

AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XXII

WILLIAM SCHUMAN

ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN

THE evidence is accumulating on all sides and the conclusion is inevitable: William Schuman has caught the boat.

In a certain, clearly apparent way, his recent commissions from Billy Rose for *The Seven Lively Arts* and *Henry VIII* might be regarded as the most important recognition Schuman has yet received. A man can win two Guggenheim fellowships, the annual award of the New York Music Critics' Circle, the Pulitzer Prize and a grant-in-aid from the Metropolitan Opera, all of which Schuman has done, and still not make much of a dent in the general consciousness of the citizenry. But if a Billy Rose show goes over, then he is definitely in with his fellow men.

But there are (thank God!) even more important things in this country than Billy Rose, and Schuman has recently been put right in the middle of one of them. A few weeks ago he was appointed to succeed the late Carl Engel as Director of Publications for G. Schirmer, and he will assume this position when college (Sarah Lawrence, in Bronxville, New York) closes in the spring. Up to this point Schuman has been responsible only for his own music. Now he assumes responsibility for directing the policies of one of the foremost music-publishing houses in the world, a fact which is bound to have significant repercussions on the country's entire musical life. For this is, if I am not mistaken, the first time that a major American publisher has chosen a prolific and very active composer as editorial head.

Schuman, one suspects, will not skip out of Sarah Lawrence without a second thought or a backward look. The Bronxville classroom and choir-room will, one imagines, remain much in his mind. For him, teaching has not been a pot-boiling chore. He is a young man who has been working with young people, and everything he has done in a creative way reveals that fact.

It is characteristic of Schuman that when I asked him to provide me with some scores to look over in preparing this article, he sent eight

choral works, half of them originally for women's voices (Sarah Lawrence is a girls' school), two symphonies, an orchestral overture, a suite for band or orchestra, and a piano suite; the string quartet came along later as an afterthought. In other words, he emphasizes big forms, big media and big sonorities. Schuman tosses off few bagatelles and indulges in few arbitrary or out-of-the-way experiments. There is a *Quartettino for Four Bassoons* written at the request of New Music Quarterly Recordings and four bassoonists, and there is a *Three-Score Set* for piano, each movement of which is exactly twenty bars long, which was composed for the sixtieth birthday celebration of the late Carl Engel; but that is about all.

Bassoon quartets have their place now and then, and to play with the formal limitations of a pre-arranged number of bars may occasionally be interesting, but such things do not point the way to accomplishing the world's real work. On the other hand, if you are the head of music in a girls' school it will not take very long before you realize that the best way in which you can discharge your function is to induce as many of your students as possible to make as much music as possible, and that the most natural and practical fashion in which to achieve this end is to offer them the opportunity of singing together.

As a consequence, Schuman has not one but several manners of composing, and perhaps it is this variety of approaches that led Leonard Bernstein to observe in this magazine that "William Schuman's music belongs to that cheerful category of compositions which are better listened to than discussed." In other words Schuman knows that a chorus of girls in a school has to be handled on a different plane from the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The medium and the function condition the style, and so the critic has continually to readjust his sights.

This Is Our Time is the title of one of Schuman's major cantatas. The phrase provides a clue to much of his thinking on the subject of choral music, especially on the ground of function; one gathers that he does not wish to compose for any other time but ours. He will not take refuge in the comforting thought that the grandchildren of the present Sarah Lawrence freshmen will ultimately appreciate him, nor is he too deeply concerned with the opinions of the present Sarah Lawrence grandmothers. But it is true that in writing for amateur chorus one is constrained to the use of a relatively simpler harmonic and contrapuntal technic than in writing for any other type of ensemble.



WILLIAM SCHUMAN
A Drawing by
ALICE BLAKE

So it is that Schuman's choral music is more diatonic than his composition in other fields; in the choral division there are pages and even entire works which might easily employ that obsolete device which Schuman obviously scorns on principle, the key signature.

A passage in his choral piece called *Prelude* contains an extraordinarily effective instance of the achievement of maximum results with minimum means. The sopranos and second altos whisper a toneless counterpoint of ostinato rhythms, while the first altos intone a pedal F and a long melody in a soprano solo arches over:

The musical score is for a choral piece in G major, 4/4 time. It features four vocal parts: Alto I, Soprano I, Alto II, and Soprano Solo. The lyrics are: "lone, naked and alone we came in-to ex-ile, lone, naked and alone we came in-to ex-ile, her dark womb we did not know our mother's lone, naked and alone we came in-to ex-ile, naked and alone face; from the prison of her flesh, have we come in-to the un-speak-a-ble and in-com-muni-ca-ble prison of this earth. lone we came in-to ex-ile, naked and alone etc." The Soprano Solo part is marked "In" and "mf".

Ostinato rhythms and extended melodic lines are, to be sure, employed in Schuman's symphonies, too, but the extreme simplicity is what is so striking here, and so characteristic of Schuman's approach to the entire choral situation. There is almost nothing to it, but properly sung it should raise your hair.

Prelude, with its text from Thomas Wolfe and its lines like "Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?" is quite unusual among Schuman's choral works. He is rather inclined to set poems on the democratic theme — he has composed to Whitman and to Whitman-like writings of Genevieve Taggard. And in some cases he cannot be absolved from the charge of plunging over the boundary line between the hortatory and the bombastic.

