

AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XVI

HOWARD HANSON

MARTHA ALTER

THE name of Howard Hanson means American Music to me. For the past fifteen years Dr. Hanson has been an outstanding, if not the most outstanding protagonist in the cause of American music. As promoter-conductor of American music, as educator, and as distinguished composer, he exerts tremendous influence in the musical life of our country.

As promoter of American music Hanson has always been an aggressive chauvinist. This has been a necessary attitude in a country that has only recently learned to take pride in home products. French colors and German textures are slowly being replaced or vitalized by rougher native materials. That such vitalizing native materials exist is no longer debatable. We see evidence all around us which, crude though it may be, tells the important story that a brave new world of American art is in the ascendant. This development is no sudden apparition. It has required the far-sighted vision of men like Hanson to foster and encourage it.

The first year Hanson became Director of the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester, he planned the now famous American Composers' Concerts for the performance of American symphonic music. No longer startling to us today, the founding of this series was news indeed in 1925. The rehearsals and free public performances, originally held in Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School, created a laboratory for visiting and participating composers from all parts of the country. Here they met, traded ideas and criticisms and learned the best or worst of a new score. I attended these rehearsals and concerts for several years and rank them my most valuable lessons in composition and orchestration.

Although the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra which Hanson conducted in the following years plodded through many a questionable manuscript, as often as not it brought to light a new work that could stand on any program of established European music. Patient, spendthrift with time and energy, and really understanding the scores before him, Hanson has by these performances undoubtedly done more to hearten American composers and to further American music than any other individual.



HOWARD HANSON

Sketch by

B. F. DOLBIN

Many of these exploratory and promotional activities coalesced in the annual five-day Festival of American Music which Hanson inaugurated in 1931. This includes band, choral and chamber music, songs, symphonies, as well as stage productions of ballet in the large Eastman Theatre. The American Composers' Concerts (which have now perhaps lost some of their precious simplicity and disregard of public appeal) have moved to the theatre also. More informal symposiums of new music were begun in 1936.

Today other conductors and audiences have turned their ears to contemporary home productions. Indeed it is now the style to pay attention to the American scene. But Hanson, as head of a generously endowed music school, pursuing the cause of a national music with undiminished fervor is still the leader of such groups. Certainly nowhere else has such a one-man battle been waged as on the conductor's stand at Rochester.

As director of the school Hanson has also been a tremendous force in the educational field. He heads innumerable associations of teachers and schools, is chairman of several commissions devoted to standardizing and improving music training, and has been the recipient of more degrees and honors than one can count. His latest and most ingenious venture in education is of course the well known series of radio concerts which he directs under the title of "Milestones in the History of Music."

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To understand Hanson's creative work it is helpful to review his background. He was born in Wahoo, Nebraska, in 1896, of Swedish parents, Hans and Hilma, and is only one generation removed from Sweden. His grandparents moved to the United States in the seventies and settled in eastern Nebraska. Hanson grew up in a small Lutheran community and received his first musical training from his mother, who has constantly remained by his side, a source of spiritual comfort and inspiration.

Hanson's musical career makes a perfect success story. He studied at Luther College in Wahoo, was graduated from the Institute of Musical Art in New York and from Northwestern University, and then at the age of twenty became a member of the faculty of the College of the Pacific, California. In 1919 he was made Dean of the Conservatory of Fine Arts of that college. Winning the Prix de Rome in 1921, he lived in Italy for three years as fellow of the American Academy. In Rome he composed one of his most popular and important works, the *Symphony Number 1 (Nordic)*, a powerful choral work, *The Lament for Beowulf*, the *String Quartet in One Movement*, Opus 23, commissioned by Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the symphonic poems, *North and West* and *Lux Aeterna*.

He was by this time well launched as a conductor and directed the premiere of the *Nordic* with the Augusteo Orchestra in Rome. In 1924 he returned to America to become director of the Eastman School.

The list of Hanson's compositions is impressive. They have been performed by the major orchestras and choral organizations of this country and by many orchestras in Europe. He has written three symphonies, several symphonic poems, shorter compositions, major choral works, and a three-act opera, *Merry Mount*, this latter to a libretto by Richard Stokes, on a commission from the Metropolitan Opera Company. Hanson is now at work on a fourth symphony which, according to rumor, is similar in style to the *Nordic* and also to the third.

