

FROM THE '20'S TO THE '40'S AND BEYOND

AARON COPLAND

LOOKING back, certain facets of our present musical life appear to have become visible for the first time during the last twenty years. Of course, if one mulls over old magazines, or books on American music published around 1900, the impression is strong that things were beginning to happen as far back as the turn of the century. It wasn't all pure imagination either. The earlier years helped to build toward today. Still, without losing our sense of orientation completely, I think we are justified in saying that we have come a particularly long way in the last two decades.

Aside from the general advance conceded by almost everybody, there are certain ideas and events which are definitely the progeny of the 'twenties and 'thirties. They should be known as such. Looking backward, they appear to be brand new phenomena. Looking a little forward, they seem certain to influence our future musical life.

One of these phenomena might be described as composer economics. During the past ten years, the serious composer's economic education may be said to have begun. No courses were given and no accredited teachers were found, but the idea gradually took hold that a composer ought to be able to draw his major income from composition. Suddenly it seemed clear that it makes no sense for at least two-thirds of our composers to spend two-thirds of their time busy at occupations other than the creation of music. The feeling grew that something ought to be done about it.

Composers have now learned not to expect any considerable return from the sale of their music, but to demand instead the income due them from their performance rights. (I shall always remember the amazement on the face of old Henry F. Gilbert in 1925 on hearing that one of our major symphony orchestras had paid an American composer for the performance rights to his first composition — "just like Richard Strauss!")

As they themselves absorbed some of these basic facts, composers came to realize that the public at large also needs education on this economic problem. Everyone knows that authors live on their royalties, and painters on the sale of their paintings. Few people, however, have ever

asked how composers live. Even interpretive musicians who ought to know better, believe that they flatter composers by the casual proposal: "Why don't you write me something?" Interpreters, too, still need to learn that there is a simple parallel between getting pay for their services and paying composers for theirs.

The next twenty years will undoubtedly see a more rigid enforcement of this principle which is already clear enough. First, however, lawmakers must come to realize the necessity for a change in the obsolete copyright laws. Record makers, too, need thoroughly to revise their estimate of a composer's rightful share in the profits of his composition. And the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, yes, ASCAP itself, must be educated to enforce the copyright provisions for the protection of serious music in exactly the way it enforces protection of popular music. And finally it devolves upon music-users in general to understand that if they use the music of living composers in any way, they share a responsibility toward the support of those composers. Perhaps here we are looking a little beyond the immediate future.

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Another entirely new chapter of recent musical history might properly be headed "government in music." The title is doubtless still rather optimistic. If you had the temerity to suggest that official Washington was "interested" in music, more than one Congressman would suspiciously ask if you were discussing an accompaniment to fan dancing. However, we have the depression of 1929 to thank for the government's involvement in music. So far the only frank sponsorship of a music program has been that of the Works Progress Administration. All other aid has been surreptitiously introduced via riders tagged on to bills relating to "national defense," "inter-American relations" and such items. No one in a responsible position has yet dared make the forthright statement that our government should have a fine arts policy. Nevertheless, all signs point to an increasing commitment of government in the arts.

The dangers of state sponsorship have been too well exploited to need much discussion here. Art should be free, yet under government all activity tends to stem from one restricted source; policy is likely to be safe, sound, and dull. Moreover, government aid has the effect of discouraging private support, particularly in this country. But right or wrong, for better or worse, our post-war future seems certain to witness an increased participation of government in the creative arts.

As a matter of fact, composers are more needed by government today than they realize. On the home front, for instance, they can stimulate and inspire love of country. To Latin-America they can demonstrate that not all U. S. energy and talent go into manufacturing and the selling trades. To meet these demands why should Washington have to beg, borrow or cajole compositions from composers? If the government needs music it should, in all its official dignity, help the composers produce it.

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What about the young composers of this era? If in no other way, the experience of the past two decades has been different from earlier periods of our native music in the number and quality of our young men. Whitman's prophecy is coming true – there are scads of them about. It is significant that in technical dexterity they rival their elders – take as typical the works of conservatively-minded Samuel Barber. It is further significant that they no longer exclusively look abroad for their influences – witness the early Harris-inspired works of one of the best of them, William Schuman. They come now in all types and sizes: the transcendental Robert Palmer, the elegant Paul Bowles, the noise-inspired John Cage, the rapturous David Diamond, the swing fan, Robert McBride; we have also the simple purity of John Lessard, the lyricism of Norman Dello Joio, the neo-classicism of Edward Cone, the physical violence of Jerome Moross, the folksong of Earl Robinson, the sensitivity of Alexei Haieff, the smooth wit of David Van Vactor, the ordered intensity of Harold Shapero.

