

THE LEAGUE of COMPOSERS' REVIEW

HONORS OF THE SEASON

BY PITTS SANBORN

INEVITABLY the New York music season of 1923-24 will go down in history as the Stravinsky season. Eloquent testimony to that fact is found in Mr. Gatti-Casazza's latest official announcement of Metropolitan opera plans for 1924-25. He has added *Petrouchka* to his list of revivals for a house the measure of whose artistic radicalism and spirit of adventurous discovery can be gathered from the fact that only now has it discovered *Pelleas et Melisande*. These words are written in no spirit of reproach. The Metropolitan Opera House cannot, for various reasons, serve as an experimental laboratory. Necessarily its business is mainly with the finished product. But its promised revival of *Petrouchka* is significant because it means that no standard musical institution of New York is quite in the running today without its morsel of Stravinsky. Another season the Metropolitan might very well take on *L'Oiseau de Feu*, whose music and spectacle are both better adapted to the conditions of the big auditorium than the more intimate *Petrouchka*. Eventually it may even be expected to mount *Le Sacre du Printemps* and the operatic version of *Le Rossignol*, both of which New York has heard only as symphonic pieces.

It was *Le Chant du Rossignol* which last autumn ushered in the Stravinsky season under the auspices of Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra. Three performances at that

time seemed a generous portion, but there came two days in March when four times within their brief compass Carnegie Hall echoed to the strains of the Stravinsky nightingale, thanks to the insistent demands by Mr. Damrosch's customers for further repetitions and to Mr. Mengelberg's sponsoring of the bird at a pair of Philharmonic concerts. But meantime there had been much more of Stravinsky in our concert rooms. The International Composers' Guild had done *Renard* in concert form under the direction of Leopold Stokowski, and Mr. Stokowski had repeated the work at a concert of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Pierre Monteux and the Boston Symphony had introduced *Le Sacre du Printemps* to New York as a symphonic piece and repeated it as such at a subsequent concert. The League of Composers had placed on its programs the three little pieces for clarinet and the *Histoire du Soldat*, and the Philadelphia Orchestra had done the so-called "symphonies" for twenty-three wind instruments in memory of Claude Debussy.

With such a season's record not a great deal of Stravinsky remains undone in New York. There is the ballet *Les Noces* with its revised instrumentation for pianos and percussion; there is the miniature opera *Mavra*, and there is some chamber music all of which will doubtless be done here before long, even though the stage pieces be presented in concert form, as has been the case with *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *Renard*, and *L'Histoire du Soldat*. The tone poem *Le Chant du Rossignol*, needless to say, is not quite the same thing as the earlier opera or ballet from which it is drawn.

From this enumeration it can be seen at a glance that the New York public has heard enough of Stravinsky's work to venture on something approaching an appraisal. It is never safe, it is never possible, to settle for ever and ever, amen, the fame and standing of any man in music, unless indeed that man be All-Father Bach. It is particularly unsafe to label and pigeonhole a man whose years number only two and forty and the present state of whose talent points to a long future of rich accomplishment. Nevertheless, it is evident that musical New York is well over the period when Stravinsky is a tonal Christ or even merely an esoteric rite. He is a composer, as Haydn, as Schubert, as Saint-Saëns, as Richard

Strauss are composers. True, he has an idiom of his own, but music is music.

Mr. Mengelberg has told me that he has told Stravinsky that as soon as the public wakes up to the Stravinsky formula it will cease to marvel and to pile up words. He then described the formula as something like this: writing in three keys at once and scoring simultaneously at the top and at the bottom of the audible scale with nothing in between! Of course, such a definition sounds like a Stravinsky burlesque of himself. But the end of the matter is not the formula; it is what the formula conveys. To condemn Stravinsky on his method is like damning thirds and sixths or the key of C. It all depends! Ernest Newman is right in his contention that we have had enough of exposition where Stravinsky is concerned; that the time is now ripe for criticism.

As it happens, the work that evoked criticism in New York last season was the "symphonies" for wind instruments. The reason is not far to seek. *Le Chant du Rossignol*, the clarinet pieces, *L'Histoire du Soldat*, *Renard*, and even the redoubtable *Sacre*, are not really puzzling. In purpose they are as clear as a Haydn piano sonata. You like them, or you do not like them, but you are not baffled by them. For all the intricacy of detail, the essential qualities of the *Sacre* are as obvious as those of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, more so, in fact, for Beethoven at moments draws about him the mist which is the appurtenance of divinity and which a century of "interpreters" has not wholly penetrated. In two extremely well prepared and authoritative performances, the *Sacre* seemed last winter a work of a great primal force. Will it endure the shock and wear of endless repetition as the Fifth Symphony has? In the case of its sister work, *Le Chant du Rossignol*, to at least one hearer, the jewelled fabric of far eastern facture had in the seven performances of last season, already worn thin. There was no mistaking behind it Rimsky-Korsakov and the forest of Siegfried's *Waldweben*. The *Sacre* is sterner stuff. So much is certain, as certain as that it is *not* puzzling.

But the "symphonies" (Stravinsky uses the word in the etymological sense) incontestably are baffling. If we are to take Stravinsky's own word in the matter—and why should we not?—this music is as "objective" as a stone entablature. Evidently what Stravinsky

means is that it must be played strictly, non-expressively, without the slightest liberty of personal idiosyncrasy on the part of the conductor, so that the notes shall be as finally the composer's in order, strength, and spacing, as if they were carved in marble or cast in bronze. And yet one critic of the "symphonies," an enthusiast now for Stravinsky, finds in them only a practical illustration of method: an aural treatise, so to say, on "How I harmonize and score." One thing is indisputable: the masterly success of the scoring. As music you may like or loathe it, but there is no denying that in these brief "symphonies" every one of the three and twenty wind instruments does its appointed work with a complete effectiveness.

