

STANDING OVATION FOR ORCHESTRA

BY MARK POPKIN

If the enthusiasm of the audience, which filled roughly three-quarters of the NCSA auditorium last Thursday evening, was any indication... the concert was very definitely a milestone in the careers of Marc Gottlieb, conductor, Cynthia Mechem, pianist, and of course, the NCSA Orchestra. It was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that all three above-mentioned were beginning their respective careers and it is a most pleasant task to offer encouragement at this time.

There was no doubt that the basic approach to the music was a dynamic, driving one and was most appropriate to Wagner's Overture to *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* and to Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Ravel's *La Valse* was appropriately orgiastic, the decadent climax of which was heightened by some delicate and beautiful woodwind playing at the beginning.

Mechem is Secure

Cynthia Mechem was the very accomplished and secure soloist in MacDowell's *Second Piano Concerto*. She managed to overcome the banal stretches of the piece with delicate playing and brought a good deal of beauty to the many genuinely creative sections. As a pupil of Marjorie Mitchell, who is an authority in this area (her recording is a definitive performance), she communicated a very valid conception of the work. Miss Mitchell might be surprised to know that I performed this work with her at a MacDowell Festival concert in New York City...about ten years ago.

In general, the orchestra had a vibrant sound, especially noticeable in the strings. From the opening chords of the Wagner, one was aware of their solidity supported by the brass and woodwinds, no doubt reinforced by the many repeated performances of their recent tour.

There were, however, very apparent difficulties with which the performers had to contend and which adversely affected the performance. Symptomatic of the basic problems were difficulties with orchestral balance, tone production, cohesive sectional definition and intonation. These problems were minimized by Gottlieb's strong rhythmical approach, but nonetheless, warrant discussion.

As a performer who has played many times on the stage of the NCSA auditorium, I am quite familiar with its limitations and try to guard against its pitfalls. In short, the auditorium is a very difficult one in which to play...as it rightfully should be since it was obviously not designed acoustically for musical performances. It is roughly opposite, in terms of design criteria, to that which is necessary for the performance

of music. A music auditorium should have a "live", reverberant stage which would resonate evenly at all frequencies produced by the performers, as well as a moderately "dead" auditorium which should not amplify the sounds of the audience but should reinforce the sound of the orchestra and transfer it to the audience. We have just the reverse at NCSA. Therefore, it is difficult for one section of the orchestra not only to hear itself but to hear the other sections. In addition, the tone produced on stage seldom sounds pleasing to the performers. These difficulties increase as one approaches the rear of the stage. Also, the stage is too small to adequately accommodate the full orchestra and become marginally acceptable for us with a soloist or chorus.

The natural reaction of the players, in these circumstances, was to overplay. The results were often unfortunate since there was a degradation in tone, especially in the string and woodwind sections, with consequent lapses in intonation. Quite often, due to the deadness of the stage, were exaggerated by the live auditorium which, while acceptable for chamber music ensembles, resonates unmercifully and obliterates the fast passage work of the larger orchestral sections. The cello and bass sections, for instance, were observed to play beautifully in the fast, canonic developments in the Beethoven but this definition was degraded by the resonance of the hall. In addition, the timpani, which was undoubtedly balanced on stage, boomed through the audience swamping the rest of the orchestra.

SOLUTIONS TO ACOUSTICS

Two solutions might be possible. First, an improvement in orchestral sectional balance might be achieved by reseating the orchestra in the "Stokowski" configuration with the strings in one group placed to the conductor's left, the woodwinds to the conductor's right at the front of the stage and the brass to the rear of the woodwinds. This arrangement has the advantage of permitting the woodwinds a greater range of dynamics while reinforcing the unity of the strings.

Second, a limited amount of alteration of the auditorium might yield significant improvements. A wooden shell, consisting of portable plywood sheets which could easily be moved to accommodate other than musical presentations, could be installed on stage while portions of the auditorium could be acoustically treated, beginning with the rear walls. In addition, the stage could be extended several feet into the audience with portable risers. The last performance of the Clarion Wind Quintet was aided by the installation

of these risers with the kind assistance of Dean Pollock.

All these difficulties notwithstanding, the concert by any standards was a definite success. It accomplished what performers always strive for...the communication of musical excitement. The audience was always aware of the performers' dedication to the music and that enthusiasm was generously reciprocated by those fortunate enough to attend.

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VISITING GUESTS TO DANCE DEPARTMENT

P.W. Manchester, editor of *Dance News*, is currently visiting NCSA to teach an introductory course of Dance History.

Born in London this "contemporary editor and critic" became interested in ballet after seeing Diaghiler Ballets Russes perform. Later Miss Manchester became ballet critic for *Theatre World* in London. In 1951 she was invited to the U.S. as guest editor of *Dance News*. She remained as managing editor.

Since 1960 Miss Manchester has been the New York dance critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*. She is the contributor of *Ballet Annual*, co-editor of *Dance Encyclopedia* and other dance publications. Currently she is a professor at the University of Cincinnati, where she teaches Dance History and Vocabulary and Style (Dance Glossery).

Also visiting the Dance Department to teach advanced ballet students is Igor Schwezoff, Russian dancer, choreographer, and teacher.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1904, Schwezoff studied at the State School in Leningrad. Leaving Russia, he joined the Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo in 1932. Thereafter he appeared with a number of companies, including the Original Ballet Russe, and formed his own group in Rio de Janeiro in 1947. There he staged "Swan Lake" and "Les Sylphides" and also his own ballets, "The Red Poppy" and "Eternal Struggle". Returning to New York, he taught at the Ballet Theatre School.

Schwezoff has written numerous articles published in Holland, England, Australia, Brazil, and the U.S. He has also written an autobiography, *Russian Somersault*.