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Modern American Music

A SUAVE style, combined with elegant workmanship, has made 40-year-old Samuel Barber one of the important new voices to appear in American music within the past two decades. Of all American composers Barber is the most likely to appeal to New Zealand ears, and it is his music which opens a series of eleven programmes called *Contemporary American Composers*, at present being heard from YC stations. The music is played and sung by New Zealand artists, and the programmes include works by Samuel Barber, Roy Harris, Paul Bowles, Charles Griffes, David Diamond, Virgil Thomson, John T. Niles, Randall Thompson, Ernest Bloch and Norman delo Joio. The first programme, of songs by Samuel Barber, will be heard from 4YC at 9.44 p.m. on Tuesday, March 30, and from 2YC at 7.0 p.m. on Thursday, April 1. The third programme, of works by Paul Bowles, will be heard from 1YC at 7.0 p.m. on Tuesday, March 30, and from 3YC at 7.18 p.m. on Saturday, April 3.

Samuel Barber is at his most important in his orchestral music, but he has written a great deal for voices and his songs are an important part of his output. His first programme includes four songs sung by Olga Burton, soprano: "I Hear an Army," a setting for a poem by James Joyce; "Sure on this Shining Night," to words by James Agee; "Monks and Raisins" (words by Jose Garcia Villa); and "Nocturne" (words by Frederic Prokosch). In the same programme Owen Jensen plays Barber's only piano work, "Excursions," Opus 20, written in 1944 and first performed by Horowitz in 1945. In Barber's second programme the Ina Bosworth String Quartet and Stewart Harvey (baritone) give a performance of his "Dover Beach," a setting of Matthew Arnold's celebrated poem, and his String Quartet, Opus 11, the latter a serene and restful work which won high praise from Sibelius.

Paul Bowles, whose work is heard in the third programme, is one of the most interesting of the younger American composers. He has led a wandering life, living for long periods in Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, the Sahara and several parts of North Africa, and these exotic backgrounds are reflected in much of his music. This programme includes two songs, "Three," a setting of a poem by Tennessee Williams, sung by Stewart Harvey, and "David," written to words by Frances Frost. Colleen McCracken plays three piano solos in the programme: "Sayula," and "Two Huapangos." The Huapangos are based on a native dance-form from the provinces of Tamaulipas and Vera Cruz in Mexico.

The music of Charles Tomlinson Griffes makes frequent use of ancient modes and Oriental scales, and his masterpiece *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* placed him in the front rank of American composers, shortly before he died in 1920 at 36. The fourth programme in the series includes Griffes's *Roman Sketches Part III* ("The Fountain of Acqua Paola") played by

Henry Shirley at the piano, and two songs sung by Ramon Opie (tenor), "Thy Dark Eyes to Mine" and "The Lament of Ian the Proud."

When he was a small boy in Kentucky, John Niles first heard in their original settings the folk music of the American Negroes and the songs of the Kentucky mountaineers. He later col-



lected and harmonised many of these songs, and two groups of them are included in the series — seven Negro "exaltations," which are used for the most part to inspire congregations with religious fervour, and a number of songs from Kentucky's Appalachian mountains. These songs are sung by Barbara Hyland and Reginald Spence, accompanied by Patrick Towsey.

The titles of the first group are: "Does You Call Dat Religion," "The Story of Noah," "Poor Mourner," "Hold On," "Trip to Raleigh," "Little Black Star" and "Wide Deep Troubled Water." The last of these seven exaltations is probably the most impressive. John Niles first heard it as the climax of a multiple baptism ceremony, when the congregation, gathered on the river banks, suddenly broke into its majestic phrases as the most hardened sinner of the community emerged from the water declaring that he'd seen the light. The second group includes "Hi Ho the Preacher Man," "The Cherry Tree," "When I Lays Down and I Do Die," "In My Little Cabin," "Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies," "If I Had A Ribbon Bow," and "Fair Eleanor and the Brown Gal." Some of these folk songs have English origins, and others, such as the jump-up song "In My Little Cabin" (called a jump-up because it has no connected story) are purely local in origin.

Better-known American composers whose work is included in this series, such as Virgil Thomson and Roy Harris, are represented by typical works sung by local artists. One of particular interest but who is almost certainly unknown to listeners in this country is Norman delo Joio. His Piano Sonata No. 1 is played by Freda Blank. Delo Joio has a long list of compositions to his credit, including a symphonic work for Solo Voice, Narrator, Choir and Orchestra, which he has called *Western Star*.

The scores of the music in this series of *Contemporary American Composers* were made available to the NZBS through the courtesy of the American Embassy in Wellington.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 26, 1954.