

AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XXV

Marc Blitzstein

HENRY BRANT

THE greater part of Marc Blitzstein's representative work, the musical-dramatic work that reflects his characteristic style and viewpoint, has been composed since 1932. Before that time his music, on the technical side, shows a marked sympathy for the neo-classic methods which attracted so many composers during the 1920's – procedures which involve the use of musical material derived from a simplification and sharpening of selected elements of eighteenth century styles.

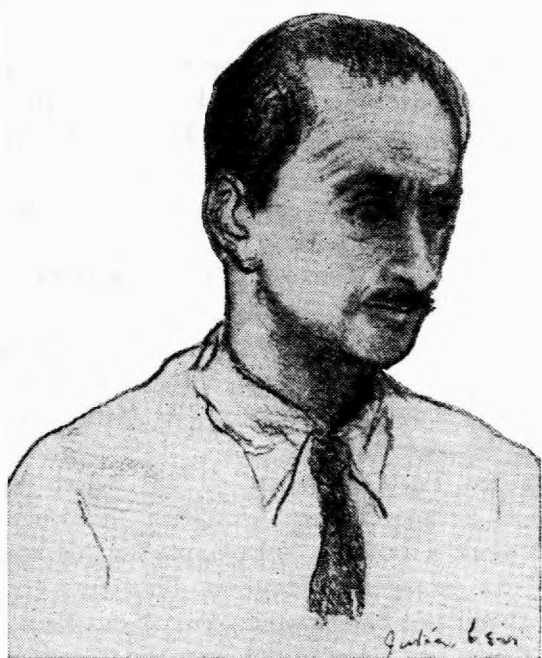
Thus an unsentimental neo-Bachian or neo-Handelian flavor pervades the rapid movements in Blitzstein's *Piano Concerto* (1931) and ballet music, *Cain* (1930). The dramatic sections of the latter work, and of the opera, *Parabola and Circula* (1929), and, particularly, of the oratorio, *The Condemned* (1932), have an austerity and unembarrassed directness of statement suggestive of a kind of neo-Gluck. Some influence of the teaching of Nadia Boulanger may be felt in the slow sections of these same works, which make use of a fastidious, Gallic and somewhat pastoral style, with neo-Gregorian melodic features. In none of Blitzstein's output is there any trace of the methods of another teacher, Arnold Schönberg, except occasionally for purposes of parody.*

On the whole, Blitzstein in his first period achieves a serious, straightforward, non-romantic expression that depends neither on the musically surrealistic nor on the scholastic. He moves confidently among the resources of neo-classicism, which is perhaps the only *modus operandi* in modern composition providing at once a technique for writing and a method for analyzing and testing the musical style of any period.

From 1927 through 1932, Blitzstein's musical technique remains basically the same but, by contrast, the text material of his first dramatic works shows a series of changes in his artistic credo, and the gradual articulation of a definite viewpoint as to the central purpose of his work.

In his first film score, *Hands* (1927), pictorial abstractions are accompanied by musical abstractions.

* The modern German style is burlesqued in the dramatic farce *Triple Sec* (1928), and in the radio sketch *I've Got the Tune*. (1937)



MARC BLITZSTEIN
A Charcoal Sketch By
JULIAN LEVI

The farcical sketch, *Triple Sec* (1928), makes cynical sport of the conventions of grand opera and high comedy by illustrating the stage action through the eyes of a drunken audience. The music is a brilliant take-off on the ear-splitting type of (by now old-fashioned) modern music.

One is perhaps justified in using the adjective "escapist" to describe the plot and treatment of the opera, *Parabola and Circula* (1929). Here the central psychological tangle is so far removed from real life that the characters are represented by geometric symbols. The musical score is ambitious and is characterized by a peculiar measured quality in its rhythmic treatment.

Blitzstein's next dramatic work, the ballet, *Cain* (1930), represents a different kind of escapism, the impulse to find refuge in something remote, in this case a Biblical subject. The atmosphere is sombre and disillusioned. The music has a harmonic pungency which gives an unusual effect in combination with the otherwise severe features of Blitzstein's neo-classic style.

A second opera, *The Harpies* (1931), expresses a classical Greek situation whimsically in terms of modern comedy. Since contemporary manners and attitudes are thus indirectly satirized, this appears to be the first work in which Blitzstein is aware of social forces as suitable subject-matter for dramatic music. Incidentally, *The Harpies* is Blitzstein's initial effort in writing his own text.

In the oratorio, *The Condemned*, (1932), which deals with the trial and execution of a Sacco-Vanzetti character, the composer for the first time gives his work a positive outlook, placing his sympathy definitely on the side of the protagonist. However, Blitzstein's cryptic and stylized text, and the almost neo-Beethoven severity of his music, give a sense of remoteness to the central figure in this dramatic tragedy.