What is the style of Hanson? To attempt to define anyone's style these days is to solicit trouble, especially when the composer is an American, for then one can expect fairly eclectic styles or odd mixtures of influences — jazz, or fiddler's tunes or Indian melodies, or Schönbergian "atonality." Our national musical style is still obviously in the process of formation in our wide-open spaces and our crowded cities. Hanson's style is no exception. Nebraska and Sweden assume a spiritual affinity in his music. There is an outdoor breadth and dignity, a tonal architecture ranging from savage intensity to blue-eyed simplicity that at once creates a Nordic-American impression. More specifically the Nordic flavor in much of Hanson's music is due to certain technical peculiarities of melody and harmony applied to this breadth and sweep of sound. The plainness of the modal effect in the opening bars of *Merry Mount* simultaneously suggests the Gregorian chant which he heard in Rome, the austerity of the Lutheran hymns of his boyhood, and the Scandinavian folk flavor which is in his blood. Then again, a melody like that of the second theme from the first movement of *Symphony Number 2 (Romantic)*, lush and heavy with more sophisticated harmonies, has lost the simpler modal contours and succumbed to something recognizably American. It is, to be sure, too sentimental for some tastes. Hanson's melodies have the long span of the romantic composer, they are on the whole diatonic, they sing quite unashamedly. For this reason more than any other, his music has at times been called "conservative." One can even remember a tune after hearing Hanson's music, which cannot be said of many contemporary works. Is it not possible, however, that some of the "atonal" music written today is already a slave to stereotyped formulae? Young though an idiom may be, it can very easily find its own clichés. Virility and communication of musical ideas seem important to me, and these are present in Hanson's music.

Harmonically, Hanson has a truly personal technic. Indeed too many of his pupils sound like diluted second editions of him. The higher dominant dissonances, which have been exploited by the late nineteenth century German school and the French impressionists, in Hanson take on a personal color. Frequently they are used with notes omitted and are spread in widely spaced positions throughout the orchestral texture. He is also fond of chords erected in perfect fourths and fifths, which, familiar enough in Debussy, at Hanson's touch, assume a barbaric strength and flavor. *The Lament for Beowulf* particularly comes to mind. It has a stark primitive beauty missing in some of his later works. By the third symphony, his harmonic style seems to have been considerably simplified, with an over-strong suggestion of Sibelius. In Hanson the influence of renaissance modes and their adaptation to modern harmonic style results in Scandinavian simplicity, rather than in nostalgic vagueness as in Fauré and Debussy. In other words, Hanson, while no innovator, has created a personal music out of already existing materials.

He himself has never been interested in jazz rhythms, although he has approved of jazz as a healthy stimulant for others. Obviously the eccentricities of jazz meter and melody do not fit into his Nordic mood.

Hanson is a master of the large modern orchestra and of the combination of orchestra and chorus. If anything, he over-exploits the rich possibilities of the orchestra. Some sections of *Pan and the Priest* seem blatant in their brassy and percussive noise and there is one cymbal crash in the *Allegro* theme of the first movement of the *Romantic* symphony that is surely intended to end all cymbal crashes. Yet this upheaval of sound cannot be dismissed as mere vulgar noise, it is too purposeful; in the one case it is Pan struggling with the Priest, in the other, the fury of an intensely passionate mood.

There is an ever-present conflict in Hanson's music between the sacred and the secular. The Puritan strain comes into its own in the choral sections of *Merry Mount*, which is in reality a choral-opera. (The treatment of the chorus as an integral part of the complete ensemble is masterful.) Here Hanson has written some of his finest "sacred" music, as unworldly as his secular moods are blatant and over-sensuous, but yet vigorously arresting. The material in his music is always spun out in the manner of a nineteenth century romantic, or a twentieth century Sibelius. But what it lacks in conciseness it gains in broader intensity. Hanson's music possesses definitely the grand manner.

