

## IMPRESSIONISTS IN AMERICA

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“IMPRESSIONISM” and “impressionistic” in relation to music are terms used today without question though we have probably not been challenged to define them. In fact, we use illustration rather than definition and speak glibly of Beethoven’s classicism, Schumann’s romanticism and Debussy’s impressionism, forgetting that Beethoven enclosed the germs of romanticism, Schumann those of impressionism, while Debussy gives promise of a new futurism, a realism, or a tendency perhaps still to be named.

Impressionism, the “modern” problem a quarter of a century ago, has become a crystallized form with obvious earmarks. The name, a term of derision attached to that exhibition in 1874 at which Claude Monet showed the picture *Impression: soleil levant*, was applied to painting whose aim was to substitute an emotion as the primary effect of a definite cause, to reproduce the emotion on canvas, rather than the cause itself. In literature Verlaine, Beaudelaire and Maeterlinck expressed the new movement through an atmosphere of mystery, of half expressed suggestions, of subtlety, which the reader’s mind clothed with meaning on an emotional reflex.

Psychologically, musicians felt the same influences, which crystallized in Debussy, who has become the Arch-Impressionist in music. Though the germ of impressionism was working in Chabrier, Fauré, Chausson, etc., Debussy is one of the first to whom the name was given. Rameau’s *La Poule* and Couperin’s *Les Petits Moulins à Vent*, are impressionistic. Perhaps Debussy unconsciously felt this quality when he advised his contemporaries to reclaim their inheritance from the eighteenth century French composers rather than to engraft German romanticism or Wagnerianism on French music. The im-

pressionistic composer tries to suggest an image existing in his own mind. The image may be a thought, an emotion, a definite object, a poem, a picture, a tree, the grandeur of the mountains. Impressionistic music reproduces not things but the emotion caused by them.



Charles Martin Loeffler is the bridge between French impressionism and American. He is not an imitator of Debussy as has so often been charged, but he reacted to the same causes which resulted in impressionism in Debussy.

Each man is the sum of his experiences. To Loeffler's early life can be traced definite trends in his music: his French birth; his early childhood in Russia; later years in Hungary where he heard Gypsy music; his violin study in Berlin with Joachim and the return to his native country drawn there by his natural affinity for things French. In Paris he drank at the same fount as Debussy. It was the day of Monet, Pissaro, Sisley, Henri Regnier, Verlaine, Pierre Louys and Mallarmé.

Settling in Boston he found himself among German musicians, who played German music and taught German methods. His was a new voice, and what Loeffler had assimilated in Europe he reproduced in music he wrote here, always retaining a certain quality best expressed as impressionistic. He was not, of course, understood in the *milieu* in which he lived his professional life. Be it to his credit that he has been a man to whom compromise was unknown. He has remained apart, giving back musically the impressions of a highly sensitized, refined, fastidious nature, a cultivated mind and meticulous craftsmanship.

In 1895, Philip Hale wrote that Loeffler "believes in tonal impressions rather than in thematic development," that he "has the delicate sentiment, the curiosity of the hunter after nuances, the love of the macabre, the cool fire that consumes and is more deadly than fierce, panting flame." For this, with many other impressionists, he was called decadent. He did not grow to be an impressionist, he was one by nature and he shows it in his earliest songs. How isolated he was twenty-five years ago! How

isolated he still is! Loeffler writes as he feels, apparently indifferent to criticism, paralleling in music the symbolist movement, or reflecting his study of Gregorian plain-song, ranging for his subjects from Virgil to Yeats.

He is a prolific composer, but he rarely duplicates a type. There are four rather austere songs with piano and viola; the lovely Rhapsodies, *L'Etang* and *La Cornemuse* for oboe, viola and piano, melancholy in mood and impressionistic in treatment; *La Mort de Tintagiles*, reflecting through the spectrum of his own personality Maeterlinck's expression of youth and death; his four English songs, among them *To Helen*; the two Yeats songs, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, a remarkable blend of Irish fantasy and French impressionism; his outstandingly great score *The Pagan Poem*, after an eclogue of Virgil, rich in fancy, in harmonic and mood impressionism; his *Music for Four Stringed Instruments*, austere and beautiful, reflecting César Franck rather than the later impressionists; *Memories of My Childhood*; a poem for modern orchestra; *Hora Mystica*, an unpublished symphony for orchestra and men's voices, a mood of religious meditation and adoration of nature in which Loeffler makes remarkable use of Gregorian melodies, as he has also done in his *Canticle to St. Francis*.



In John Alden Carpenter we have the first native impressionist. His earliest songs published in 1912, though not imitations of Debussy, were frankly influenced by the French school.

He reflects culture in its fine sense. Everything he has published is mature. He successfully reproduces the mood of the poets whose verses he has set. His very choice of texts shows his characteristic tendencies—Verlaine, Yeats, Lanier, Tagore, Barnes, Sassoon, and Wilde. His unusual gift for translating each word of a poem into its exact musical counterpart is pure impressionism. Of all the composers who "set" Tagore, no one caught the spirit of the *Gitanjali* more convincingly than Carpenter in *The Sleep that Flits on Baby's Eyes*,

and *When I Bring to You Colored Toys*. In these and in the Chinese tone-poems, *Water Colors*, he has suggested rather than expressed orientalism. In *Adventures in a Perambulator* and the *Concertino*, however, we see signs of a new American impressionism. The orchestral suite describing the sensations and emotions of a baby wheeled about by its nurse is delicately humorous. The titles show an awakening desire in Carpenter to express American life:—*En Voiture, The Policeman, The Hurdy-Gurdy, The Lake (Michigan), Dogs and Dreams*.

