

# BOOKS

## and REVIEWS

### The Gershwin Years

By Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart. 283 pp. Garden City, New York. \$6.95.

Reviewed by ANN JACOBS

George and Ira Gershwin (music and lyrics, respectively) are responsible for a significant part of this country's popular music. Much more surprising is the fact that their best songs have withstood nearly 30 years of repetition and have become neither banal nor dated. "The Man I Love," "I Got Rhythm," "Embraceable You," "Someday My Prince Will Come," and many others have escaped the usual ignominious death of popular music and continue to be loved and sung.

But George Gershwin went far beyond the level of show tunes to become one of America's most important composers. "Rhapsody in Blue" was his first not wholly successful attempt at utilizing the rhythms and orchestral techniques of popular music in a serious composition. He more nearly realized his purpose in such later works as "An American in Paris" and "Concerto in F." In "Foggy and Bess" he gave us the "first authentic American opera" taking theme and music from the people.

IN THIS dual biography of the Gershwin brothers, authors Jablonski and Stewart have avoided the excesses common to their field, and for this we can be thankful. They do not assume beyond the facts: they do not take liberties with their material. The objective chronicling of the progression of the Gershwin careers shows plainly the integrity and exhaustive research of the authors.

But this virtuous scrupulousness leaves an emptiness—a dimension is missing. The parade of shows and songs seems the work of woodmen. Perhaps this missing dimension of personality has been done so completely and so well in other biographies of the Gershwins that the authors felt their also doing it would be needless repetition. Nevertheless, this book does very carefully follow the Gershwin brothers from show to show and song to song with more than 200 excellent photographs.

### The Democratic Vista

By Richard Chase. 180 pp. New York, Doubleday. \$3.95.

Reviewed by DONALD A. YATES

"The Democratic Vista" is subtitled "A Dialogue on Life and Letters in Contemporary America"—a most exact description of its contents. It is first of all a very interesting work—the way a town hall meeting is interesting in the variety of ideas and opposing ideas that are presented and discussed, the way a cocktail party is interesting when two people or more get to talking who have something intelligent to say.

Richard Chase is a literary critic of some stature, having gained his license with vigorous and enlightening words on Melville, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and (most recently) on the American novel and its tradition.

The latter work contains some original theories on the nature of the novel in America which suggest a solid grounding on the part of the author in his material, and which demonstrate Chase's ability to digest the literature of America's past and draw from his understanding of it coherent and interesting conclusions.

IN THIS new volume, the author concentrates on the contemporary literary, social, educational, philosophical and moral scene in America and once again comes up with some provocative observations.

The scene is the seaside summer home of Ralph Headstrong and family. Ralph is a professor. His principal guest is George Middleby, an intelligent, promising young chap who is pondering a choice of careers. The alternatives are education (teaching and research) and business. In the course of the weekend Ralph and George conduct a running commentary on the American scene with points being scored for both sides in this meeting of the conservative (Ralph) and the liberal (George) minds.

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Many of the most controversial and vital issues facing thinking Americans today are raked over in the process. None of them, to be sure, too long to slow down the rather artificial but highly illuminating dialogue.

SOME SAMPLE gambits: (on people) writers today don't starve for their art; they are usually married, have children, and have generally exposed themselves to the hazards (complacency among them) of comfortable family life; and professors today are no longer easily distinguished from "bureaucrats," in that they dress more or less the same way, adopt executive techniques and mannerisms, and have begun more to serve the community directly instead of representing (in the traditional fashion) an exclusive world of endeavor and accomplishment detached from and independent of the civic governing bodies.

(On intellectual trends): a noticeable contemporary movement on the part of the country's intellectuals toward the denigration of conflict, of diversity, and of intellectual struggle, whereas in the Thirties, for example, the artist fought for individualism, engaged in a personal rebellion against a complex society. (The answering argument proposes that social conformity is vital in its own way.)

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to be certainly worth reading for the perfection it will provoke. We are grateful to critic Chase for sketching out the "democratic vista" as he sees it.

### The Musical Life

By Irving Kolodin. 266 pp. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. \$4.50.

Reviewed by HERB FISHER

Irving Kolodin has devoted his life to the "musical life." With this book, he aims to have the reader share his infatuation—and he most certainly succeeds.

Kolodin has been a music critic for 26 years. In 1949, he was named

4-B THE BIRMINGHAM (MICH.) ECCENTRIC Dec. 18, 1959

music editor and critic of the "Saturday Review" and is now one of its associate editors. He is an established spokesman, bringing to hear a musical wisdom and an agility of language that make his writings a very pleasure.

"The Musical Life" is a collection of essays in which the writer brings together a number of acute observations about the concert hall and its performing artists, the opera, some leading composers particularly close to Kolodin's heart, and some of the significant people he has known in his pursuit of the "musical life."

THE ESSAYS are abundant with the delightful insights that a man steeped in the tradition, the romance, the intimacies of music can convey. Here we gain a better understanding of the genius of Wagner; the contributions of Mahler, Richard Strauss and Bruno Walter in re-creating Mozart's music as it was intended to be performed; a portrait of George Gershwin and what made him run; the wonderful Arturo Toscanini; and the fabulous Tosti; the special devotion required of those who perform chamber music; how to construct a concert program; observations on clichés (undesirable) and clichés (preferable); and much more.

Kolodin writes with charm, wit and deftness. He is never pedantic, though he does not avoid some of the more esoteric matters. Too secure in his own knowledge ever to be patronizing, pretentious or without humility for his passion, Kolodin gracefully enriches our own musical life.

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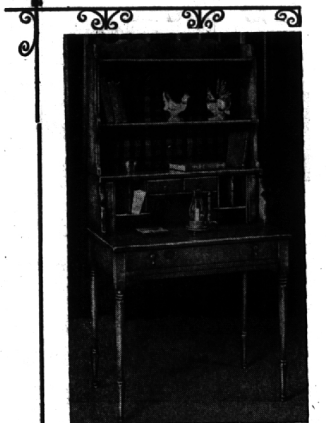
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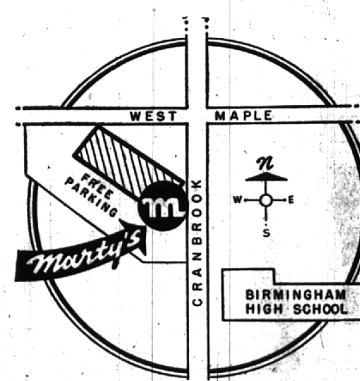
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