

A high songfulness in the melody of it is one of its charms. A great suavity of harmonic figuration (one can scarcely call it counterpoint) is another. Real seriousness of thought and a certain purity of spirit it undoubtedly has. There is nothing vulgar, cheap, or meretricious about it. And it sounds extremely well; it is graciously written.

On the other hand, the eight symphonies, which constitute the major body of Bruckner's work, are none of them well integrated formally; they barely hang together. And their unvarying pattern of four-measure phrases brings them, like César Franck's two-measure monotony, dangerously close to a doggerel meter. Also, the melodic material, for all its grace, is derivative. Schubert, Brahms, and Wagner are never wholly absent from the memory as one listens. The music is intended, I think, to feel like Brahms and to sound like Wagner; and unfortunately it more often than not does just that.

It does another thing, however, which is probably not intentional but which gives it what personal flavor it has. It evokes, by orchestral means, organ registration. Bruckner uses his brasses exactly as an organist uses the reed stops; and he uses the woodwind more often than not as a choir organ, or *positif*. His masterful cleanliness in the antiphonal deployment of the different kinds of sound is the work of a great organ player, which he was. The looseness of his formal structures is due, no doubt, to the same professional formation, as is certainly his unvarying use of the apocalyptic climax to finish off his longer works.

There is a pious theatricality about all Bruckner's symphonies that, combined with his constant reverence toward his masters, makes them most attractive. They represent esthetically a philosophy of quietism, musically the ultimate of humility. They rest one; they are perfect to daydream to. Of real originality they have, I think, very little.

APRIL 6, 1945

Schuman's *Undertow*

♫ WILLIAM SCHUMAN'S ballet *Undertow*, which will be played again tonight at Ballet Theater's closing performance of the season, has enlarged our acquaintance with this composer's personality; and I suspect it may be about to add something to the concert repertory of his works. It is the first narrative instrumental piece by him that many have had occasion to hear, possibly the first he has composed, though he has worked successfully in most of the other musical forms both vocal and instrumental. Whatever may be the future of Antony Tudor's ballet, there is probably an effective concert piece to be derived from this score.

There is no question, I think, that American composers by and large, at least those of the presently mature and maturing generation, have

done their most striking work in the theater. Also that the best training available for serious musico-theatrical work is practice in the concert forms. Interestingness of texture and soundness of continuity are the minimal requirements of concert audiences. On the other hand, concentration on a specific subject, the depicting of it without expansion or digression, which is the minimal requirement of any music destined for theatrical collaboration, is exactly where American concert composition tends to fall down. It is weak in specific expressivity partly because our American training in composition is formalistic, seeking chiefly abstract perfection, even at the expense of direct speech; and partly because our concert audiences are not sufficiently accomplished at seizing the meanings in music to require of musical composition the kind of coherence that readers demand of literature.

Formed entirely by American teachers and American audiences, William Schuman is a characteristic product of the American musical scene. He has written symphonies, string quartets, overtures, band pieces, and lots of choral works; and they have all been performed by major musical organizations. His workmanship is skillful, individual, striking. His expressivity has always been tenuous, timid, conventional. His serious works have shown a respectable seriousness of attitude without much private or particular passion, while his gayer ones have expressed either a standard American cheerfulness or the comforting bumptiousness of middle-quality comic-strip humor. He has written easily, abundantly, and in a technical sense well: but his music has been, on the whole, reticent, has communicated to the public little about himself or about anything else.

Undertow has a sounder proportion of matter to means. The story of this particular ballet has required, to begin with, vivid rather than formalistic treatment. That story, or plot, for all its inefficiencies as dramatic literature (it has a realistic but nonessential beginning and a nonrealistic, quite unbelievable ending; with all that public opinion around, the young man would certainly have been arrested for murder if he had committed one), has a serious subject, namely, the pathos of sexual initiation. The music is full of frustration and violence. It has a static intensity in the passages of pure feeling and a spastic muscular energy in the passages which depict physical action that are completely appropriate to the subject and completely interesting. The climactic *pas de deux* is the most realistic piece about sexual intercourse we have had since Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*. And the contrapuntal accompaniment to the scene of ganged-up lovemaking between one girl and four men is both exciting and convincing.

