33⅓ Microgroove

Peter Racine-Fricker

ATC 1002

Sonata for Violin & Pianoforte

PETER RACINE-FRICKER was born in London in 1920. Until he was called up for military service—which period he spent with the R.A.F. in the Far East—he studied at the Royal College of Music under R. O. Morris, a teacher who enjoyed an unique reputation during the thirties. On his return to London, Fricker found the doors of the College closed to him, and became a pupil of Matyas Seiber.

The choice of Matyas Seiber as a teacher is significant. The criticism of an accomplished composer whose music is truly European was now brought to bear on Fricker's work. His technique became more disciplined, a process—having nothing in common with coercion, but all too rare in our official colleges and academies of music—during which his style became as subtle as it is simple. Since then the success, first of his Wind Quintet, then of his Symphonies, has brought him into prominence and made him a sounding-board for the judgement and prejudice of critics both in this country and abroad.

The artistry of Fricker's instrumentation was apparent from the first. The 'Badinerie' of the Wind Quintet—one of the many works to be crowned with a prize, the Alfred Clements prize for 1947—may be cited as an example. And in the beautiful and unjustly neglected '*Sonnets of Cecco Angiolieri da Siena*' for Tenor and seven instruments this branch of Fricker's art can be said to be masterly. The romantic implications inherent in the composer's development during this period reached their logical conclusion in the magical opening of the Violin Concerto, in the Prelude, Elegy and Finale for Strings, and in the slow movement of the First Symphony.

Acknowledging debts to Hindemith, Stravinsky, and to Bartok, an indebtedness that has not escaped the notice of the critics, these works reveal a definite individuality and it is difficult—at this stage of our musical life—to think of better models for a young composer.

It is already quite clear, notably in the Violin Sonata and the Concertante for Cor Anglais and Strings, that Fricker is moving toward a style wholly his own. This has not, however, led him to abandon tonality and, although, in the Concertante, he makes use of the Twelve-Note technique, this work, as Colin Mason has pointed out, has a definite bias in favour of the key of G minor. The second symphony, spare and economical in comparison with the extravagant ebullience of the first, and the Viola Concerto in which interest centres around melodic and harmonic problems rather than in the contrapuntal texture that has hitherto been a feature of Fricker's work, marks the opening of this new phase in the composer's development.

The public has not been slow to recognize the value of Fricker's music and, while critical opinion lags behind and mutters about the 'grim and unsmiling' quality it professes to find in his work, this is unlikely to surprise those who realize that a healthy reaction against the Mock-Morris, raffia hat, contemplate-the-world-over-a-five-bar-gate school which has dominated the British musical scene for so long is overdue.

Fricker has few interests apart from music and his work as director of music, and as conductor of the small amateur orchestra at Morley College, has rounded off an apprenticeship served in the copying of parts for several of our more fashionable dance bands. While this has led to some picturesque and sensational reports in the popular press, it was not without value since it gave him a close insight into the mechanics of orchestration. His ventures, as a composer, into the more commercial side of music have been limited. The film '*The White Continent,*' dealing with the Anglo-Scandinavian expedition to Maudsheim showed, however, that he is able to adapt himself to the medium of the screen and write an episodic yet colourful score which avoids the flat cliché-ridden wash of sound all too common in film music. And, in spite of the slip-shod orchestral playing which attended the early performances, his ballet, '*The Canterbury Prologue,*' marred as it is by a poor 'book,' displays a sense of the dramatic, and, what is far more important, a highly developed sense of the theatre.

Since the war no young English composer has made such an impact on the musical life of Western Europe and his past achievement is a sufficient guarantee for the future.

Sonata for pianoforte, op 21

33⅓ Microgroove

Humphrey Searle

ATC 1002

IN the programme note on his piano sonata on the occasion of its first performance at the Wigmore Hall—given in honour of the 140th anniversary of the birth of Liszt—the composer wrote: "The music attempts to combine the Lisztian idea of thematic transformation with the twelve-note methods of Schoenberg, which of course also make use of thematic transformation, though in a rather different way." Confronted with this, the listener may have been reminded of the conjuror at the Christmas party who prefaced his *pièce de résistance* with the remark, "My next trick is impossible." But, of course, the conjuror always pulls it off and so too does Humphrey Searle, though in a rather different way.

To judge from Searle's quietly conventional upbringing and education—he was born at Oxford in 1915 and was at Winchester and New College, where his musical education was received at the hands of Sir George Dyson—one would have expected him to have followed the well established, slightly donnish, tradition that has become the hallmark of so many British composers who have arrived in our concert halls by the same route. The more conservative eyebrows among our musical hierachy of Mus. Docs. and Bacs. may have been slightly raised when, on winning the Octavia prize, Humphrey Seale chose to study in Vienna under one of the most uncompromising of Arnold Schoenberg's followers, the late Anton von Webern.

As was the case with Peter Racine-Fricker, Searle's public debut was delayed by the war. But, when, during 1943, the Society for the Promotion of New Music produced his '*Night Music,*' it was apparent that the composer had adopted the twelve-note system of Schoenberg and, what is more, could handle this somewhat intractable idiom without, as so often happens with those who attempt to write in this style, obscuring his own personality; an opinion confirmed by the works that followed: "*Put Away the Flutes*" (1947), a setting of the poem by W. R. Rodgers for tenor, flute, oboe, and string quartet—commissioned by Peter Pears, who gave the first performance—'*Quartet*' (1948), for clarinet, bassoon, violin and viola, and '*Gold Coast Customs*' (1949) a setting of Dr. Edith Sitwell's poem, for two narrators, male chorus, woodwind, brass, and percussion. This period of development reached its climax with the production of '*Poem,*' a work for twenty-two solo strings. Any doubts that may have remained vanished on the production of this strangely beautiful work. It was selected for the 1952 festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music and subsequent performances have added to the composer's reputation.

It should be pointed out that Humphrey Searle's music receives the bulk of its performances abroad, notably in Germany. One of the great difficulties facing the British music-lover who would like to know more about the music of his own time is to persuade concert promoters to perform anything other than box-office successes. While our official bodies do valuable work by spending several thousands of pounds per annum on bringing the most advanced painting and sculpture before the public, it is difficult, if not impossible, to persuade them to spend more than a few hundreds on contemporary music. Nor is this all: modern scores—when they are published at all—are most difficult to read and without public performances the music lover and the composer seem condemned to remain at arms length. It is hoped that the Long Playing Record will go a part of the way at least toward solving this difficulty. Humphrey Searle's piano sonata is certainly a tough nut, but, now that the listener has only to turn on his gramophone to have as many performances as he likes, it should be possible to show that it does not need a musical steam hammer to come to terms with works written in an idiom that poses some of the most fascinating problems of our day.

Cyril Clarke.

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