

N. Y. Herald-Tribune

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1944

MUSIC

By VIRGIL THOMSON

PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA,
Artur Rodzinski, conductor; Gregor Piatigorsky,
violinist. Concert in Carnegie Hall
last night. The program:

"Haffner" Symphony in D major.....Mozart
Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte by Lord Byron,
for Recitation, Piano and String Orches-
tra.....Schoenberg
(Narrator: Mack Harrell; pianist, Edward
Steuermann)

(First performance)
Concerto in D major for Cello and
Orchestra.....Haydn

* (Mr. Piatigorsky)
Three Dances, from "Sombbrero de tres picos"
Falla

Beautiful String Work

THE Philharmonic concert of last night in Carnegie Hall was a delight both as program and as execution. Mozart's lovely "Haffner" Symphony, Haydn's charming D major cello concerto and three dances from de Falla's saucy ballet, "Three-Cornered Hat," made up the familiar works. The first hearing of Schoenberg's "Ode to Napoleon" provided a fascinating, and apparently successful, novelty. From the symphony through the concerto, with Gregor Piatigorsky, the evening offered a display of fine string playing that few orchestral societies can match. The final de Falla, also, was first-class in both sonority and articulation. A few irregularities of pitch and some not wholly pleasant nasal sounds from the solo cello in the concerto were minor blemishes.

The Schoenberg "Ode to Napoleon" is a melodrama on Byron's poem, set for a male reciter (quaintly called by the program a "narrator"), piano and string orchestra. I doubt whether Lord Byron's ode is of the best quality either as poetry or as philosophic reflection. Also, whether the pre-

Gregor Piatigorsky



Who appeared as cello soloist with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra last night

sumed (and announced) parallel between the career of Napoleon and of Adolf Hitler is very good history. But let that pass. Arnold Schoenberg's setting of the text, if I am any judge, is good music, very good music, the best music, take it all round, that anybody I know of is writing today.

It is twelve-tone music of polyharmonic rather than atonal texture. Played in tune, as it was last

night (and one so seldom hears music of this sort played in tune), it makes constantly delicious sounds. One hardly knows which to admire most, Schoenberg for writing it so skillfully or Artur Rodzinski, Edward Steuermann (who played the piano part and helped no end in the preparation of the whole performance) and the Philharmonic string section for executing it so beautifully. Mack Harrell, who read the text according to the composer's indicated scansion and cadence, did a handsome job, too.

The orotund elocution and its dissonant, intensely expressive accompaniment made together an effect that, curiously enough, was more musical than dramatic.

It is the excessive expressivity, in fact, of the music, its constant sensitivity without much spaced emphasis, that removes all direct expression from the accompaniment and turns it into a richly textured but, on the whole, neutral background for elocution. My

guest described it as "the movie music of the future." One wishes, at least, that the movie music of the present bore it a greater resemblance. Certainly, if there is much of a future anywhere for melodrama—or musically accompanied speech—that future lies in the films, with occasional concert performances. The theater has always found straight speech or complete music, with the verbal text sung, more effective.

All his life, Schoenberg has worked at the problem of melodrama. His earliest vocal works tend to pull the singer's art away from cantilena and over toward speech. The Ode scraps formal intonation altogether, keeping only the rhythmic scansion strict and suggesting an approximation of cadence. The effect is completely happy, because the prosody is good and because the musical accompaniment is beautiful. Melodrama is not usually a grateful genre, but it can be pretty wonderful in the hands of a master musician.