

1957 Nov

RECORDS: BARTOK

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

INITIAL exposure to the six Bartók String Quartets leaves most listeners, even trained ones, with a feeling of bewilderment. Such clashing dissonances! Such unconventional writing! Such a strange use of the instruments (the string glissandi of the later quartets sound like four ban-shoes celebrating their equivalent of Walpurgismacht)! Such an avoidance of "melody" in the romantic sense!

And yet many qualified observers have no hesitation calling these six quartets the most significant contribution to the form since the Beethoven sixteen. They are hard to listen to, and they feature the uncompromising attitude that led the little man from Hungary to follow his own style, even if it meant almost dying of starvation. But after their quirks and idiosyncrasies are broken down, and after the listener accommodates himself to their ferocious rhythms and harmonies, they present one of the great experiences music has to offer.

Nationalist

Bartók was one of the nationalistic composers. Because of his high dissonance index and because of the highly stylized nature of his writing, the nationalistic element, especially in the string quartets, tends to become obscure. Yet, once one achieves a familiarity with Bartók's style, the Hungarian nationalism is ever present. A certain rhythm, a turn of phrase, and we are in a world basically not too far removed from that inhabited by the Liszt "Hungarian Rhapsodies" (Bartók's Op. 1, the Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra, is not much more than a rewrite of Liszt's "Hungarian Fantasy"), no matter how different the two may sound on the surface.

It is this pungent, supersaturated nationalism that is part of the Bartók style. Another is his complete avoidance of classical harmony. Bartók was a modernist in the best sense of the word. His modernism was not of the "false-note" variety, wherein dissonant harmonies are superimposed over a classic chord structure in a calculated and cynical manner. Bartók's harmonic language was something he automatically thought in; it was peculiar to himself and nobody else. Others have worked in his style, but with little success. When Bartók spoke his own language it meant something; when adopted by imitators, it has always sounded sterile.

It is interesting that music with the difficulty of the six

Parennin Group Heard In Six Great Works Of Modern Master

string quartets has been recorded several times. The Juilliard Quartet came out with their precedent-breaking three disks for Columbia around 1950. A few years later the Vegh Quartet made its version for Angel. Now comes the Parennin Quartet, on three Westminster disks.

Each of the three approaches has something to recommend. The Juilliard version is the most exciting. It goes with snap, tremendous rhythmic propulsion and a staggering technical virtuosity. The Vegh Quartet version is quieter and more lyric, and frequently underplayed. The Parennin Quartet brings to the music directness and a completely literal approach. As executants, the Parennin players are not in the class of their competition, and frequently they fight the notes. But at the same time they feel and understand the music, and their phrasing often has a charm that the other two ensembles do not bring out. All three versions have good recorded sound, though the Columbia disks, now beginning to be aged, lack the mellow quality heard in the others.

Good Performances

As so often happens in opposed interpretations, there is no such thing as the "best." This listener responds most to the incisive force and rhythmic alertness of the Juilliard Quartet. Others may respond to the Vegh mellowness or to the Parennin earnestness. Whatever version the buyer ends up with, he is going to have some of this century's most significant music in good performances.

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