacre* to Debussy seems unambiguous enough. The performance and recording of this still cataclysmic work are superb. The wry Concerto leads the Hallé into a somewhat finical performance.

The late works of Stravinsky have clearly suggested to Lennox Berkeley some of the exquisite noises which occur from time to time in his *Divertimento*. This piece does not seem to me, however, to be up to the standard of Berkeley's finest recent work, such as the *Stabat Mater*; the incidental noises are delightful, but they are not justified by a sustained melodic invention, so that the music sounds rather parasitic, suggesting now Roussel, now the final works of Debussy. Tippett's second Quartet could never be mistaken for the work of anyone else. It still seems to me an important work, though I am beginning to wonder if its rhythmic complexities, which are so largely the secret of its personal manner, don't in the long run defeat their own ends. There is a chance that they may cease to stimulate, as they cease to defeat, one's expectation. The finest passages in the third Quartet seem to be recovering a more stable rhythmic norm, without any sacrifice of Purcellian and madrigalian intensity.

Britten is so much a man of the theatre that I doubt whether the recording of two-thirds of *The Rape of Lucretia* gives an adequate notion of the music except to those familiar with the stage version. But it is admirably done by the Glyndebourne company. It might have been better to have started with *Herring*, I think, which ought to become a part of the established repertoire, for it is not only 'clever' but very funny and brimming over with Good Tunes. But again you can't really take it out of the theatre,

and that is a strength rather than a weakness, at this stage at least in the composer's development. The Interludes from *Grimes* also lose much by being divorced from their context. In this case they are not very sensitively played.

Bush's *Dialectic* is about as untheatrical as a work could well be, but it is a fine piece for which one's liking as well as one's respect grows the better one knows it. It is an early experiment in the completely thematic technique which Bush has adopted consistently in his recent works. One of these pieces, notably the *English Suite* for strings or the lovely *Winter Journey* cantata for soli, string quartet and harp, might perhaps have made a more grateful introduction of Bush to the gramophone public; but one is glad to have *Dialectic* which wears well because it is honestly felt and logically argued, in musical terms.

Whatever its deficiencies in charm, the Bush piece has everything which Elizalde's concerto hasn't. This work of a pupil of Falla is not obstreperously Spanish—the most obvious influence is the admirable one of Milhaud's *Cincertino de Printemps*—and brims over with charm of an unpretentious nature. But although each movement starts off with a delightful idea and has many elegant touches of orchestration, the work has no composition. The initial ideas are succeeded by amiable passage work; the pretty scenery on each side of the path does not disguise the fact that the path leads nowhere. These records are chiefly remarkable for the phenomenal fiddling of Christian Ferras, who is said to be only fourteen. Seldom have I heard such brilliance of attack and such scrupulous intonation in multiple stopping. It looks as though he will be in the Heifetz class.

An eighteenth-century composer with considerably less talent than Elizalde could not have produced so directionless a work; still less could he have produced so emotionally inflated a one as Barber's Symphony. I have never been able to see anything in Barber's music except perhaps for the unpretentious *Dorset Beach*. Several American musicians whose opinion I respect have told me I was wrong about him, so I listened to this work carefully and hopefully. It still seems to me a crude and hysterical bit of melodrama, grievously overscored.

Nothing could reveal its shabby pretentiousness better than to put it beside Bloch's second Quartet, magnificently played by the Griller Quartet. Bloch is a highly intense and rhetorical composer whose music has sometimes degenerated to hysteria. But it was always passionately human and honest, never attitudinizing. Here the cruder violences are purged away; the slow fugato passages seem to me the most intensely moving music Bloch has given us, with a nervously chromatic line worthy of comparison with the subtlest linear writing of Bartok and Berg. I'm still not so sure about the frantic metrical passages, though they are here convincingly absorbed into the structure. In any case this is a work of consequence.

W.H.M.

## ‘HUMANITAS’

As most *Scrutiny* readers probably know, *Humanitas* is a quarterly review, inaugurated at Manchester, and contributed to mainly by teaching members of universities. Its title suggests well enough the function it proposes for itself—the function of vindicating, in a non-specialist intellectual organ, the idea of a university as a humane centre. Such an undertaking clearly deserves to succeed. The numbers of *Humanitas* to hand may fairly be taken as justifying the promoters’ claim for support—even if one dissents from Bro. George Every’s view of Charles Williams as a distinguished and improving writer, and deplores the critical approach that permits this kind of thing:

‘The younger poets who came to light in 1937-42, such voices as Dylan Thomas, David Gascoyne, Alex Comfort and Sidney Keyes, have never suffered from any illusions about the future of our civilization’.

(Bro. George Every’s part in establishing certain authors tends to make one think that Christian Discrimination is decidedly a thing to be discouraged).

*Humanitas* needs more support if it is to continue publication: 16/- a year, post free. Subscriptions should go to Dr. W. Schenk, *Humanitas*, University College, Exeter.

## AN AMERICAN SELECTION FROM ‘SCRUTINY’

Readers may be interested to know that, under the title *The Importance of ‘Scrutiny’*, a large volume of selected *Scrutiny* work has been brought out in America. The Editor, Mr. Eric Bentley, contributes an introductory essay. The volume is published by George W. Stewart, New York, at \$5.75.

Readers should be warned that, among the many misprints, there are some distressingly plausible and insidious ones.