

POPULAR MUSIC—AN INVASION: 1923-1933

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I SHOULD like, in this survey, to consider popular music of the decade from the viewpoint of an analysis and an interpretation of a somewhat unprecedented situation. This situation is such as to impose a various definition upon the term itself: in "popular music" I include what the public actively likes, and what is written in a "popular" idiom, regardless of the public's immediate reaction. I do not hope to be complete or entirely accurate; the field is vast, and not all of it by any means is cogent for the purposes of my survey. I dip in with the boldness of an outsider, making my selection as I go. I think the main points are here.

Some important items of the last ten years:

1922: *Easy Pickin's* from "Good Morning Dearie" (Jerome Kern); the first Grand Street Follies.

Paul Hindemith wrote, in 1922, his suite of that name, with its "Shimmy" and "Foxtrot." The Rhapsody in Blue appeared in '23 at a Whiteman concert in New York. London heard Dick Rogers' overture to "One Damned Thing After Another" early in '27.

1923: Gershwin's *I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise* from "George White's Scandals;" the New York boards displayed also Youman's early "Lollipop," "Charlot's Revue," Con Conrad's "Greenwich Village Follies" (I think this is the year for *Kitten on the Keys*), and the "Ziegfeld Follies," with Herbert-Friml-Stamper music. 1924: the first "Garrick Gaieties."

Jazz first appears for ordinary concertgoers in Paris, in programs including Bach, at the two-piano recitals of Wiener and Doucet, late in the fall of '25.

1925-'26: Youman's smash hit, "No No Nanette" (*Tea for Two*); *Here in My Arms* from Rogers' "Dearest Enemy." 1926-27, in Paris: "Olive chez les Nègres" (Wiener), Spinnelly's "Diable" (Auric); in Berlin, "Was Sie Wollen," with Holländer's tunes, and Reinhardt's "Mannequins," with Mischa Spoliansky "intimately" at a piano; in New York, *Varsity Drag* from "Good News" (Henderson), and "Hit the Deck" (Youmans), in which Dorothy Fields transformed *Hallelujah* into a tune of vigorous brilliance by the simple expedient of changing the tempo. Functioning radio had better be historically placed at 1924, functioning talkies during the season 1927-'28, although indentifiable products of both existed before those years. 1928: "Broadway Melody," first musical talkie; "Show-Boat," Kern's best, which resolves into *Can't Help Lovin' That Ol' Man River*; *Moanin' Low*, from the "Little Show;" "Fine and Dandy" (Kay Swift); *I Must Have That Man* and *I Can't Give You Anything but Love*, from the "Blackbirds" (McHugh).

"Jonny Spielt Auf" was played in Leipzig in '27. Baden-Baden got the first, tabloid edition of Weill's "Mahagonny" in '25, and Leipzig heard the completed opera, together with a riot on the part of the audience, in '30; the "Dreigroschenoper" stampeded all Germany early in '27; Darmstadt got "Neues vom Tage" in September, '29; and Antheil's "Transatlantic" was performed in Frankfort in '30.

"Three's a Crowd" arrives in New York in '30 (Schwartz-Duke-Green music); also the German films "Zwei Herzen" and "Der Blaue Engel." 1931 sees "The Band Wagon" (Schwartz) in New York, and Coward's "Bitter-Sweet" in London. 1932 gets "Of Thee I Sing," "Face The Music," "The Cat and the Fiddle," and the film "Love Me Tonight," composed respectively by Gershwin, Berlin, Kern, and Rogers; all of them have scores which as a whole are better than their individual tunes.

There are the popular dances:

The shimmy and the foxtrot open the era in our dance-halls; then the dashing Charleston, followed by the feebler black-bottom. The Parisians remained true to the tango, but introduced the Spanish paso doble and the sensual Martiniquais biguine. There is still an occasional stray waltz, quick and

lively in Vienna, drearily slow in New York, which has in the meantime developed a tomato-catsup version of the Havanese and Mexican rumba, and the speedy Lindy-hop. England and Italy are somewhere in the picture, with modifications of the others (I have seen the tarantella danced upon the sophisticated floors of the Quirinetta cafe in Rome). Berlin will probably do a "slow-fox" until the revolution comes.

And the international song hits: They are not many, and they are not good. You can make a choice among *Yes, We Have No Bananas*, *Ich Küsse Deine Hand Madame*, *Prenez-moi Mes Allumettes*, *My Yiddische Mamma*, *Schöner Gigolo*, *The Man I Love*, and *Mon Pays est Paris*. All are easily assimilated tunes, making no history (unless it be one on sales receipts)—engaging, forgotten airs.



