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Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York

INTERVIEWS: BRC

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FRENCH-AMERICAN FESTIVAL  
New York Philharmonic

July 23, 1965

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This program was changed at the last minute, to its benefit. It started with a strong and confident renditions of Edgar Varese's "Hyperprism" for chamber orchestra, performed by the Group for Contemporary Music at Columbia University. Written in 1931, "Hyperprism," with its ~~discrete~~ structure and wonderfully interesting collection of percussive sounds, stands up very well through the years. Bethany Beardslee then sang Boulez's "Improvisations sur Mallarme, No. II", giving us a praiseworthy virtuoso performance, which contrasted richly with the opening Varese. The Lenox Quartet then did fine service to Elliott Carter's "Quartet No. 2", bringing the greatest possible element of umph and elan to this very intellectual, dry and structured composition.

After intermission came the fun and games. Merce Cunningham's fine dancers, in weird cooperation with John Cage, and his collaborators - now minus Rauschenberg - made a sort of a music by passing their bodies through the electrical fields created by about a dozen standing poles placed in a regular pattern on the stage. Their movements produced different sorts of static sound, according to the speed and position of their interception of the currents. To this was added other electronic sound generated by Cage and his engineers who sat at their equipment in a long row at the back of the stage. The large screen behind them carried a disorganized and wild pop art film by Stan Brakhage, and also a series of distortions of the images, picked up and played with by one of the technical row at the back. The performance highlighted two elements which are typically "Cage": first, the playfulness and unpredictability of the high jinks presented, and second, the intellectual severity which leads Cage to go to such an extreme in exploring the idea of having the performer participate in the creation of his material. These two primary interests of Cage and others occasionally connect and enhance each other, though the man's essential antipathy to conventional notions of form often keeps this from happening. I was pleased to see that a third typical Caguan element of style was nearly missing, or at least not so apparent as in the past, i.e., his chip on the shoulder hostility toward the audience. A few people sitting too close to the loud-speakers suffered more than they should, and two or three from the center of the orchestra left mid-way. In a sense, it is appalling that the Lincoln Center audience may have come to live with things they detest, just in the short period since they left the first Cage performance last year in such great numbers. At any rate, the whole was full, and there was much applause, principally for Cunningham and his splendid dancers. The music created was not just ugly, but uninteresting and without development or theatrical impact. Cage is certainly a major figure for our time, though this assertion certainly doesn't imply that his usual product need be taken very seriously as performance; he is a man of significance because of the tortured and passionate interworkings of his piercing mind and a kind of moral fervor which comes right out of Salem.