

RECENT MUSIC

No. 24: By Marsyas

ERNEST BLOCH'S *Piano Quintet* is the best new modern music I have heard for a long time. "The modern idiom" is the phrase you're supposed to use in talking about any of the more adventurous music written since 1900, and it may refer to any number of styles, all as different from one another as Bach, Chopin, and Wagner. What it usually means is some totally unsuccessful attempt on the part of the composer to attach symbols of modern ways of life to some musical form which is not in itself a symbol of those ways. So that when you encounter a piece of music that does contain symbols of the times and yet has absorbed them into itself in such a way that they are proper to it, you hardly notice them there. If Maurice Ravel orchestrates Moussorgsky and pops a saxophone into his score it is natural enough to start up and say: "Ha, saxophone." No doubt if William Walton were to write a second symphony and stick a boogie-woogie bass into the scherzo, some encyclopæ-

dia-minded gramophile would wag his head and mutter: "First instance of boogie-woogie rhythm in symphonic form."

But Shostakovich has written a symphony employing both piano and xylophone, and yet no one if he were listening properly, would be distracted from the course of the music for a moment, because, as I remember two passages in that symphony, these very extraneous instruments are introduced with a brilliant perception of their value.

Thus Bloch's *Quintet*, which convinces me that there is some use for intervals of less than a semitone, has got me completely biased in its favour long before I have grasped its whole significance. And then, I find that it is passionately lyrical. I felt that Bloch heard everything implied in its strange harmony before he wrote down one note. And that's saying a lot when such sounds as these are involved. From scant acquaintance, I wouldn't say the same of other composers who have split the semitone (Alois Haba and Julian Carrillo).


Like that other "indivisible" smallest particle, the atom, the semitone releases an enormous energy when it is split (whether the hearer reacts favourably

or not, he will not deny that his reaction is acute). To split it is comparatively easy; to harness the energy is another matter. To my mind, Bloch has achieved the greater object in his *Piano Quintet*.


THE programme from the Christchurch Male Voice Choir concert was as much as one could expect; here I refer not to quality but to quantity. I've learned not to expect to hear all the items scheduled in a relayed concert, because of this convention of "encoring" items, and I'll support anyone who will make a move to install a new system that will enable choirs to fulfil their undertaking to what is, after all, the larger of their two audiences. At the last concert by this choir, it was a madrigal by Thomas Morley that took its death blow from the nine o'clock chimes. This time it was a Wagner excerpt. But it was in both cases a barbarous atrocity. Besides, what about the friends and relations of the soloist? Two further items which the programme promised were not broadcast.

I SUGGEST a system which would avoid these disasters. I propose that at the end of a piece the audience should


be allowed to satisfy its noisy instincts in the ordinary way, but that those who demand an encore should clap their hands above their heads. The conductor, in turning to take his bow, would at the same time take a show of hands. He would then nod politely, make a mark on his programme (if he hadn't swished it off the podium into the orchestral well), and signify to the audience by prearranged pantomime that the encore would be given later. The audience by this time would have discovered that clapping with the hands above the head is very tiring indeed, and would probably be willing to let the musicians continue. And think of the advantage to the announcer, who at present has to improvise tit-bits between items and spin out the announcements by giving every available opus number, key signature, composer's dates, and so on; he would be able to tell his radio audience quite barefacedly that the performers were getting a warm reception even if (as is frequently the case with "encores"), it were comparatively tepid. For although all audiences know that it's rude not to clap at all, they often show a disarming candour by subsiding just after the announcer has declared them to be rapturously delighted.



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