

CRITIC'S CORNER

by Larry Fine

Ping-pong anyone? Come hear the Rochester Philharmonic orchestra this season; it seems to be offering several different types of entertainment.

The RPO opened its 1968-69 concert season last Thursday night amidst a rain of 50 or more ping-pong balls which fell from the ceiling of the stage during the first number.

The Haydn Symphony No. 90 in C Major was progressing nicely through the second movement when the shower of ping-pong balls fell, and Maestro Somogyi immediately stalked off stage, followed dutifully by Howard Weiss, the concertmaster. My first reaction to the incident, which surely must be an historic first, was utter amazement, which increased when Somogyi failed to return to the podium.

After about ten minutes of audience applause and backstage coercion, Somogyi returned to the stage amidst a standing ovation. Explaining to the audience, "In the interim I have spoken with Mr. Haydn; he excuses all," and with a shout of "First Movement!" the Haydn symphony was begun again.

This is the first time I have ever heard the RPO in concert. Unable to compare this performance with others by the RPO, let me just record some of my first impressions.

The first half of the concert consisted of the forementioned Haydn symphony (played about one and a half times) and the Debussy "Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faun." This half in general featured the woodwinds above the other sections, which is surprising considering the trouble Somogyi had with the woodwinds last season (or was it vice versa?).

OBOE TROUBLES

Despite a little bit of trouble with the oboe part in the Haydn, the woodwinds came through strong. The flute soloist, Nancy Howe Webster, who also played the solo in the Debussy, had an excellent tone quality.

The string section, a very unhappy looking bunch, was, frankly, much better than I had expected. The tone was uniform, smooth, and expressive. My only criticism is that their expressiveness seemed over-rehearsed, so that that small spark of spontaneity, which should serve to open channels of communication with the conductor, was lost.

Conductor and orchestra were each "doing their thing" and doing it well, but they didn't fit together into a unified effort. In the Debussy, a similar situation was encountered. Technically, the piece was beautifully rendered, but I never got to see that picture of a fawn ambling out into the noon day heat, half asleep and full of dreams. A certain cohesion in the piece itself and among the sections of the orchestra was missing.

The second half of the concert, Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 ("From the New World"), was as alive and communicative as the first half was not. The brasses had their heyday in this piece; especially noteworthy was the control exhibited by the horn and trumpet sections. The orchestra members seemed much more eager to perform than they had been earlier, and the audience felt and responded to this.

As for the maestro, I will have to reserve comment for later. All I can say now is that I admire the way he returned the serve. I wouldn't have blamed him if he had not returned at all.