Whether Schuman has a real theatrical gift or merely certain qualities that are useful in the theater I am not sure. The whole score does not accompany the ballet as consistently as certain passages underline it strikingly. If Schuman is a born man of the theater, he ought to have

given to the choreographer, or secured from him, a closer communion. But Tudor, who likes to work from ready-made music, may not be easy to do a duo with. Further dramatic works from Schuman will no doubt reveal further his qualities. For the present he has shown a gift for expressing the lurid; and the lurid has afforded him a more ample field for exploiting his full powers as an artist than the formalistic, middle-ground modernism of his concert style and the boisterous-but-not-much-else Americanism of his assumed concert personality have done. Also, his gift for massive orchestration, which lends so easily a merely demagogic air to his concert works, becomes an element of magnificent emphasis when applied to a melodramatic subject in a theater.

And so, viewed freshly through his new-found medium, Schuman turns out to be not at all the composer of small expressive range and assumed monumental proportions that his concert music has long led one to consider him, but a man of high and spectacular expressive gifts who has been constricted by the elegant abstractions of the American concert style — and a little bit too, perhaps, by his youth. The concert forms have been good schooling for him, but he has never expressed himself in them with any freedom. The theater gives him elbow room. His mind can move around in it. And his feeling-content, his compassion, as well as his inveterate love for depicting physical movement, take on an unexpected strength under the theater's channelization of them to purposes of specific meaning. *Undertow* is not a masterpiece of music, any more than it is of choreography. But it is full of music that says something. It speaks. It can even be listened to. I think it will be remembered.

APRIL 29, 1945

The Organ

☞ THE MODERN pipe organ and its repertory make a strange dichotomy. The instrument itself is the most elaborate, the most ingenious, the most complex, and the most expensive of all instruments. Also one of the most common. Hamlets that never saw a bassoon or a French horn or an Australian marimba or even a concert grand piano will occasionally house a quite decent one. City people give them away like drinking fountains and altars and stained-glass windows. And yet, in two centuries scarcely twenty pieces have been written for the organ that could be called first-class music. The learning, the taste, the engineering knowledge, and the skilled handicraft that go into the manufacture of even a reasonably satisfactory instrument are enormous. Nevertheless, not one major composer, since Sebastian Bach died in 1750, has written for the organ with any notable freedom or authority. And very few have written for it at all.

César Franck, perhaps, did the best, though none of his half dozen best organ pieces is as commanding a work as any of his half dozen best chamber and orchestral works. Also, Franck's position as a major composer in any medium is doubtful. The organ got much of their best work out of Frescobaldi and Couperin and Handel and Bach, not to mention a hundred other composers of the Baroque age. Since that time it is chiefly the second-rate that have written for it. Mozart, though a skillful organist himself, never wrote a solo piece for the instrument (though *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* lists seventeen sonatas for organ, "usually with violin and bass, intended to be used as *graduales*" in the Church service). Mendelssohn wrote six solo sonatas for it that are sound music, if more than a little stuffy. Brahms wrote eleven chorale preludes, his last opus number, of which two are genuinely inspired, though neither of these is particularly well conceived for the instrument. And there are twelve organ pieces by Franck that are respectable as music. The rest of the post-Baroque repertory has been written by the Gounods, the Saint-Saënses, the Regers, the Viernes, the Widors, and their like — at its best, second-rate stuff. Among the modern masters, only Schönberg, and that just once, has produced a work of any grandeur for the organ.

The cause of this neglect lies, I think, in the nature of the instrument itself, which has nowadays little but a glorious moment of history to offer. For the organ, like many another instrument of ancient lineage, did have its hour of glory. This hour, which lasted a good century and a half, say from roughly the year 1600 to quite precisely 1750, covers the whole of that period commonly known to the Fine Arts as the Baroque. And though in the visual techniques the high Baroque style is associated chiefly with the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church, the musical Baroque penetrated, both in Germany and in England, to the heart of Protestantism itself.

That was the age that created the fugue, the aria, the free fantasia, the opera, the oratorio. It invented the violin too, and carried to an apogee of musical refinement the keyed instruments, notably the organ and the harpsichord. It was the age of oratory in music, of the grandiose, the impersonal, the abstract. When it gave way in the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginnings of a more personalized romanticism, certain of its favorite media ceased to have effective power. The oratorio, for instance, has never recovered from that change in taste; nor have the fugue and its running mate, the free fantasia, ever since had quite the authority they enjoyed before. The opera survived by going in for personal sentiment in the arias and by giving up all that was merely grandiose in the set pieces. The violin also, played with the new Tourte bow (an invention of the 1770s), took on an appropriate sensitivity of expression. But the harpsichord fell wholly out of use, a new keyed instrument, the forte-