

MUSIC

Brooklyn, N.Y. "Eagle"

By Miles Kastendieck

'Serpent Heart' Highlights Martha Graham Program at Columbia

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That a dance program should have opened the Second Annual Festival of Contemporary American Music at Columbia University last night is just one more indication of the growing significance of ballet in America. That Martha Graham and her company should have been the exponents of the dance on this occasion is only natural. Two works were performed: "Appalachian Spring" because Aaron Copland's score won the Pulitzer Prize last year, and "Serpent Heart" because it was commissioned by the Alice M. Ditson Fund especially for this opening night. Columbia's McMillin Theater was packed to the doors and many people were turned away, so great was the demand for tickets.

"Appalachian Spring" grows more absorbing on further acquaintance. The fact that the Copland score is so eminently satisfactory became more noticeable last night because through mechanical necessity the orchestra and the performers played on the same level, thus throwing the music into relief. The blending achieved between the music and the dance in a small hall helped the audience to appreciate more fully the personal and the intimate quality that surrounds both arts. It was not difficult to understand why the Copland score was singled out as the most distinguished piece of music for 1945.

"Serpent Heart" finds Martha Graham dipping again far into the past, this time for an analogy with the Greek myth of Jason and Medea. The simple story of the eternal triangle where one possessive love seeks to destroy a favored love of another hangs lightly on the story of Medea's effort to destroy Jason because she was scorned. As

the epitome of malevolence, Martha Graham depicts all the torture of unrequited love and the viperish determination to enact revenge.

The work is fairly clear in outline though often confusing in detail, once again suggesting enlightenment by means of the spoken word. This could readily be supplied by the figure representing the Chorus in this "Greek tragedy." There are stage props the purpose of which is not too easily grasped on first sight except as a means for calisthenic outlet. The costumes of Edythe Gilfond were strikingly effective. The Graham choreography offers nothing particularly new, singularly adept though it is in conveying emotions that well up within the characters.

Samuel Barber wrote the music. For all his skill in rhythm, in style, and in orchestration, the score leaves an idea of background music rather than integrated music. It conveys the emotional meanings of the dance but somehow does not complement them, at least on first hearing.

Four dancers made up the cast of "Serpent Heart." There was Martha Graham as the "One Like Medea," then Erick Hawkins as "One Like Jason," Yuriko as the Daughter of the King, and May O'Donnell as the Chorus. It is hardly necessary to report that they gave a superb exhibition of modern dance. The orchestra was directed by Louis Horst.