

RECENT MUSIC

No. 27: By MARSYAS

AN opportunity to hear the 4YA concert orchestra came my way for the first time in months, and they played a suite by Anthony Collins, called *Louis XV. Silhouettes*, which is what I would call excellent theatre music — good drops scene stuff. The brassy minuet disclosed that the 4YA brass players achieve a clean tone; the *sicilienne* and *pavane* made use of a good flautist — one thing you can rely on in a New Zealand orchestra — and in the Percy Graingerish *tambourin* everyone seemed happy, as the result was. The penultimate piece in the suite is labelled *Passe-caille*, but it is no more a passacaglia than "Anitra's Dance" or any of the other Peer Gynt pieces. A passacaglia is a test-piece for a composer—he has to show how much variety he can make over a repeated "ground bass" (in this case a very casual formula consisting of descending scale and four-five-one cadence). And though Anthony Collins can make pleasing sounds in *forlanes*, *pavanes*, etc., he is not a composer in the sense in which we apply the word to

men who have written such passacaglias as *Dido's Lament*, the *Crucifixus* in the Mass in B Minor (Bach), and the Finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony.

A WHOLE 30 minutes of 16th century polyphonic vocal music, which came over 3YL, was a generous treat. I have always felt that a man with such a name as "Josquin of the Meadows" must have written beautiful music. The magic about these pieces of Josquin des Prés, Vittoria, Mauduit, Alchinger, Juan IV. (of Portugal) and Palestrina himself, is their fusion of bare simplicity and devilishly clever artifice. The artifice, fortunately, doesn't insist on being noticed by the ear, and often escapes notice altogether; but in their sublimely simple moments these composers make a couple of common chords in minims seem to convey a profound enlightenment. It is all a matter of the medium—men's voices—of course. The same context, exquisitely scored for strings, might sound insufferably banal. But when the boys of the Dijon Cathedral proclaim their flawless Latin syllables to the notes, a model of strict counterpoint becomes a momentary glimpse of the Infinite.

SINCE polyphony is the thing of the future in musical competition—the immediate future—each occasion which brings the listener into contact with its

earlier manifestations is of great significance. All sorts of interpretations have been placed upon the signification of polyphony—even political ones. It was, I think, Rutland Boughton (composer of *The Immortal Hour*) who asserted that Bach's music, wherein each part has an interest of its own, was Communitistic by nature, as distinct from the style employed by the "romantic" composers, wherein many parts (or instruments, or voices), are subordinated to one or a few with little consideration for their individual existences.

Polyphony is a fearsome looking word, but its understanding requires less mental effort (other things, such as association with context, being equal) than the word Harmony. It simply means many voices. And as that's the way music's going to be written for a while, familiarity with the term will do no harm.

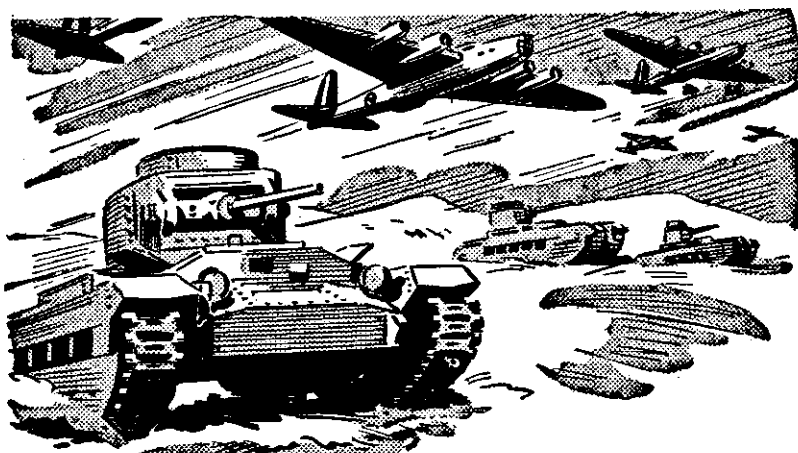
PIECES for the clavecin by François Couperin (musician to Louis XIV. and teacher of fashionable Parisian ladies) which followed the 16th century music were a fresh reminder of this composer's genius for putting the listener into a good humour. Wanda Landowska, to judge by what she has written about them perceives these little miniatures in any terms but those of sound or of music, yet there is no doubt that she is a master of their interpre-

tation. Since it obviously enables her to produce wonderful results in sound, one must allow her practice of confusing them with all sorts of colour schemes, and visual images of every variety.

On the other hand, there is no reason to insist that every one of Couperin's fanciful little titles denotes some indispensable association for the music. We are so used to composers giving a piece a name to show what it is, that we miss the point when one of them gives a piece a name to show what it is not. A brass-band conductor with an inventive flair might compose a perfectly formal rondo with a tenor-horn solo, but to avoid appearing self-conscious he will name it *Hyacinths*, or some such, well knowing that no brass-band will ever sound, look or smell like hyacinths.

Similarly when Couperin wishes to preclude solemn "attentive" listening, he names a piece *Slight Mourning*, or *The Three Widows*, *The Crossed Legs*, *The Knitters*, *The Tame Pigeon*, etc. You're not meant to fold your arms and shut your eyes and dream of "olden dayes" when you listen to it, any more than those fashionable ladies were.

Couperin's music is the true "light music"—not light because something has been left out of it (as most of our "light music" programmes are) but light because only fine and delicate things have been put into it.



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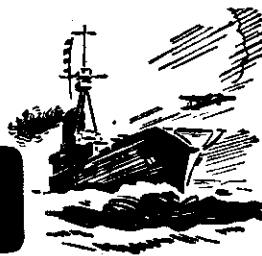
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