



WILLIAM SCHUMAN

a drawing by

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YOUNG AMERICAN - WILLIAM SCHUMAN

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WILLIAM SCHUMAN's music belongs to that cheerful category of compositions which are better listened to than discussed. But recent performances of the *Third Symphony* by Koussevitzky in Boston and New York have raised several points of interest which are really worth talking about.

This work marks a new stage in the composer's growth. It is free of those tender faults we have come to know in his music – faults which grew out of being too much in love with his own musical product to permit an objective approach. Schuman's progress could in fact best be measured by looking at the music which was cut out of the work before performance.

In general, Schuman rides to glory in two ways. The first is an unbounded conviction, which, aided by a solid and rapidly growing technic, maintains a clarity and sculpturesque quality no matter how complex the sound. However slight or arbitrary the material may appear on paper, by virtue of this conviction it acquires great significance the moment it is played. (Incidentally, a discussion of so-called "arbitrary" or "synthetic" musical material is badly needed to throw light on such phenomena.) The second is an energetic drive, a vigor of propulsion which seizes the listener by the hair, whirls him through space, and sets him down at will. This involves a buoyancy and a lust-for-life which I find (at the risk of being called old-fashioned and artificially nationalistic) wholly American. To help me make my point I wish I could somehow perform the *American Festival Overture* on these pages for each reader, to prove that Young America exists, acts, and speaks in this music.

The happiest feature of Schuman's work is that its weaknesses arise directly from these healthy qualities. And so I take strong issue with the rather frequent criticism that Schuman's music is only inferior Harris, combined with inferior Hindemith, touched up more recently with inferior Copland, and even Sibelius as some say. Remarks like these are seldom thought out, they never come from a musician who has carefully heard

and really understood the music. If there be resemblances, well and good; a composer's output is the sum of all his experience, musical or otherwise; yet a composer with more original creative spirit than Schuman's is rare indeed.

The real faults lie elsewhere. The works are conceived in such passion, developed with such energy, and finished with such conviction as inevitably to engender both naïveté and unevenness. Let us take the second fault first. Sometimes it is manifested in the juxtaposition of inferior with other material so exciting that the first seems bad by comparison. This use of what is inferior may follow the excitement of developing similar preceding material; in his rush forward the composer fails to realize that it does not measure up to the standards already set and relies instead on the continued drive itself to make the passage come off. Sometimes this works. More often it does not.

Sometimes too, Schuman is long-winded, he simply does not know where to stop. (This is allied with the old fault, beautifully absent in the *Third Symphony*, of not knowing when to start moving.) Too much love and too much conviction dull his sense of proportion. The moment the maximum is reached in developing a musical emotion-pattern, any continuation of it becomes the residuum, and therefore bad. That maximum is an arbitrary thing, and probably varies with each listener. But we can arrive at a consensus of opinion about such ephemeral matters only through the statements of people interested enough to grapple constructively with the music.

Of course there is the example of Schubert whose music is still fresh and exciting though overlong and repetitious. "An hour and a quarter," said someone speaking of the *Octet*, "and not a minute too short." But Schuman's case is of another sort; it is not necessarily the material that is overworked, but the spirit of the music — that is, the emotion-patterns. This results in what some call "Plauderei," a rather ignoble word to bestow on music so sincerely written. Yet a few examples of what was cut from the *Third Symphony* before performance would almost justify that word; and the fact that such material was cut indicates the decline of this unfortunate tendency.

The same good news can be reported of Schuman's other fallibility — his naïveté. The use of fourths, for example, in some of the earlier pieces like the *Prologue*, or the *Second Symphony*, had become a fetish. Whole pages were built up of pyramids of fourths which were then knocked down

in succeeding pages by new blocks of fourths, so that almost all meaning in their use disappeared for the listener. If one had asked Schuman why he persisted so, he would have answered, "I love fourths." But now the *Second Symphony* has been withdrawn; and the errors of the *Prologue* have never been repeated. There are many such mistakes, all characteristic; student-like uses of ostinati, augmentations, diminutions, and other devices, the abuse of which is unmusical, almost ludicrous. Examples in kind literally cram several tedious pages in the *Piano Concerto*. But, now too, the *Piano Concerto* has been withdrawn.

Almost as exciting as hearing the music itself is to observe how Schuman's progress is manifested in the *Third Symphony* – a progress alive, radiant, optimistic. It is, in fact, all one piece – his development and his music – a pattern of health and youth, and work, and hope.