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Two World Premieres

ONE of the important events of the musical season in this city took place recently: a concert of contemporary choral music that included world premières of two major works, as well as first New York performances of two others.

Aside from what the music itself had to say, it was a notable event because up to a relatively short time ago such a concert (containing so much new music of stature) could hardly have been presented. That is to say, the relative dearth of new choral works that was particularly evident during the 1930s is broken, and composers are again giving major attention to music for massed voices.

The concert in question was presented by one of America's most distinguished choral groups, the Schola Cantorum of New York, under its permanent director, Hugh Ross. The programme consisted of "Eternitie," by Jan Meyerowitz, "Coro di Morti" ("Chorus of the Dead"), by Goffredo Petrassi, "The Stranger," by Herbert Fromm, three of the six "Canciones de Primavera" (Songs of Spring), by Domingo Santa Cruz, and "Inscriptions at the City of Brass," by Jacob Avshalomov.

It was distinctly a "big" programme, aside from the newness of four of the numbers, and ranged in scope and character from the lyric, ethereal Santa Cruz songs for a capella chorus to the macabre "Chorus of the Dead" and the crashing Avshalomov cantata.

Of the six "Songs of Spring" for which Santa Cruz wrote words as well as music, Ross selected numbers one, four and five. Only the first of these is written in the presence of the rejoicing of spring—the other two look forward to spring, but are themselves still in the grip of winter.

The a capella songs gave the chorus an excellent opportunity to demonstrate its famous purity of tone, and ability to project nuances. Domingo Santa Cruz, Chile's leading composer, wrote the "Songs of Spring" in 1950. This was their first performance in New York.

Avshalomov's "Inscriptions at the City of Brass," which was given its world première performance, is based on a story begun by Scheherazade on

NORMAN SMITH, writing from New York, reports on a notable concert of contemporary choral works.

the 339th of the Thousand and One Nights. The cantata, scored for mixed chorus and orchestra, includes one speaking part: a female narrator, personifying Scheherazade, who tells the story. The orchestra was augmented by a number of rather exotic percussion instruments, as well as banjos and guitars. On the other hand, the upper strings were not used, as the composer wished to avoid a singing element in competition with the chorus.

The "Inscriptions" has been criticised for using a speaking voice, which some found disturbing in connection with the orchestral accompaniment, and for seeking to imitate oriental music. I felt the narrator was an effective device, although the speaker's use of a microphone and loudspeakers gave her voice an artificial quality. As for the latter charge, it seems to me that the composer sought merely to suggest, rather than to imitate, oriental modes, just as, for example, Ravel's "Jeux d'Eau" merely suggests the sound of a gamelan.

Incidentally, Avshalomov really knows oriental music at first hand, having been born in Tsingtao, China, in 1919. He settled in the United States in 1937, and is at present conductor of the Portland (Oregon) Junior Symphony.

The other world première was Herbert Fromm's dramatic cantata *The Stranger*. Scored for three male soloists, mixed chorus, and orchestra, it is based on a parable by Benjamin Franklin which warns against over-zealousness and self-righteousness. The cantata proved to be a powerful and moving work, without unusual problems for either performers or audience.

The composer was born in Germany, where he received his musical education. He came to the United States in 1937.

Perhaps the most effective work of the evening was "Coro di Morti," heard for the first time in New York. Its

(continued on next page)

New Music

TROMBONE CONCERTO

CONCERTINO FOR CLARINET AND STRINGS, by Adrian Cruft, English price 8/6. CONCERTO FOR CELLO AND STRINGS, by Gordon Jacob, 15/-. CONCERTO FOR TROMBONE AND ORCHESTRA, by Gordon Jacob, 12/6. All published by Joseph Williams Ltd., London.

ADRIAN CRUFT is a young English composer who, by virtue of several competently written works, has secured for himself a niche in the catalogue of Joseph Williams. His Concertino for Clarinet and Strings, in three movements—dedicated to Dr Gordon Jacob on his 60th birthday—is constructed with a craftsmanship that must have gratified Mr Cruft's illustrious teacher. The work is confidently written and freely utilises a dissonant harmonic idiom that is not without its appeal. There is a directness in the composer's economy of ideas and notation which together with several interesting instrumental timbres, gives added attraction to the work. If anything, Mr Cruft's ideas are a little too fragmentary to

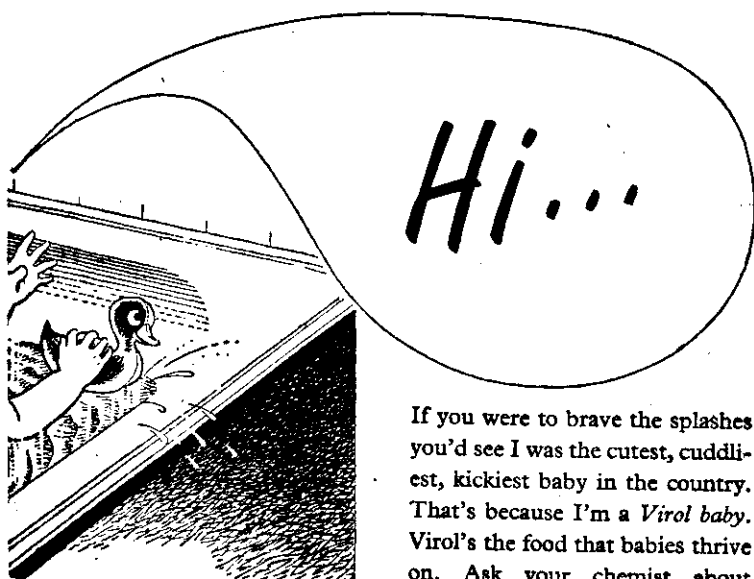
provide a really convincing continuity to the work as a whole.

Of recent years Dr Jacob has made some really distinguished contributions to the repertoires of some of the "forgotten" instruments of the orchestra. Notable are his concertos for such instruments as the flute, oboe, bassoon and cor anglais. His latest ventures into the concerto field have produced something of a mixed bag. His Concerto for Cello and String Orchestra is a little disappointing, and not as gratifying as some of his other productions. Had the work come from a lesser composer it might have arrested attention for a slightly longer period. While one may not agree with Dr Jacob's selectiveness of ideas, there is no disputing his supreme craftsmanship in handling the orchestra.

The Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra, on the other hand, really "comes off." The solo part, by no means easy, has several striking ideas which the composer fully exploits on the instrument. These ideas, coupled with the type of orchestration for which Dr Jacob is without peer today, make this work an absolute winner. It is brilliant and effective and well worthy of performance.

—A.D.H.

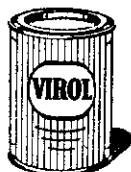
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