

THE COMPOSER IN AMERICA, 1923-1933

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MODERN music as an organized movement was born at the end of the World War. In so far as organization was concerned, it took on a somewhat similar form in various countries of Europe ranging from the local and semi-private concerts of the Schönberg Group to the International Society for Contemporary Music with its many affiliations. By the early twenties the movement had reached New York, and from there it gradually seeped through to the rest of America.

It has been a comparatively short time since so-called radical music began making its way. Yet, at the end of a decade, music which was greeted with snickers and sarcasm on the one hand and enthusiasm on the other had concededly won its place in the sun. A few die-hards there may still be who think it has all been a regrettable mistake. But for the most part, even those who were reluctant to allow that composers had broadened the language of music in a manner not to their liking now seek formulas with which to accommodate themselves to the inevitable.

Along with the introduction of radio broadcasting and the system of the guest conductor, the decade 1923-33 definitely marks the influx of new music. The performance of works by European and American contemporaries now plays an important role in our musical life and aids considerably in making New York one of the principal musical centers of the world. To sum up the accomplishments of these past ten years may present little that is unfamiliar to the readers of MODERN MUSIC, but it should be of interest from an historical standpoint, and to those who are unacquainted with the beginnings of contemporary music in America.

“A group of composers of various nationalities”—an announcement of 1922 reads—“all living in New York City

formed a Guild last year and gave three concerts at the Greenwich Village Theatre." This was the International Composers' Guild of which Edgar Varese was Musical Director. The Guild was founded with a two-fold purpose; to give living composers—"innovators" and "path-finders" as they were then called—the opportunity to have their work performed, and to present the public with auditions of the latest music (by which, of course, experimental music was meant). These two motifs—with variations—have supplied all subsequent societies with their *raison d'être*.

It was characteristic that the first of our modernist societies should have been organized by a European. The Guild was allied with similar organizations in Europe. Varese stressed the point that the Guild stood for "internationalism" in music. In so doing, he correctly gauged the temper of the times. No mention of the American composer as such can be found in any early prospectus of the Guild. In this respect, only a few years brought a change.

Even those whose purposes are identical often fail to agree as to the best means for attaining their ends. The Guild was confronted with this fact at the end of a second season. Several of its members, finding themselves unsympathetic to its methods, determined to group themselves anew, this time as a League of Composers, with Claire Reis as their chairman. The important thing for us to note is that this schism profited public and composer alike, for where there had been one forward-looking group there were now two.

To these two societies a new generation of American composers turned for support. As a member of that generation I can vouch for our need. What our fate would have been without their help is difficult to visualize. Nevertheless, some idea of the difficulties encountered by composers, no matter how gifted, can be gained from an examination of the ten years prior to the last decade. As to performances: the composer of that period was dependent upon a local orchestra which occasionally "tried out" the work of a native son, or on a personal acquaintance among concert artists. Lack of these openings meant no public performance. As to publishers: a certain number of American scores were published out of a sense of duty by our

largest publishing houses, but these scores were carefully picked from a handful of "official" composers: Edgar Stillman Kelly, Daniel Gregory Mason, Rubin Goldmark, and for "modernists," Parker, Loeffler and Hadley. As to economic aid: the composer able to devote his entire energies exclusively to composition was practically unknown, for there were few prizes and no stipends or fellowships at the disposal of the creator of music. The careers of men like Griffes or Ives or Ornstein testify to the dearth of interest in any vital music during these years.

Out of these circumstances arose the American Music Guild (and also the Composers' Music Corporation). The generation that was twenty to thirty during the years 1912-1922—Marion Bauer, Frederick Jacobi, A. Walter Kramer, Harold Morris, Deems Taylor—made common cause. These composers were modest, and did not for the most part venture so far as public concerts. Their efforts undoubtedly had value for themselves, but lacked sufficient scope to have seriously influenced the general trend of music in America.

The influence of the League and Guild, on the other hand, was widespread. It is a simple matter to trace all later groups with similar aims to the paternity of either one or the other of these two societies. Thus, such organizations as Pro Musica which makes propaganda in the Middle and Far West, the New Music Society of San Francisco, the active Pan-American Association, are allied in spirit to the Varese Group, while the Philadelphia Contemporary Music Society, the Chicago Section of the I.S.C.M. and (possibly) the Copland-Sessions Concerts have closer affiliations with the League.

