



HENRY FRANKLIN BELKNAP GILBERT

Portrait by

FRANK WALDO MURRAY

# MODERN MUSIC

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## AMERICAN FIGURE, WITH LANDSCAPE

ELLIOTT CARTER

IT has been characteristic of musical life in America to neglect the composers of its own past. Although almost all serious compositions presuppose a future audience whose tastes will be affected by them, in our country, the death of a composer generally marks the end of his musical career. Quickly he is supplanted by new men anxious to promote their own works before they, too, shall be forgotten. And music that is easily forgotten by musicians is more easily forgotten by the public. Thus we develop the habit of evaluating each new work as having the same unimportance as its rapidly vanishing predecessor.

It may, of course, be true that many if not all of our previous composers have not produced music of great significance. On the other hand they have occasionally written works which deserve attention because they mirror and communicate to us certain interesting, lovable aspects of the America of their day. Besides, many of the tendencies they set in motion still direct our musical thought.

At the time when Henry Franklin Belknap Gilbert was making his effort to write, as he put it, "some American music," nationalism was the subject of wide discussion by critics, musicians and composers, including Gilbert himself. A general historical sequence of periods had been formulated to cover our national musical evolution: first, foreign domination and imitation of non-native art music; second, collection of and familiarization with indigenous folk songs and dances; third, invention of a style consistent with folk material without using actual quotations; and fourth, the musical millenium, emergence of the national masterworks written by native composers with a large native background and inheritance. This

hypothesis, reflecting the historical doctrines of the late nineteenth century and especially the "millenarianism" so dear to America, had its obvious support in the facts of Russian musical history. True, also, to the thinking of the period in omitting the important influences of speculative thought and of religious music in the concert hall, this thesis gave folk songs a basic position as the root from which each national music culture is to grow. All the elements comprising the "manner:" rhythm, melody, harmony and form, evolve from this germ and generate a style that is to be expressive of our native kind of "matter." To put it another way, in a search for a means of expressing the "matter" of our national consciousness, it was assumed that composers would inevitably follow this historical pattern.

The two interrelated doctrines of historical stages, and the antithesis of *matter* and *manner*, combined with our special brands of individualism and of progress, have deeply influenced the thinking of our contemporary composers, particularly those of nationalist intentions. The conflict of opinion over which of the four stages we are now in, is the basis of many present arguments; while the manner-matter problem perpetuates itself in questions as to the "abstraction" in contemporary music and its "neo-classicism" or "neo-romanticism."

When these doctrines were being considered at the turn of the century, there was a tendency to minimize America's longing for the refinement of feeling and taste of Europe, which found literary expression in Henry Adams and Henry James. But the founding of our conservatories and of our larger performing organizations had been largely motivated by this longing. They were more concerned with promoting an interest in the classical European repertory than in encouraging native compositions.

Obviously under the circumstances the cards were stacked against those composers who were following nationalist doctrines. At a slightly more advanced stage of musical development, their reception might have been very different. If we had been ready, their ideas might have penetrated our musical life. For at that very time, political and economic nationalism were being aggressively declared by such important Americans as Theodore Roosevelt and A. T. Mahan. It was in this same aggressive spirit that the school of American nationalist composers supported their doctrines. In literature the field had already been well explored by the generation of Whitman and Emerson. But in music, as in politics, these ideas still had the charm of novelty and adventure. Composers led lives and wrote music in conformity with them, and the fourfold historical scheme gave men of

Gilbert's generation, who modestly placed themselves in the second and third periods, a bright future to anticipate for their music and, by that token, a deep-seated conviction which helped them carry on under conditions often adverse.

## III

Throughout his fifty-nine years of life, from 1868 to 1928, Gilbert struggled against a physical handicap of an unusual sort which had to be borne in an almost continuous state of extreme poverty. As he would ruefully explain, he was occasionally invited to medical conventions as "Exhibit A" – the only man to survive his thirties with the heart deformity known to doctors as the tetralogy of Fallot. He had been born with the right ventricle of his heart larger than normal and therefore an unusual amount of blood flowed through the capillaries of his skin. This gave him the fiery red complexion which was his most striking physical characteristic and also made him susceptible to many physical troubles of which he never spoke. To have persisted in a career of musical composition at a time when no money could be derived from it, and when he obviously had talents for several more remunerative occupations, illustrated the power of his faith. Bearing his difficulties in an outwardly carefree way, he courageously led the trying life of a pioneer American composer, and at its culmination ventured on a trip to Frankfort, Germany, in 1927 as a representative from America to the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival where his "Uramerikanische" tone-poem, *Dance in Place Congo* was being performed. Probably as a result of his exertions on the trip, he died in the following year.

