

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XXI

### BERNARD WAGENAAR

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THE chronicle of many a contemporary composer reads like a more or less successful *Pilgrim's Progress*. The perils of jazz, Gebrauchsmusik, neo-classicism, mechanistic philosophies, and quarter-tones endanger the advance. There are subtler struggles with the style problem, esthetics of form, eclecticism, and denials of basic romanticism.

A glance at the *Sinfonietta* for small orchestra by Bernard Wagenaar, written in 1929, might lead one to believe that this composer had never felt such temptations, so well-defined is its placement. Yet the untroubled assurance of manner is achieved with complete contemporaneity. Closer analysis however shows an awareness of trends which have proved deterrents for others, all absorbed nevertheless by the style without tell-tale scars. His earlier works reveal fusing processes. But the composer is even in these pieces not contending with the varied will-o'-the-wisps of the nineteen-twenties, but rather with the eroding effects of a somewhat exposed eclecticism, conventional tonal postures, and occasional emotional wanderings. From this travail sprang the *Sinfonietta* full-blown, style and expressive content quite purified and to the point. Wagenaar was able to arrive at this goal, deriving what he needed from jazz or neo-classicism for instance, without passing through periods strongly under such influences. Later works have been basically varied shots from different angles of the *Sinfonietta's* clear-cut picture. Since in addition the early works form a chain which leads naturally to the *Sinfonietta*, Wagenaar's chronicle sets down a progression of unusually unified aspect. It shows little of the glamor of trial and tribulation, only the quiet drama of the most private problems of the composer, those of achieving fullest self-expression and continuous growth.

This very unified impression of his work is due less to typical themes and mannerisms than to the always full projection of personality. It is as though the man were speaking directly to you in almost every note. There

is little rhetoric or objective atmospheric painting. That is why his music falls so naturally into abstract, rather than programmatic or dramatic forms. Such intimacy of manner naturally precludes the universality of the finest music of the past. The range is limited. The warm emotion frequently appears in suave, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan terms, at times affecting the knowing naiveté of Mahler. But underneath is a great longing, resigned without pessimism, understanding. Though this may break out in stress and intensity, the passion is generally subdued. Force is more likely to be achieved by a motorized persistence of pacing. Wit and irony flit over the surface. There is no attempt to conceal the purely romantic outlook of his music.

Since its typical physical attributes remain fairly constant, an examination of one of the recent pieces will reveal characteristics that may be offered as generalities. The *Violin Concerto* is his latest abstract composition of sizeable proportions. His mastery of form is here seen at its highest level. For the concerto, unlike the elegant classical shape of many other of his works, unfolds freely and almost improvisationally, its progression determined by the material and mood alone. There are two connected movements, the first quite complex, the second a slow, continuous cantilena, which prolongs the mood in force at the close of the first movement, epilogue-like, and assumes the character of a philosophic commentary on what has preceded, a distilling of what was most essentially meaningful in the varied emotional scene. The gradual flowering of the work's opening shows the careful way in which Wagenaar molds phrases.



This consciousness of the complete, if tiny, world that a phrase implies, and of its function in the whole, accounts for the success with which he manages the larger aspects of form. The excerpt also shows the very lyrical nature of his music, with emphasis on the surge of melodic line, even when its actual shape is somewhat unvaried. The auxiliary note is a favorite device. It is like a tentative step forward for assurance which then sets the theme in motion. Many of his opening ideas also have just such conjunct movement. This Wagenaar likes to contrast in other sections by rather wide melodic skips, with note values of long and intense duration. The second theme, which appears in the concerto after con-

siderable expansion of the above, illustrates the method.

This melody continues without a break, leading to a faster theme, more energetic. The fourth section, a vigorous fugato, takes the place of development, and indeed, just before its close, even suggests actual development by merging into a slight reminiscence of the third theme. An impassioned compression of the opening theme appears at the climax. As it dies down the way is prepared for the re-entry of the extended melody of the second section, and the retrograde recapitulation which distinguishes this movement is already under way. The first theme is then repeated almost in its entirety, as originally presented.