But it must be remembered that modern music societies reach a comparatively small audience. Contemporary music could only find its way to the larger musical public through the agency of the symphony orchestra. For this we needed conductors with vision. It would be illuminating in this connection to compare the programs of Stransky and Damrosch during the years 1912-22 with those of Koussevitzky and Stokowski in 1922-32. These two last named conductors are held in general esteem but it has not saved them from being violently attacked

for espousing the cause of the "modernists." Other conductors have helped to introduce new music to a not always willing public: Reiner, Stock, Monteux, Klemperer, Kleiber, Smallens. On more than one occasion these men have combined forces with the League and the Guild.

All these agencies working towards a more or less unified goal—that of introducing the music of living composers—have been instrumental in developing the latent potentialities of our own composers. The past decade saw the older generation of "young" composers come into their own; Bloch, Carpenter, Gruenberg, Ives, Jacobi, Morris, Ornstein, Ruggles, Salzedo, Saminsky, Varese, Whithorne. At the same time an entirely new generation of composers was fostered: Antheil, Blitzstein, Berezowsky, Chavez, Copland, Cowell, Hanson, Harris, McPhee, Rudhyar, Sessions, Sowerby, Still, Virgil Thomson, Randall Thompson, Wagenaar. These men form, for better or worse, the American school of composers of our own day.

Public opinion during these past years has remained comparatively unformed in regard to the relative merits of these composers. Such lack of a true critical standard must be attributed to a corresponding lack of interest on the part of our music critics. The critic contends that his interest is commensurate with the importance of the music in hand, that he gives it "honest criticism" without benefit of chauvinism, and that the composer obstinately insists on lavish encomiums. The composer, on the other hand, contends that praise is a small thing compared with honest criticism which is worthy of the name, based as it must be on intimate knowledge of the composer's work—a kind of knowledge which few of our critics possess. The composer, moreover, may always point by way of example to at least one glaring exception to the run of critics—Paul Rosenfeld—who has remained consistently and genuinely concerned with the work of our newer composers over a period of fifteen years. His book *One Hour with American Music*, whatever its faults or qualities, may be said to be the first serious attempt to set standards of musical excellence as applied to our living composers. More work of this kind must be done if we are to emerge from the present chaotic state of musical values.

The past decade re-engendered at least one vital idea: that of mutual cooperation among composers themselves. It definitely marked the end of the Helpless Period. Composers learned to band themselves together and to achieve performances of their works through their own combined efforts. This principle of action was not being carried out for the first time. Aside from the classic example of similar groups founded by Liszt in Germany or Saint-Saens in France, there is the precedent of our own Manuscript Society recently resuscitated in the pages of the *Musical Quarterly*. This society functioned at the turn of the century and possessed aims which differed in no essential from those of our "modernist" groups. But unfortunately the Manuscript Society found no effective way of handing on the tradition which it began in our country. Our present-day societies, on the other hand, may proudly point to a numerous progeny who in their turn must learn to continue the now established tradition of organized cooperation among composers.

Modern music during the next ten years will have entered on a new phase. The day of the "pathfinder" and the "experimenter" is over. We are in a period of "cashing in" on their discoveries. The struggle which was begun by Varese and his associates of the International Composers' Guild must be carried on, but on a wider front. By that I mean that new music in future should no longer be confined to the sphere of the special society. Now it must interest the general public through the usual concert channels and the usual interpreters: pianists, singers, chamber organizations, choral societies, etc. Their interest in the contemporary music field must be awakened, for it no longer contains elements at which they need be frightened.

The gains of the past decade will, of necessity, work to the advantage of the coming generation of composers in America. The first phalanx is already in sight: Henry Brant, Paul Bowles, Israel Citkowitz, Lehman Engel, Vivian Fine, Irwin Heilner, Bernard Herrman, Jerome Moross, Elie Siegmeister. They enter the struggle with weapons that not all of us have enjoyed. For economic support they may win stipends from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Prix de Rome, the Pulitzer Prize; or occasional prizes such as the N.B.C. or Victor

Prize. For publishers they have Henry Cowell's *New Music* or Alma Wertheim's Cos Cob Press. For a medium in which to express their ideas they have MODERN MUSIC, edited by Minna Lederman, or possibly the forum of the New School for Social Research. For performance of their works, besides the channels already mentioned, there are the festivals of Mrs. Coolidge, of the Eastman School of Music, of the Corporation of Yaddo. And for the listing of their works after they are written they have the catalogue of the United States Section of the I.S.C.M. After ten years, here is something to be thankful for. With aids such as these we may with greater surety leave the future of American music in their hands.