In *The Condemned*, Blitzstein's work reaches a critical stage where his developing interest in expressing a positive social viewpoint is almost directly in conflict with the rigid, impersonal stylization of his musical and literary language. It is significant that during the next three years he composed no major dramatic work.*

III

With the successful production of the opera, *The Cradle Will Rock*, in 1936, it became evident that Blitzstein had come to terms with a consistent set of principles covering all phases of his work, musical, literary and dramatic. These principles, which are articulated even more sharply in *No For An Answer* (1938-40), may be stated as follows.

1. The composer who wishes to interpret the vital urgencies of con-

* *Parabola and Circula*, *Cain*, *The Harpies* and *The Condemned* are all unperformed to date. A premiere of *The Harpies* is scheduled for the coming season.

temporary experience in musical-dramatic terms, will find his strongest expression in projecting the common realities of average existence, which is to say the ordinary behavior of the average person. If everyday people are to have credibility as the protagonists of a social cause, they must be presented with the most truthful realism; they cannot be prettied up and made picturesque or sentimentally heroic, neither can the drab aspects of their existence be glamorized.

Here Blitzstein as dramatist-musician is scrupulously fair; he can be cruel in his caricatures of characters as unsympathetic as Junior, the play-boy, and Mister Mister (in *The Cradle Will Rock*); but he will not hesitate to satirize the weaknesses of other characters who obviously have his sympathy (Paul, the well-meaning but confused liberal, and Mike, the nondescript lumpenproletarian, in *No For An Answer*).

2. It is plainly absurd to put either a stylized blank verse or any elaborately literate and fluent speech into the mouth of a character intended to represent an "average" lower-middleclass type. It is equally absurd to expect this sort of character to be realistically convincing if required to sing an abstrusely longhair melody in formal bel canto tone-quality. In an everyday situation the characters should stick to an everyday speech – an unvarnished colloquial speech. The proper music for a situation involving middleclass or proletarian prototypes should reflect some part of the popular music which forms a conscious or unconscious part of such people's experience – this music should connect somehow with an idiom in which the average person can whistle or sing, and the appropriate tone-quality is that of the untrained voice.

The American commercial popular song and show tune have gone a long way towards solving the problem of a direct and colloquial expression, in both words and music. It should be noted, however, that the customary dream world of American popular song possesses little variety of expression; either the gay mood or the romantic mood prevails. Then too, from a musician's viewpoint, appallingly little significance is attached to the harmonic structure of a typical popular tune, so that the individual arranger or performer feels generally free to change chords and interpolate harmonies according to his fancy. In addition, the favorite harmonic style is a slavishly European one, making almost exclusive use of the Debussy-Ravel swamp of continual secondary sevenths and wholetone-flavored ninth chords. This slothful harmonic backwash undoubtedly contributes to our commercial popular music much of its truly escapist character.

Despite the many impurities present in the commercial popular song, Blitzstein decided to adopt certain of its characteristic features as raw material for a new kind of "common" musical style, suitable for the dramatic expression of common experience. With the help of neo-classicism

Blitzstein found an unexpected solution to the harmonic problems of his new style. This technique gave him the means of critically evaluating the styles of the past and of selecting whatever was appropriate to his purpose of the moment. Popular melodic and rhythmic elements, combined with harmonic-contrapuntal features stemming from a fresh view of eighteenth and nineteenth century music, and set to colloquial American words, are responsible for the unique musico-dramatic texture which is at once so personally Blitzstein's, and so inescapably an expression of American popular music.

Blitzstein uses this technique with the greatest freedom and variety. He brings to popular music the power to represent emotional states which were formerly beyond its range. Noteworthy examples are the following, from *No For An Answer*: the staggering music and flamboyant words portraying the self-pitying liberal, Paul; Clara's song about growing up, with its touchingly wistful lyrics and harmonies; the anger and exasperation in Gina's scolding song; and Bulge's self-spoofing in *Penny Candy*. In this last song a piquant, Italianate atmosphere results from the mixture of neo-Monteverdian melodic-harmonic elements first with a modified blues rhythm, and later with a sort of honky-tonk rhythmic accompaniment.

An unusual song, this time about unemployment, appears in Blitzstein's score to the film, *Valley Town* (1910). Here the words, expressing the yearning for a faraway existence, are played off against the music (a melancholy blues), and against the film-images which depict the harsh presence of shut-down factories.