It is the collection of italicized sentences in this kaleidoscope which is the signal for my special interest. It indicates why the subject of popular music differs in this decade from all others; for the first time, serious composers turn their attention to the field, purposefully, with an "esthetic" in mind. This can be stated more fancily; you can say that popular music invaded the concert-hall. The ten years have seen a rise to glory, and, it is already evident, a fall from grace. I mean jazz, but not only jazz. Antheil, for instance, thought to find new roots in the earlier ragtime; Kurt Weill too, to a degree, and more specifically in the valiantly sentimental ballads of the music-halls. If Hindemith cannot be said to have founded all alone the *Gebrauchsmusik* movement, he surely contributed some of its bulkiest examples; and for a time he operated a school for jazz in Frankfort. Krenek, Gruenberg, Copland, hoped for jazz. Milhaud, Auric, Poulenc, had derived a tradition of boulevard-music ready-made from Satie; Sauguet has used it to better advantage than they; he leaves it more alone, more itself. . . There is the other side of the picture: George Gershwin, a popular composer, writing what is to a Stadium-full of people important concert-music, and writing it to the satisfaction of Mr. Damrosch, Mr. Koussevitzky, and the committee of the I.S.C.M.

And, as if there were not confusion enough, the serious composer Vladimir Dukelsky becomes at times Vernon Duke for Broadway consumption (neatly reversing the usual procedure whereby plain Maggie Smith becomes Maria Panorama for Carnegie Hall's sake).

The reasons for so magnificently disarrayed a picture are not hard to find. Europe delivered a musical blast with the *Sacre* in May, 1913. Then came the war. The *Sacre* started many things in music, and so can be taken as cause; it was of course also effect; and is most important as symptom. A neo-primitivism, which had been apparent in the sculpture of Gaudier-Brzeska, in the vogue for African-Negro masks, the fauve paintings of Picasso, and in Marinetti's noise-making, was unleashed almost full-grown into music. Stravinsky proceeded to *Noces* and the two ragtimes; and then, disconcertingly, to the *Symphonies* and the *Octuor*; turning a corner in his own development (he has repeated this procedure ever since), he left behind him, on a tangent, a whole school of incipient neo-primitives. The germ persisted, without benefit of Stravinsky; nourished partly upon resentment, partly upon a sound intuition. A loss of "constant" values, an artistic inferiority-complex, an upheaval in the technical body of music, and the abandon and excitement of the years succeeding the war—these tell the story; a Continent of half-bitter, half adventurous composers began to deny, and to substitute. A wave of infantilism resulted. We find the disciples of the Machine, certain composers managing to believe in a noise-esthetic long enough to write a single composition in the field. We find a dependence upon folk-elements out-doing anything existing before along that line. And everywhere we find a search for materials, resources, where they had never been sought, where music seemed fresh. A new deification—of the savage, the child, the peasant, the artless music-maker—had set in. Theories arrived, to explain and to bolster. The generation was in full flight from "culture," high-mindedness, and civilized music; curiously in almost polar opposition to the ideals, at this point, of Stravinsky, its first patron-saint. (I exclude purposely the hermetic ingrown hyper-individualism of

the Schönberg school.) And so popular music, in particular American jazz, became for a time an object of worship.

America (Wyndham Lewis calls us the "baby of Europe") was stirring at this moment in an embryonic art-consciousness. We began to hear, and we have not finished hearing, all the claims and demands for an indigenous music. As usual, we were several years late with the idea; we seem unable to have even our own authentic chauvinism. Looking feverishly about for a "passport," some of us tried negro-spirituals, some the residue of Indian folk-music (yes, baby America had borrowed even its methodology from infantilistic Europe). What more natural than that the most astute of us should alight upon jazz? Here was something new, ours, unused, full of vitality (it turned out to be nothing more than a charming exuberance)—and the great American symphony had yet to be written! So some of us took the plunge, and a host of vanguard critics did the cheering. Nobody stopped to realize that an idiom creates itself, or goes unborn; and that the very avidity with which we dogged an "American culture" throttled its chances for existence. All that can ever be done, obviously, is to hope and pray for great men; lacking them, the most elaborately arranged synthesis of cultural heritages and roots is like an empty house.