To the older generation of our period these younger men seem different in at least one respect. They expect to have their works played more as a matter of course than we did. It's a curious fact that no society of concert-giving youngsters has come into existence. The young men are satisfied to wait around until their elders see that they are performed. I, for one, wish they would get going themselves, as we did, and brighten the horizon with hearings of the many works they have been writing. They are different, too, in one other important respect; they are quick to take a utilitarian attitude toward their own work. They see clearly the new uses to which their music may be put: by the radio, the films, the high schools, the Broadway shows. They like the functional idea. And why shouldn't they? For that way lies at least some of the road ahead.

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In one important respect, however, the past twenty years have completely failed music. No one has found out how to exploit many fine

works written during that period. They may not be eternal masterpieces, but they easily deserve to be heard ten or even twenty years after they have been composed. I submit here a sample list, confined to the choral and orchestral field, which names a few of the compositions I have in mind: Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927) or *Persephone* (1933); Schönberg's *Variations* (1928); Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1935); Milhaud's *Concertino de Printemps* (1934); Berg's *Der Wein* (1929); Hindemith's *Konzertmusik for Strings and Brass* (1931); Krenek's *Violin Concerto* (1924); Martinu's *La Bagarre* (1927); Varese's *Arcanes* (1927); Walton's *Portsmouth Point Overture* (1925); Chavez' *Suite* from the ballet *H.P.* (1927); Harris' *Second Symphony* (1935); Piston's *Concerto for Orchestra* (1933); Cowell's *Synchrony* (1930); Ruggles' *The Sun Treader* (1933). It would be easy to add many more in the same category. Indeed it is a sad comment on the musical set-up of our times that a fourth-rate novelty should take precedence in the conductorial and newspaper mind over the repetition of an important piece. Some way must still be discovered for using the best of what we already have.

There has also been a remarkable lack of serious, critical, full-length studies of the works of American composers. More than ten years ago Paul Rosenfeld wrote a slim volume called *One Hour With American Music*. This is still an isolated example of a first-hand examination of the field. Most of the so-called studies are compendiums of stray opinions received at second hand by amateur investigators. We badly need some critical survey of our twenty years of music making in America. How else are we to know what we have accomplished?

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Without a doubt, the most startling musical innovation of the past two decades has been brought about by radio broadcasting and the improved methods of phonograph recording. Considering how these have transformed our musical scene, it is amazing to remember how slowly these developments have penetrated the consciousness of composers. (There are composers around still who tend to ignore their importance.) My own idea is that none of us has yet realized, to the fullest extent, the profound changes which the phonograph and radio are destined to bring. Aside from the question of the vastly enlarged audience music commands over the air or through records, there is a challenge in the media themselves that ought to be considered by every serious composer. It confronts us anew with the question of style as related to listener. I realize that I have discussed all this before. I also realize that there exist other audiences – legitimate ones –

of the concert hall, the school, the elite, the community sing, for whom composers will want to write. But the radio and phonograph have given us listeners whose sheer numbers in themselves create a special problem. They can't be ignored if musical creation is to flourish. More and more we shall have to find a musical style and language which satisfies both us and them. That is the job of the 'forties.

I have seldom advanced this point of view without being misinterpreted. I can only repeat that I do not advocate "writing-down" to the public. Laymen profess to be shocked because they prefer to imagine that compositions are born full-blown from the brain of their creator. Composers, too, sometimes talk as if they really were convinced that nothing but pure inspiration goes into the making of a work. The truth is of course, that it is far from easy to throw off old composing habits, to think afresh on the subject of the purpose and function of music in relation to the musical idiom used and the audience one is trying to reach.

We have the example of at least one man who has squarely faced that problem - Dmitri Shostakovitch. Composers have been so intent on disposing of him as second-rate, that they have missed completely one of his most remarkable attributes - he has made the music of a living composer come fully alive for a world audience. It is not the war fever alone that explains the phenomenon of the *Seventh*. Its success was in large measure due to a consciously adopted musical style which is accessible to listeners everywhere. I am not suggesting that Shostakovitch has found the solution for our problem - far from it. But all his work, despite its obvious weaknesses, sets that problem before us in an inescapable way. It is the *tendency* he represents, rather than the music he writes, that makes Shostakovitch a key figure of the present time.

During the past few years, it has become customary to speak slightly of the 'twenties and 'thirties, not only in music, but in every manifestation of art and life. Much easy sport is made of the "flapper age," of the exaggerations and inanities of a period of post-war disillusionment. That is merely a caricaturist's version of a complex epoch. So far as music is concerned, we have no need to be apologetic. It is true that nobody wants to write "modern music" any more. Yet the modern movement has been historically sound and musically fruitful. Thousands of pieces, honestly written, may now be hopelessly stamped as period stuff. Amidst all that material, some was merely ridiculous. But whatever seems ridiculous from today's vantage point, seemed just as ridiculous then. By and large it was an exciting time for musical ideas and works. We can consider ourselves lucky if we produce as vital a progeny in the next twenty years.