Whitman and democracy are very familiar subjects in contemporary American choral music. But Schuman holds out against a corollary to them which has begun to appear with increasing frequency in the works of his similarly-minded colleagues. From celebrating the destiny of the American folk, he has not gone over to using the music of the American folk. He had a wide-open invitation to do so in the barn-dance movement of *This Is Our Time*, but he declined it with grace and ingenuity. The only self-consciously Americanistic work in his whole list is the recent *William Billings Overture*.

"Enthusiasm" is the word for Schuman, and his faults are the faults of enthusiasm. Some of his virtues stem from the same quality, and no one who has written about him has failed to observe it in one way or another. Bernstein notes his "buoyancy," "energetic drive," "vigor of propulsion" and "lust for life," Paul Rosenfeld his "force, originally fixed and deadly, which is subjected to a new incarnation and finally moves joyously unified and with a gesture of embrace out towards life."

Schuman's big instrumental pieces employ a far freer, subtler, more intricate and kaleidoscopically shifting tonal plan than his choral works. Here he is closer to Roy Harris, with whom he once studied, than to anyone else, although he has much more rhythmic fire, variety and vivacity than Harris. But the resemblance, however superficial it may be, is still there. It lies, among other things, in the fondness both composers display for chorales harmonized with much use of consecutives, and in their pronounced respect for old polyphonic forms. Harris writes a quintet in the form of passacaglia, cadenza and fugue, Schuman a symphony in the form of passacaglia and fugue, chorale and toccata. But the lithe and aerated draughtsmanship of Schuman's polyphony and the luminous quality of his orchestration, which always glows and never glitters — these things, plus the rhythmic variety, give his music its own strong profile.

One device he frequently uses may not seem important when it is described in words, but it is very important in the actual sound. That is the ending of a piece which has been very free and complex and fluid in tonal movement, by a simple triad or unison. With Honegger this is just a sensational trick. With Schuman it is a resolution; it ties the whole together with peculiarly strong logic.

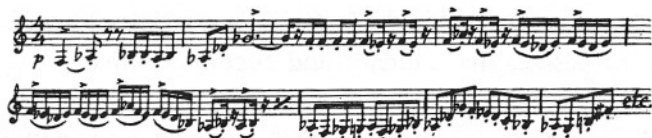
Having given an example of one of Schuman's smaller and simpler devices, I should like to give an instance of his style in the large. One cannot, however, quote entire pages of a symphonic score. But as ex-

ample of something which is, in a small way, colossal, one thinks of the theme of the toccata in the *Third Symphony*, given out by the slightly incredible combination of bass clarinet and snare drum.



This may not be Schuman's best tune, but it is nevertheless characteristic of his melodic thinking, and it is characteristic, too, of the sharp-edged boldness with which he sets forth his ideas. It sounds. It has nerve and virtuosity and drive. It goes the whole hog.

Schuman told Ronald Eyer that if his music was going to be a failure, he wanted it to be a great, big failure, not a little, piddling failure. There is, I think, an answer to that, to be found in the first work of his I came to know, a work which has almost a kind of symbolic value for me and for many others who have met Schuman through this door. In reply to the question of success or failure, I give you the subject of the fugue in William Schuman's *American Festival Overture*:



THE MUSIC OF WILLIAM SCHUMAN

DATE		PUBLISHER
ORCHESTRAL WORKS		
1937	* Prelude and Fugue - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	* Symphony No. II - - - - -	Free Library of Philadelphia
1939	American Festival Overture - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1941	Symphony No. III - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1941	Symphony No. IV - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1941	Newsreel (composer's arrangement of band score) - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1943	Prayer in Time of War - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1943	Symphony for Strings - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1943	William Billings Overture - - - - -	G. Schirmer
CHORAL WORKS (With piano or a cappella)		
1932-3	Four Canonic Choruses - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1937	Pioneers! - - - - -	J. & W. Chester (E. B. Marks)
1937	Choral Etude - - - - -	C. Fisher
1939	Prelude - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1942	Requiescat - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1942	Holiday Song - - - - -	G. Schirmer
(With orchestra or two pianos)		
1939	Prologue - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1940	This Is Our Time (Secular Cantata No. I) - - - - -	Boosey & Hawkes
1942	A Free Song (Secular Cantata No. II) - - - - -	G. Schirmer
CHAMBER WORKS		
1934	* Canon and Fugue (Violin, Violoncello and Piano) - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	* Symphony No. I (18 instruments) - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	* String Quartet No. I - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	String Quartet No. II - - - - -	Arrow Music Press
1938	Quartetino for Four Bassoons - - - - -	Boletín Latino-Americano de Música
1939	String Quartet No. III - - - - -	Boosey & Hawkes
PIANO WORKS		
1942	Concerto for Piano and Orchestra - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1943	Three Score Set - - - - -	G. Schirmer
STAGE WORKS		
1934	* Choreographic Poem (for seven instruments) - - - - -	Manuscript
1944	Steeltown (O.W.I. film) - - - - -	Manuscript
1944	Side Show (for orchestra) from "The Seven Lively Arts" - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1944	Music for Henry VIII - - - - -	G. Schirmer
In preparation . . .	A Ballet - - - - -	G. Schirmer
FOR BAND		
1941	Newsreel - - - - -	G. Schirmer

Miscellaneous Shorter Works and Arrangements

* Works withdrawn pending revision.