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REVIEWS

4th February : Town Hall, Birmingham.

Concert of Works by Lutoslawski, Prokofiev and Bartok, given by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Maurice Handford, with Shura Cherkassky as soloist.

With music of the 20th century finding an ever larger place in the repertoire of the C.B.S.O., it was not surprising to discover that on February 4th their programme was dedicated entirely to works, which, if not contemporary, were at least written in the last 60 years. The occasion provided the opportunity to hear the CONCERTOS FOR ORCHESTRA of both BARTOK and LUTOSLAWSKI, in the same programme. The third work in this concert was the 2nd PIANO CONCERTO OF PROKOFIEV. When this work first appeared, in 1913, a Russian critic described it as "a welter of barbaric sounds, with unbearable cadenzas; what might be expected if an inkwell were capriciously upset" - to which I have nothing to add.

The Concertos for Orchestra were a very different matter. They provided a unique opportunity to compare the music of two Eastern European composers, the one a Hungarian, the other a Pole, in the same medium. Bartok wrote his concerto for Orchestra in 1944, in America. Once known as the most popular piece of 20th century music, its popularity seems to be on the wane, although it still retains a large army of devotees. The concerto was written by a poor, ignored, embittered, old man of 63, the year before he died. For all the gaiety and jolly "popular" music, or perhaps because of it, I find that the underlying bitterness of the man comes through the music and stays with one. This element is very disturbing in that one is constantly aware of the deliberate superficiality of much of the music.

By comparison, my reaction to the LUTOSLAWSKI, written between 1950 and 1954, was that here was a work of great effect, carefully written and very well balanced. One could feel the shadow of BARTOK on the music; not the BARTOK of the Concerto for Orchestra, but rather of the 5th String Quartet, or the MUSIC FOR STRINGS, PERCUSSION AND CELESTA. The music was full of vitality, with an interesting variety of textures, the percussion being especially effective and well handled. The performance of the Lutoslawski was of a very high standard, creating a well-balanced and pleasing sound. Unfortunately, by the time the Orchestra reached the BARTOK they seemed to be flagging, and gave what can best be described as a very weak performance, utterly lacking in conviction.

IAN LLOYD.