THE MUSIC OF HOWARD HANSON

ORCHESTRAL WORKS

DATE		PUBLISHER
1916	Symphonic Prelude - - - - -	Manuscript
1917	Symphonic Legend - - - - -	Manuscript
1919	Symphonic Rhapsody - - - - -	Manuscript
1920	Symphonic Poem, "Before the Dawn" - - - - -	Manuscript
1920	Symphonic Poem "Exaltation," with piano obbligato - - - - -	Manuscript
1922	Symphony Number 1 in E Minor, "Nordic" - - - - -	C. C. Birchard & Co.
1923	Symphonic Poem, "North and West," with choral obbligato - - - - -	Manuscript
1923	Symphonic Poem, "Lux Aeterna," with viola obbligato - - - - -	G. Schirmer, Inc.
1926	Symphonic Poem, "Pan and the Priest," with piano obbligato - - - - -	C. C. Birchard & Co.
1926	Concerto, Organ and Orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Symphony Number 2, "Romantic" - - - - -	C. C. Birchard & Co.
1937	Symphony Number 3 - - - - -	Manuscript
1938	Suite from the Opera, "Merry Mount" - - - - -	Harms, Inc.
1939	Fantasy, for String Orchestra (based on String Quartet) - - - - -	Manuscript

CHORAL WORKS

1925	The Lament for Beowulf, for mixed chorus and orchestra - - - - -	C. C. Birchard & Co.
1927	Heroic Elegy, orchestra, mixed chorus—without words - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	Songs from "Drum Taps" (after Walt Whitman), for mixed chorus, baritone solo, and orchestra - - - - -	Vocal score published by J. Fischer & Bro.
1938	Hymn for the Pioneers, for male voices - - - - -	J. Fischer & Bro.
1937	Transcription of Palestrina's "Pope Marcellus Mass" (Kyrie, Gloria and Credo) for Mixed Chorus and Large Orchestra - - - - -	Vocal score published by J. Fischer & Bro.

STAGE WORKS

1919	California Forest Play of 1920, for solo voices, mixed chorus, ballet and orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript
1933	"Merry Mount," opera in three acts (libretto by Richard L. Stokes)	Harms, Inc.

CHAMBER MUSIC

1916	Quintet in F Minor, for piano and string quartet - - - - -	Manuscript
1917	Concerto da Camera, for piano and string quartet - - - - -	Manuscript
1923	String Quartet - - - - -	C. C. Birchard & Co.

PIANO

1915	Prelude and Double Concert Fugue for two pianos - - - - -	Manuscript
1918	Four Poems for Piano "Peace" "Joy" "Yearning" "Desire" - - - - -	Manuscript
1919	Sonata in A minor - - - - -	Manuscript
1919	Three Miniatures, "Reminiscence" "Lullaby" "Longing" - - - - -	Composers' Music Corp. (Carl Fischer)
1918	Scandinavian Suite, "Vermeland" "Elegy" - - - - -	Manuscript
	"Clog Dance" from Suite - - - - -	Composers' Music Corp.
1920	Three Etudes "Rhythmic Etude" "Melodic Etude" "Idyllic Poem" - - - - -	Manuscript
1920	Two Yule-tide Pieces, "Impromptu" "March Carillon" - - - - -	Theodore Presser
1920	Symphonic Poem, "Exaltation," for solo piano and orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript

ORGAN

	"Vermeland" from Scandinavian Suite - - - - -	White-Smith Publishing Co.
	Concerto for Organ and Orchestra, (based on themes of "North and West") - - - - -	Manuscript

SONGS

1915	Three Songs for High Voice, "To Music" "Remembering" "Dawn" - - - - -	Manuscript
1915	Three Songs from Walt Whitman for Voice and Orchestra, "The Untold Want" "Portals" "Joy! Shipmate—Joy!" - - - - -	Manuscript
1916	"Schaefer's Sonntagslied" (Uhland) - - - - -	Manuscript
1916	Two Songs from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, "The Worldly Hope" "Wake" - - - - -	Manuscript
1918	"Exaltation" - - - - -	Manuscript
1919	Three Swedish Folk Songs, "Domaredansen" "Gladjen's blomster" "Kristallen den fina" - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Three Songs for Children, "March" "The Coming of Spring" "The Night Will Never Stay" - - - - -	Manuscript