Gilbert was one of the very few residents of Cambridge, Massachusetts who ever attained prominence unaided by some connection with Harvard. In its vicinity he was born, lived, died, and he was buried like a good Cantabrigian in Mt. Auburn Cemetery not far from William and Henry James. Both his parents were musicians and encouraged their son to continue in this path. As a result of their efforts Gilbert had an all-American musical education. At the New England Conservatory, he learned to play the violin and studied harmony and counterpoint and finally took lessons in composition from MacDowell who had just returned from Europe. His violin opened up a source of income as a fiddler in resort hotels from Florida to the White Mountains. But even in his early twenties Gilbert was interested in being a composer and this conflicted with his hectic hotel-musician's life. By the age of twenty-four, Gilbert had had enough

of this and set out to find a more grateful trade that might pay a little better. For the next ten years he gave up music almost completely and tried many different ways of earning his living. He worked in music publishing houses in Boston as an engraver and as an arranger. Wandering away from home, he even got a job as a pie-cutter in the Chicago World's Fair at the time of the hootchy-kootchy. During this period he learned about a great many sides of life in America, and gained the almost Whitmanesque knowledge and love of his country that so deeply affected his musical development.

At the Chicago Fair he met a Russian who thrilled him with stories of Rimsky-Korsakov, Moussorgsky and the new kind of music they were writing. To familiarize himself and his friends with this music Gilbert organized a few concerts of Slavic nationalist music at Harvard. His association with Arthur Farwell in Boston, the discussions they had about American nationalist music, which finally resulted in the Wa-Wan Press publications of American music, all tended to rouse him once more into musical activity.

Finally, Gilbert heard rumors of a new French opera about the common people and, shipping on a cattle-boat, went to Paris in 1901 to hear Charpentier's *Louise*. This opera was the touchstone in his life, for he was so impressed by it that he decided to devote all his time to musical composition, come what may. At thirty-three, Gilbert came back to Cambridge, found a job minding a horse and a cow in a barn at Somerville to pay his board, moved a piano in beside one of the buggies and started to compose on a breadboard resting on a flour barrel. He was going down to rock bottom to create the true American native music.

### III

From his barn, near Harvard which was then educating such erudite composers as John Knowles Paine, Arthur Foote, Walter Spaulding and Edward Burlingame Hill, Gilbert threw down the challenge. American serious music was too imitative "not only of the methods of Europe but of its spirit - a spirit which, at the present day, is decadent - which covers its weakness in genuine inspiration with a wealth of invention; a glittering show-off of ingenious externalities; deceiving the unwary into attributing to it an undue worth and importance. The long arm of Europe still stretches its deadening hand of tradition and authority over our American musico-art developments, so that the true spirit of America is lost sight of, and that great potential spirit which is the birthright of the American composer, as

of others in their lines of activity, has been thoughtlessly bartered away for a mess of clever European pottage."

In his struggle to cast off the erudite tradition and yet to surmount a crudeness and amateurishness that sometimes helped to stamp his music with personality and sometimes prevented him from realizing his intentions, Gilbert resembles Moussorgsky and Chabrier. Both these men seem to have impressed him with their vitality and unconventionality, and his music occasionally shows their direct influence. The prevailing tradition of the time was largely German and the prestige and success of Dvorak's American works served to strengthen it. Like anyone reacting against an accepted custom, Gilbert was searching around for unconventional elements. These he found in American and Celtic folklore. From the Russians he took for his cue the vigorous, simple and even crude style he needed to express the spirit of the America he loved. Like many composers of his time, he did not escape the influence of the saccharine chromaticism of Grieg, Dvorak and MacDowell; but as time went on he gradually eliminated their over-ripe harmonies and helped to develop the harmonic style which has become the common currency of most popular music since.

