

STRAVINSKY'S NEW SYMPHONY

Lawrence Morton



IGOR STRAVINSKY'S *Symphony in Three Movements* was heard here for the first time about ten hours after the broadcast of the President's address to Congress on the state of the union. The symphony was, in a sense, a logical sequence to the speech. Mr. Truman, after discussing at length some acute problems of social organization, concluded with an invocation to man's inherent nobility of spirit. And this is where Mr. Stravinsky began, as if in answer to the President's appeal.

The symphony opens in full orchestra with a mighty affirmation of confidence and resolution. Then the horns state the main problem with which the composer would confront us; other instruments reiterate it, as if to show it to us from new angles and with new perspectives; and it finally settles down into a bass figure with accompanying shouts from the piano, strings and winds. The whole middle section is a lengthy discussion of disturbing collateral issues. This is followed by a return to the basic problem, a restatement of the high resolve of the opening, and finally a quiet but hopeful ending.

This is perhaps a too fanciful, too topical interpretation of the symphony's first movement—induced by having

heard it on a day that had already been made significant by other events. On a Thursday I should doubtless have heard it with different ears—as a continuity of blocks or planes of sound, for instance. But under no circumstances can the movement be heard as anything less than a work of high seriousness which compels earnest attention and contemplation. Stravinsky is concerned here with solemn matters, and he has searched into every cell of his imagination, drained the well of his resourcefulness, exercised every muscle of his skill in order to arrange his musical thought into a coherent and powerful organization. This is no occasion for charming refinements, easy congeniality, pretty phrases; it is an occasion, rather, for strong musical talk, forceful and expressive in a way that the composer has seldom felt it necessary to speak. At other times (perhaps in the *Symphony of Psalms*) he may have spoken with equal seriousness; but he has never equalled this effort in drama and life-like intensity. Certainly the symphony's first movement is Stravinsky's greatest achievement.

I wish it could be said that the other two movements are as impressive—or at least as immediately impressive. The middle one has many mar-

velous moments, like the lovely but fragmentary flute melody at the beginning, which extends itself in florid ornamentation; like the impressionistic harmonies (once for solo strings, later for woodwinds) which stand like sign posts marking the boundaries of the movement's middle section; or like the bitter-sweet sonorities that exist throughout. But the movement as a whole seems to me to have developed out of nostalgia and preciousness. It is thus, as compared to what has preceded it, a miniature in both size and content.

The last movement is again, to my ears, somewhat spotty, episodic. The opening and closing sections, to be sure, are a return to the grandeur and intensity of the first movement, and they are exciting for their impetuous motion and release of feeling. But the sections between these—especially the fugue with its almost grotesque coupling of the trombone and piano—hide their meanings from me almost completely, leave me puzzled, make me regret that the composer appears to be less frank here than elsewhere.

It was Otto Klemperer who did us the favor (and himself the honor) of introducing the symphony to Los Angeles, just as last season he introduced the Alban Berg *Violin Concerto* with Szigeti. There is no way of knowing precisely the excellence or shortcomings of his reading of the symphony since it can be compared only with two broadcast performances which the composer conducted—the first nearly a year ago by the New York Philharmonic which memory can not recall accurately, and the second by the Cleveland Symphony on the eve of the local performance. In comparison with the latter, still fresh in memory, Klemperer's excelled. It gained, first of all, by the real presence of the music as against a broadcast that was not only badly monitored by the engineer but also cruelly cut off by Mutual about a half-minute before the end. (In radio it is not the play but the schedule that must go on!) Klemperer's performance gained also by a more deliberate pace that gave the sparsely orchestrated music more time to sound, and by a consequent increase of weight which I would judge appropriate to the thematic material.

Out of sheer gratitude to Klemperer (if there were no other reason) I would be eager to attribute to his playing of the Stravinsky all the virtues that he exhibited in his playing of Glinka's "Russlan" overture and Tchaikowsky's *Pathetique*—and these were not inconsiderable virtues. It was a genuine pleasure to see him again on a Los Angeles podium, hailed by an appreciative and affectionate audience as the fine conductor he has always been. And not at all by the way, the orchestra played very well and deserved the tributes that Klemperer shared with it.