Here, too, as I say, Europe was a step ahead. It leapt upon our jazz-orchestras and music with an almost indecent haste, and proceeded to manufacture bad copies of both—silly, crass imitations. (Is there any need now to discuss Krenek's "Jonny," that hefty coal which our own Metropolitan brought to Newcastle? Aside from its composer's naive grandiosities of conception—"Jonny" is East-vs-West-modern; "Orest" is North-vs-South-ancient; his new one "Karl der Grosse" will be medieval, with I am not sure which compass-signs—"Jonny" proved to be extravagant and poor theatre, and meandering, decentralized jazz, far from its source, and showing it.) *Gebrauchsmusik* is a more respectable offshoot; this German child of an American popularism on one side and a Russian Communism on the other, postulates a utilitarian music. There are sound values to the theory (if it is always kept in mind that such a theory can provide for the tributaries to a trend, but

never for the trend itself), and it is one case where the theory can precede the music. At best, *Gebrauchsmusik* is a system of popular education, through the performance of music itself—in places and upon occasions where it cannot be escaped. There is no reason why new “functional” music played in schools, beergardens, over the radio, in the talkies, should not be good music. Yet *Gebrauchsmusik* is apparently doomed. Once the theory was formed, look at the style of music it brought forth! Music which abjectly copied what the mob had *already learned* to like. Instead of educating, it pandered; when it didn't, as in the case of Gronostay, and some of Hindemith, it simply never got across. Success has crowned Kurt Weill, with his super-bourgeois ditties (stilted *Otchi Tchornayas* and *Road-to-Mandalays*) harmonized with a love of distortion and dissonance truly academic; the “sonx” go over, the “modernisms” get sunk. This is real decadence: the dissolution of a one-time genuine article, regurgitated upon an innocent public, ready, perhaps even ripe to learn.

Among our own products of the jazz-cult, Copland's *Piano Concerto* gives away the sad secret. It is the best work I know in the genre; even so it barely skirts the difficulties of being real jazz while retaining a certain level of intellectual content. More important, it shows plainly that jazz as an esthetic resembles very much the Machine; a single work or two of real but isolated value, and the thing has been said completely. . . Incidentally, I am curious to know why we haven't had more serious compositions in the jazz dance-forms; dance-suites. Here is the inevitable form, one would think: it has precedent (the French and English Suites of Bach), and it saves the composer the embarrassment of stretching to a large frame matter which lacks the necessary plasticity, but which can be very successful when correctly dimensioned. With so much theorizing, how was it missed?

This reaching down has had its counterpart in a reaching up. In certain popular composers (I have mentioned Gershwin) a new pretentiousness appears. The case of Gershwin has been handled, I think, with expertness by B. H. Haggin in a recent issue of the *Nation*; and I can only repeat after him that the

value of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, *The American in Paris*, etc., is the value of the delightful melodies these works contain, strung in a row. . . There has also appeared a tendency among composers doing whole shows, to write in a kind of "continuum" to dialog scenes (undoubtedly the effect of the talkies) and hoping to conceal in a *pianissimo* background-fabric a lamentably mediocre, false and sloppy music.

But on the whole, popular music (I now use the term literally) has resisted wonderfully the "invasions" of serious and popular composers. One grows to believe in the real worth, wherever it may be in the scale of values, of the untinkered Tin-Pan-Alley "number;" so stubbornly does it stick to its guns, and so cautiously does it take on new aspects. Our musical-comedy melodies still grimly turn out a thirty-two-measure chorus. There is a general buzz of comment when the "verse" is omitted from *I'm Bidin' My Time*; and a seven-measure phrase invented by Duke becomes sheer iconoclasm. The material is still predominantly Yiddish, with strains of negro and Celt; our harmonies, of the Raff-Massenet order, have acquired some sevenths and one or two ninths for "special effects," from the impressionists; and our danciness of rhythm, characteristically American, retains its capacity to shuffle up the accents and still make them come out to the good old four-four. The jazz orchestra, once graduated from the cornet-piano-traps stage, changes very little; a "hot" orchestration today is not very different from what it was ten years ago; deriving, did it but know it, from the *Sacre's* "Evocation des Ancêtres." (Of all the jazz orchestrations of the last ten years, commend me to Russell Bennett's variations on *I've Got Rhythm*, from "Girl Crazy;" this is surely the high-water mark of a highly-developed, perfectly mature craft.) The changes are few and rare. And it is just as well. Serious music might even learn a lesson from this persistently "low" art, in the matter of discovering one's place, and respecting it.