Gilbert composed the greater number of his published works from about 1902 to 1913. During these years, he worked on an opera based on Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* stories; but after having nearly completed the score he was finally refused permission to use the material. This was one of his greatest disappointments. The opera still lies in manuscript, unperformed, a somewhat remarkable fact considering the success which its *Comedy Overture on Negro Themes* has had in all the years since its first performance in 1911. Judging from this and from the delightful *American Dances* for piano, four-hands, published by the Boston Music Company, which are also excerpts, and from the comment of those who heard Gilbert run through the opera, it is rich in the particular homey American humor that was one of Gilbert's most engaging characteristics as a musician and as a man.

Another good work dating from this period is the set of five rag-timey piano numbers, *Negro Dances*, written in a style that closely resembles the popular music of its day and yet raises it to the level of concert music without pretence or falsification of its spirit. At his best in gay, humorous short pieces, Gilbert was often at a loss in the larger forms, where a lack of emphasis at important points, such as the climax or the end, makes his works seem too short. The *Symphonic Prologue: Riders to the Sea* suffers



from this weakness, and perhaps all his other orchestral works of the period would be more effective if their proportions had been slightly amplified.

All kinds of Negro music aroused Gilbert's interest – minstrel, spirituals, Creole songs and dances like the cake-walk – because that music seemed closely related to the spirit of all America. Its national popularity testified to that. He was not attracted to it because of its strangeness and, though a Northerner, he never sought to play up the exotic element. He wanted to get at its forthright qualities of humor, sentiment and vitality. This humor he attempted to express in the orchestral *Humoresque on Negro Minstrel Tunes*, with its gay setting of *Zip Coon* and comically sentimental second theme; its vigor and enthusiasm are reflected in the orchestral *Negro Rhapsody*, "Shout." His songs, not of great distinction, reveal the strong dramatic sense which pervades all his works. The *Lament of Deirdre*, the *Pirate Song* and *Salamambo's Invocation to Tanith* are the best instances of this.

Gilbert's greatest popular success came with *Dance in Place Congo*, a twenty minute tone poem on Creole tunes. Unlike his earlier works, its form is completely convincing, which is why it was more immediately effective. As in Moussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* there is the striking of a bell in a macabre night revelry which calls the New Orleans slaves back to their quarters (in the Russian work the dead are called back to their graves.) Yet, although a very effective piece of its kind, it had somehow lost the simplicity and charm of his earlier music. The composer's preface in the printed score admits modestly that he was using the Creole melodies "much after the manner of Grieg or Tchaikovsky." This is not to say that the work lacks personality, for in spite of his admission (which may have been more to calm the public than to inform the critics) it has his characteristic rhythmic vitality and melodic interest. The score with a ballet interpretation of its program was performed at the Metropolitan in 1918 and received many enthusiastic tributes. For Gilbert by this time was a composer whom audiences and critics were discussing. All our important orchestras played his music and he had even received acclaim in Russia. His reputation seemed made, most of his scores were published and he seemed a fixture in American musical life.

But after the end of the war, "modern music" galvanized our audiences. Sides were taken, arguments raged, and the newer music with its tumultuous energy and the violent opinions it aroused made the cause of "American music" and Gilbert's in particular appear tame and faded. Jazz

too was gaining over rag-time, and Gilbert's raggy pieces began to sound old-fashioned. Gilbert stuck to his guns and wrote the excellent *Symphonic Piece* which had all the American qualities of his earlier work. It was performed in 1926 by Dr. Koussevitzky and deserves a rehearing today. But time was pressing on and the music of Gilbert had no publicity appeal. Younger composers were busy blowing their own horns. After the first fine frenzy of the modern music movement had died down and Gilbert was forgotten, a whole group of composers started rediscovering the virtues of simplicity, of ascetic Americanism, and of many other qualities which he had prefigured. They claimed these as their own invention, as if Gilbert and his fellow nationalists had never existed.

It would be unfortunate for our culture if the present generation were as easily swept aside as all previous ones have been, yet this is the lesson which our history seems to indicate.