

SOME RECENT MUSIC

No. 10: By MARSYAS

LITTLE did I think when I mentioned Monteverdi's *Lament of Arianna* a week or two ago that I would shortly hear it on the air—the first time I have ever heard any Monteverdi on the air. It was sung from 2YA's studio by Yvonne Webb-Jones, and she gets the equivalent of G.M.'s "stand-up clap" for digging it out. But I heard the last strains with regret, because here was someone interested enough to get hold of a neglected masterpiece, but not quite able to do it justice. *Arianna* and *Aida* were both "Italian operas"—but they are not by any means one and the same thing; and this *Lament* was sung in the later style. The accompaniment was also far from satisfying—just the right notes at the right times, and nothing more than that.

In spite of what I say about the manner of the performance, I applaud the singer unreservedly; she will, I hope, get out further music by Monteverdi (and his Renaissance contemporaries), and let us hear it.

The *Lament of Arianna* (*Lasciate mi morire*), as Yvonne Webb-Jones sang it, lasted only 23 bars—a mere fragment. Is that really all there is of a piece that got itself talked about and sung all over Italy in its own time, and all over the world in a later time?

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MENDELSSOHN'S *St. Paul* was relayed by 3YL this Saturday; a dull pedestrian work, achieving unity only through uniformity. All the choruses seem (if I may use a music text-book term out of its context), to "proceed by similar motion." So level and flat is this thing that it was a pleasure to hear the orchestra alone at odd moments, and a thrill to hear the trumpets. The recitatives are stodgy, and the chorales just too Moody and Sankey to be endured. The Salvation Army sings better ones. So I got more and more bored as I listened. I felt that Mendelssohn, after spending a whole evening borrowing from J. S. Bach, tried to repeat the success of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* by quoting it. The main phrase of the opening of the last chorus of *St. Paul* is just the "Lord God Omnipotent" phrase from the *Hallelujah*. It was second-hand when Handel got it from Byrd, but by the time Mendelssohn retailed it in this tub-thumping finale it was thoroughly shopworn.

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FOR three weeks I've been looking through the programmes for a substantial helping of Chopin to listen to and think about, and I'm surprised to find how little there really is on the air. The demand must be slighter than I had imagined. You get odd bits and pieces now and then in programmes that are not printed, but there's not much opportunity to sit down and have a straight half-hour of Chopin. The classical composers and the other romantics

all take the air for longer periods simply because they wrote in larger forms. Chopin, who composed mainly in small forms, can be compensated by being given half-an-hour for his bits and pieces (as he sometimes is on Sunday afternoons).

Though I'm not fond of Chopin myself, I think he is peculiarly suited to broadcast performance, where radio and the gramophone combined give everyone the opportunity to listen to him, played by a fine pianist, under intimate private conditions. To quote T. S. Eliot once more:

We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole

Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.

"So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul

Should be resurrected only among friends

Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom

That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room."

* * *

BELA BARTOK is a very fine composer. Any man who soaks himself in his native folk song has a marvellous store of real music inside him to draw upon (Haydn, Dvorak, Vaughan Williams, for examples). His quartets are magnificent to hear, however absurd they may appear on paper, and the piano collection *Makrokosmos* has some charming fragments in it. But *Contrasts* (for piano, violin and clarinet), is a hollow sham, a piece of arrogant charlatanry. I would rather listen to Heykens' *Serenade*. Szigeti, I have read, puts down his own fiddle in the last movement and picks up a purposely mistuned instrument. As sleight-of-hand this is of passing interest; something to take the children to see. But the cult of the difficult and the queer is not peculiar to our age. It is more than 300 years since Henry Farley complained:

*To see a quaint outlandish Fowle
A quaint Baboon, an Ape, an Owle . . .
A Rimers jests, a Juglers cheats,
A Tumbler showing cunning feats
Or players acting on a Stage—
There goes the bounty of our Age;
But unto any pious motion
There's little coin and less devotion.*

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