The syncopated rhythms, tied notes and characteristic melodies of the *Concertino* label it indelibly *Made in America*. Carpenter calls it "a light-hearted conversation between piano and orchestra . . . mostly of rhythms, American, Oriental and otherwise." With the same skill of workmanship and native politeness one finds in the songs, he introduces interesting cross rhythms, 5/8 measures, a typical waltz, but with a new treatment that is less of France and more of this country.

In the jazz pantomime, *Krazy Kat*, Carpenter displays a humor one would hardly expect from the composer of *Looking-glass River* or *The Day is No More*. Here he comes out vulgarly, we were about to say, but no, even in this amusing caricature, with every desire to be democratic and commonplace, Carpenter still is the gentleman in handling accompanying figures and in individual harmonic twists and forms. But his jazz is impressionistic and *Krazy Kat*, frankly experimental, falls in line with a newly developed style which holds a mirror, as it were, up to American life and shows us to ourselves, rather pitilessly revealing our crudities, our humor, frailties and independence. Is not this perhaps a new kind of impressionism, an expressionism or realism which is the American parallel of the atonal and polytonal European era that came as a protest against the impressionism of Debussy's imitators?

In *Skyscrapers* where music and choreography are Siamese twins, we find Carpenter at the acme of this new American realism. The suave, elegant gentleman is lost temporarily but not forever. Carpenter has passed through interesting metamorphoses out of which a phase of American composition is slowly evolving with its own accent and grammar.

Emerson Whithorne also has developed an American expression through impressionistic methods. In his earlier piano works such as *The Rain*, *La Nuit* and *The Aeroplane* we find impressionism that grew out of European associations. Next came *New York Days and Nights*, successful musical impressions of Times Square, Chinatown, the ferry boat, Greenwich Village, and the chimes of St. Patrick's. With this Opus 40, Whithorne graduated from European tutelage and added a block in the foundation of the skyscraper of American composition, which is slowly but surely being erected.

In the ballet, *Sooner and Later*, written in collaboration with Miss Irene Lewisohn and produced a year before *Skyscrapers*, one finds similar ideas and methods, although very differently treated. The result, like Carpenter's, is of an American subject and idiom modeled on the modern European ballet, technic and orchestration.

Whithorne's *Saturday's Child* is American and impressionistic. Its Americanism does not reside alone in the fact that the verses are by a Negro poet, Countee Cullen. It is as different in feeling from what is European as coming up the harbor in view of the the New York skyline is different from arriving in Cherbourg.



Charles Tomlinson Griffes stands apart from these others because, dying in 1920, he was unable to step from his impressionistic period into a further development. From conversation with him, we know that his tendency was towards absolute music. In his last composition, the *Piano Sonata*, he attained this end in an idiom almost austere. He was a student, an experimenter, a reticent person of extreme earnestness, sincerity and modesty, who worked without regard for the public.

Griffes studied first in Elmira, with a fine, English musician, Mary S. Broughton, later in Berlin, where he was steeped in German romanticism, thus strengthening a foundation of musicianship laid along classical lines. His first German songs such as *By a Lonely Forest Pathway* show this influence.

The casual hearing of a piece of music completely changed Griffes' tendencies. In his pension he heard an unfamiliar composition which so strongly appealed to him that he went to the pianist's door to ask its name. It was Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* and Rudolph Ganz was the pianist. This discovery was the turning point in Griffes' career. Norman Peterkin in the *Chesterian*, has told us what it meant to him. "Like many of the young composers the world over, he was influenced by and temperamentally attracted to the methods and innovations of Debussy and Ravel and later to some of the advanced Russians. However, he was never enslaved by these influences, but was able to extract from them precisely those elements he needed to set free and express his own personality." A new Griffes appeared in the two Oscar Wilde songs, *La Fuite de la Lune* and *Symphony in Yellow*.

The next three works bring forward the piano composer, the most important in America after MacDowell, who had treated American subjects and landscapes from the romantic viewpoint. Now we find Griffes, the impressionist, reflecting in *Three Tone Pictures*, the lake at evening, the night winds and the vale of dreams. These are French in atmosphere and in delicacy, but in addition there is the sure hand of a creator, not an imitator, in search of "the new, the great unfound." His love for Oriental folk-lore, for the mystic beauty and imaginative poetic quality of Fiona MacLeod's poems is reflected in his work. *The Lament of Ian the Proud*, *The Rose of the Night*, *Thy Dark Eyes to Mine*, and the *Roman Sketches* are examples of pure impressionism with individual sweep and power.

*The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan* for orchestra, his *Poem for Flute and Orchestra*, his string quartet sketches based on Indian themes, and his *Piano Sonata* all show a great promise broken by an untimely death. In less than forty compositions, Griffes left an indelible mark on American music.

Loeffler, Carpenter, Griffes and Whithorne—could four composers be less alike in final results? Yet through all their work runs the current of an impressionism which, in the history of American music, will doubtless link their names as defining a twentieth century tendency in the United States.