All these songs are more properly dramatic situations in essence. The voice passes from singing to ordinary speech and back without the slightest break either in the natural flow of words or in the musical continuity. This ability to mix the ordinary spoken word with a musical background that has a complete life of its own, without distorting either, is one of Blitzstein's most impressive technical achievements. Blitzstein's device may eventually supersede both the stilted coyness of musical comedy patter songs and the musically lifeless recitatives of grand opera tradition.

The composer is no longer forced to make a formal opening or ending to every song, and he is able to preserve the informality of popular music without being bound by the straitjacket rule which requires that a good popular tune be catchily singable above all else. Occasionally Blitzstein will give the tune its head, letting it take precedence over words and action (*On a Still, Still Evening*, in *No For An Answer*). In other cases the characters or situation are more important, as in the remarkably handled "Francie" scene of the same work, where Joe's love-song is continually interrupted by Francie's spoken words and never gets past its initial phrase even though the scene reaches an emotional climax at the close.

To this observer, Blitzstein achieves his most distinguished expression in the concentration and realism of these dramatic episodes in popular idiom. The best of them have an almost folksong-like directness and poignancy of statement, and, in their epigrammatic precision, suggest a broad generality of truth that goes far beyond the specific situations.

III

It remains to speak of Blitzstein's orchestration. The arranger cannot be allowed to have his way with a Blitzstein song, since the meticulously contrived harmonic-contrapuntal background carries so much dramatic responsibility. Each note must be clearly and literally articulated. It is perhaps for this reason that much of Blitzstein's scoring features a thin, neutral orchestral texture, bare of flashy colors or lush timbres, and favoring drab instrumental shades almost to the point of conventionality. However, in the rare cases where he requires tone-qualities evoking a special atmosphere, Blitzstein shows no lack of orchestral invention and considerable resourcefulness in handling a few instruments. Striking examples are the use of accordion and strings to give orchestral expression to the hypocritical piety of the Reverend Salvation, in *The Cradle*; the whining guitar chords in *Croon, Spoon*, from the same work; and the bitter, jazzy machine-like sounds which accompany the choreographic gestures of the steelworkers in *Valley Town*.

In 1943, Blitzstein, at that time a sergeant in the United States Army 8th Air Force stationed in England, arranged a number of concerts featuring a chorus of 200 Negro soldiers from aviation engineer battalions. For performance at these concerts he composed the symphonic piece *Freedom Morning*, using melodic and rhythmic material suggested or improvised by the soldiers themselves. The result is music of strong and direct American folk character, kept in a deliberately bold and simple harmonic context, with a hefty and spacious orchestration.

His symphony *The Airborne*, a kind of dramatic cantata dealing with the history of flight, is Marc Blitzstein's newest work (1943-44). It has had successful performances in New York City and was extensively reviewed in an earlier issue of MODERN MUSIC.

THE MUSIC OF MARC BLITZSTEIN

DATE

PUBLISHER

ORCHESTRAL WORKS

1927	Jigg-Saw (ballet suite) - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Romantic Piece for Orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	Piano Concerto - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Variations for Orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript
1943	Freedom Morning (symphonic poem) - - - - -	G. Schirmer, Inc.

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

1926	Gods (mezzo-soprano, string orchestra, cello soloist) - -	Manuscript
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CHORAL WORKS

1933	The Condemned (choral opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	Children's Cantata - - - - -	Manuscript
1943-44	Symphony, "The Airborne" - - - - -	Chappell and Co.

CHAMBER MUSIC

1927	Piano Sonata - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Four Songs for baritone (Whitman texts) - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Percussion Music for the Piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	"Is 5" Songs for soprano (Cummings texts) - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	String Quartet - - - - -	Manuscript
1932	Serenade for String Quartet - - - - -	Manuscript

STAGE WORKS; FILM MUSIC; RADIO MUSIC

1928	Triple Sec (opera-farce) - - - - -	Schott Söhne
1929	Parabola and Circula (one-act opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Cain (ballet) - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	Music for Film, "Surf and Seaweed" - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	The Harpies (one-act opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	Send for the Militia (speaking number) both voice and piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	War Department Manual - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	The Cradle Will Rock (opera) - - - - -	Random House
1936	Chesapeake Bay Retriever (film) - - - - -	Pedigreed Pictures, Inc.
1937	I've Got the Tune (radio song play) - - - - -	Chappell and Co.
1937	Spanish Earth (film in collaboration with Virgil Thomson) - - - - -	Contemporary Historians, Inc.
1939-40	No for an Answer (opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Valley Town (film) - - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Native Land (film) - - - - -	Manuscript
1941-42	C.I.O. Broadcasts - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	Night Shift (film opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
1945	Golopchik (Working title for a stage musical) - - -	Manuscript



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