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SOME RECENT MUSIC

No. 2: By MARSYAS

A STUDIO performance of sonatas by Busoni and Stravinsky was such an important event on my musical calendar that I was determined nothing should prevent my hearing them, with the result that some friends were obliged to listen, though the radio was theirs and I their guest. Opportunities of hearing Busoni are rare enough; in fact I do not recall any recorded composition of his—though there are plenty of his Bach arrangements to be heard—and we rely on studio performers to give us those opportunities. While Eileen Ralph was playing Busoni's "Christmas Sonatina," I had the feeling that here was pianism retrieved, pianism directed once more to purely musical ends; with Liszt and the virtuosi of the nineteenth century, uses were found for pianistic technique that were soon to fall out of favour. Bach had a use for it that will never fall out of favour. He applied it entirely to the music itself, he did not use it to make a display of the performer's skill. And Busoni, whose technical achievements (according to E. J. Dent, his biographer), "must have far surpassed anything accomplished by Liszt and Rubinstein," succeeded in overlooking the popular success of his immediate predecessors, and found the same use for his expert playing as Bach had found. During the Sonatina, I felt that Busoni and the shade of Bach were remembered by Miss Ralph. The polyphony was clear; the spurts of fiery energy that came now and then were full of Busoni's vigour.

After that, the Stravinsky. It got away to a good start with programme notes that were honest, and to the point. I liked the description "pseudo-classical" which was substituted for the "neo-classical" that we are usually expected to swallow. And I liked the reference to the "factors imposed on this somewhat confused idiom." Miss Ralph's familiarity with modern composers served her well in the Stravinsky Sonata. She dealt out the brittle first movement in the real percussive manner, much as Stravinsky plays himself. In the slow movement there was a clarity which anyone not acquainted with Stravinsky's mannerisms might have obscured. I felt I was lucky to have heard the works at all, and grateful that, in addition, justice had been done to them.

THE same night, there was some more Prokofieff from another station. It is possibly my imagination, but I suspect that we have been getting more of the modern Russians since their country entered the war. If that is the case, then it is a good thing. Prokofieff's "Classical" Symphony, the answer to critics who had said he could not handle classical forms, has the last laugh in more than one way. In the first place,

it shows that he could "handle" the form. But Prokofieff went further, and injected a new life into the form which those critics could never have expected to see in it. Prokofieff had his little wisecracks—the poppo-popopp bassoon accompaniment to an ingratiating "second subject"; a galumphing gavotte, instead of a minuet, and other neat touches. But his real achievement was in making a grand work that belongs to this century, and is full of a vigour that he saw in Mozart and Haydn, and could not find in the works of some of his contemporaries.

H. G. WELLS, if my memory is not playing me a trick, outlined the history of the world without any mention of music. I believe the index to his book has one entry under "musical instruments," and none under "music"; not even the name of Beethoven! Once, when he did write about music (Stravinsky's "Les Noces") in the *Morning Post*, he wrote stupidly, being badly informed. So it is a question whether he deserved to have incidental music for his *Shape of Things to Come* when it was filmed. Some of Arthur Bliss's pieces for *Things to Come* are broadcast now and then. They are evocative, good in spots. The March is stirring; the "World in Ruins" scene sends a shiver down the spine. To have provided such music was a generous concession to the worst musical Philistine we have known since Charles Lamb.

INCIDENTALLY, while I was listening to "The World in Ruins," I found it recalled the "Spring Night" prelude from Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." As I listened more closely, it had clear affinities. If Bliss can evoke the desolation of destroyed peoples, and Stravinsky the erotic stirrings of a warm spring night, and both with the same sounds, it makes you wonder whether either of them is really evoking anything.

AT the end of the week, 3YL gave me what I call a really satisfying programme; a programme consisting only of what I like, of course, but a well-balanced selection, the kind that shows that some programme organisers have good ideas about putting music together. We had Gluck, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven. One of the "vocal interludes" was Beethoven's "Adelaide," about which I had read so much, and which I had heard only once before. Anyone who writes about song-form always talks with bated breath of "Adelaide." So I sat up to listen carefully to the great song. There was a hiss—an old record; the woody sound of stringed instruments playing into a wooden horn—an acoustic recording, in fact; then a tenor who might have had a date stone in his mouth. Toward the end, the accompaniment was reduced to a mere oompah,

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