Stravinsky's abiding fame we must leave to the years that are to come. The fact of prime importance in last season's record is that through it Stravinsky has "arrived" in New York. He is now quite definitely one of the composers that everybody may not worship but still accepts. It is true that at the matinee performance of the *Sacre* a few staid customers of the Boston Symphony were seen to rise up and walk out on Stravinsky's ruthless tribute to Spring in Pagan Russia. In the presence of the multitude that stood and shouted "Bravo!" (if not "Bis!") the handful of quitters simply did not count.

Although something more of Schoenberg was heard in New York last season, the fate of the debatable Austrian, unlike that of the Russian modernist, still hangs in the balance. The prospect that his *Pierrot Lunaire* may be heard again next season is welcome, and welcome, too, would be the news that Mr. Stokowski, or if not Mr. Stokowski, another enterprising conductor, would do again the *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. Stravinsky really had his chance last season; Schoenberg is awaiting his.

The League of Composers is to be thanked for making known a piano sonata by Nicolas Miaskowsky. Amid much new music of tentative character, this brief sonata stood out as the utterance of a man with something to say and an authoritative way of saying it. Miaskowsky has a half dozen symphonies to his credit, though that important fact is only just becoming known outside of Russia. Hindemith, of what may for convenience be called the Salzburg group, was heard here this year, but Haba, the reviser of music on a quarter-tone foundation, we are awaiting. While we wait, the

ever-ready Ernest Bloch did something to satisfy the want with a quarter-tone piano quintet. Haba may really have discovered a new aesthetic of music, but Mr. Bloch's effort was, to some listeners, indistinguishable from our time-honored enemy, false intonation. Fortunately for Mr. Bloch (and perhaps for the gospel of the quarter-tone) he has more impressive works to his credit than this hasty-sounding quintet.

The season was not a period of burning revelation for the music of either England or America. Though Lord Berners is always entertaining, and Mr. Bridge is much with us, English honors went to the *Color Symphony* of Arthur Bliss. Not that one need take too much stock in Mr. Bliss's matching of colors to tones—the device is an old one, and no two men hear all colors alike,—but Mr. Bliss has written, theorizing apart, a distinctly ponderable work, much of which is very good to hear just as music, whatever disposition the hearer makes of his ocular nerves.

As for the Americans, I have no hesitation in saying that to me the most arresting contribution was made by Mr. Henry Cowell of tone-cluster fame. Fun has been poked at Mr. Cowell because he sometimes operates the keyboard with his palms, his fists, his forearms. Why, in all conscience, should he not? The main thing about his music is that in it he reveals a talent as well as a theory. To unprejudiced ears the talent may sound older than the theory, but what of that? Music will be music until Arnold Schoenberg or Alois Haba overturns it completely; and then, one fine day, it will be music again.

It was not a field year for France or for Spain. The Milhaud score of *L'Homme et son Desir*, presented by the unfortunate *Ballets Suedois*, and *La Habanera* at the Metropolitan were the most interesting matter out of France. Some of us who believe Vuillermoz absolutely right—and a little more than right!—as regards Milhaud still find in the accompaniment to the pantomime in question more persuasive corroboration than Milhaud's music usually provides for it's composer's claim to talent.

La Habanera dates from 1908 and even in that year Laparra's music was in no sense "tendencious." Nevertheless, this brief lyric drama of sudden crime and punishment in Spain is one of the few indisputably individual and impressive operas of our century. But

Metropolitan audiences viewed it with indifference. True, the house is too large for its best effect and the casting was not ideal. However, the Metropolitan is too large for the best effect of many operas, and opera casts anywhere are seldom ideal. When the public stays away from *La Habanera* and *Così fan tutte* (whose Metropolitan production could hardly have been bettered), can one blame Mr. Gatta-Casazza for presenting every *Tosca* and *Fedora* he can lay his hands on?

La Habanera, by a Frenchman, proved the best Spanish music of the year. Manuel de Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, introduced at the final Boston Symphony concert, were a disappointment to all who had hoped much of them from the promise of de Falla's songs. As Philip Hale remarked in Boston, the gardens could be anywhere, and he might have added that anywhere they would be commonplace. Bartok, the Hungarian, and de Falla, the Spaniard, in their eagerness to wipe out the trace of the Gypsy or the Arab and so authentically to "nationalize" the music of their respective countries, seem to be less purifiers than denaturers.

Italy made a real contribution to the season in the *Requiem* of Pizzetti, who is clearly the foremost talent, as well as the man of pre-eminent learning, among the younger Italians. Pfitzner's *Von Deutscher Seele* must be mentioned for the space it fills in the record. If Pfitzner is not the world's dullest composer, then who is? May the Metropolitan give us a thousand *Fedoras* every year provided it spares us one *Palestrina*!

A much discussed phenomenon of the season was the irruption of official "jazz" into our concert halls. Mme. Eva Gauthier began it, and eventually Paul Whiteman himself entered in, with all of his jazzmen and more! There are those who see in this a momentous musical gesture. Others see in it nothing so important, believing that whatever jazz had to contribute to the music of the world, it contributed long before enthusiasts pressed it into service for the American Academy at Rome. Still others, now that Mr. Whiteman is so definitely "taken up," launch at this brand the dreadful epithet "*pompier*" and maintain that to find the true jazz we must follow a different trail. Alas, the day of victory is indeed dark! How soon shall we be hearing Stravinsky too, his *Sacre*, his *Noces*, his "symphonies", curtly brushed aside as "*pompier*"?