The second movement is all of one piece, its richly ornamented voice moving through a large range with a quiet determination. The following passage (with the bass progression in the continuation expressed in parentheses) shows the individual romanticized version of the neo-classic method which Wagenaar frequently adopts for slow movements.

A short coda, based on the opening theme of the first movement, brings the work to a close.

## III

Considered harmonically, Wagenaar, with his free chromaticism over a solid diatonic base, should be classed as of French derivation. Though triads appear in root position in simple passages, he tends to favor the richer first inversions. First or second inversions of sevenths move freely to other such inversions from a different key. He uses the less flashy polytonal combinations, though an unusual resolution of a rather lush harmony may provide unexpected bite. The opening of the *Third Symphony* shows the blazing brilliance his juxtapositions of two triads often have. Sometimes chord streams of the simpler variety are pitted against each other. The higher forms of the dominant are frequently enhanced by having the melodic line move over them freely, with resulting dissonant clashes.

In facets other than the harmonic, the influence tends rather to be German. Since there remains in his music a certain European quality, even though all his significant listed works were either written entirely in this country or completed here, after his emigration from Holland at twenty-six, I suspect that the mingling of French and German cultures represents something more deep-rooted than mere early influences, that their synthesis approximates a characteristic *urban* Dutch manner. Certainly his music does not mirror the more familiar rural landscape of his native land.

In the *Three Songs from the Chinese* for voice, flute, harp, and piano, his first important work, the Mahler influence is especially apparent. The suave, quasi-naïve vocal line, the scoring, even the choice of texts, show his imprint. The élan is Straussian. The harmony is already quite French in origin however. Thus the characteristic pattern of double allegiance is set from the start. In the *First Symphony* and the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, both written over a period of years, the effect is less fresh, both works suffering from an overdose of the more ordinary Teutonic influences. Yet the sonata has a fine feeling for line and avoids the tenuous impressionism which might have resulted after the song settings. Very characteristic touches are found in the rhythmic scherzo and a theme from the finale, which resembles an original sketch for the opening of the *Violin Concerto*. The symphony is an inventive, if somewhat confused, attempt at the mosaic type of construction which, in compressed form, is the shape of the *Sinfonietta* and several succeeding works. Already the



**BERNARD WAGENAAR**  
Portrait by  
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orchestration glitters and has great organic life, for the lesson from Mahler had been learned well.

### III

In the *Divertimento for Orchestra* Wagenaar's formal conciseness begins to shape up. The cloying exoticisms and sometimes tangled growths of the *First Symphony* are sheared away, the conventional assurance of the *Violin Sonata* becomes more pointed. More modern sonorities appear. There is a light touch and a characteristic feeling that the composer is riding high on his music, carried irresistibly forward yet quite in command, and with no superficiality resulting from this buoyant, on-the-surface position. The expressionistic *Piano Sonata* is a strange work, which was probably necessary to rid the composer of musical inhibitions. Quite dissonant, it is somewhat gloomy and forbidding, restless, hesitant. Occasional poses, coupled with the improvisational shape, impede his typical forward drive. Yet there are very affecting passages of a quiet, muted power.

Having rid himself of the uneasy sentiments which this sonata propounds, Wagenaar wrote the confident, zestful *Sinfonietta*, in which all the incertitudes of past works disappear, and the style is distilled into most personal terms. This and the succeeding three works constitute a group of similar nature. The *Sinfonietta* shows how a piece employing the favorite direct, classical lines of this period need not also imply stylistic atavisms. The decidedly romantic sentiments are cast in almost metallic sonorities. Characteristic are the building up of a highly organized structure from several short motives, the motorized urge of fast passages, the constantly alive orchestration. The *Second Symphony* is a much larger and more serious canvas but it has the same streamlined quality, the same power which suggest impregnable city constructions. The *Second String Quartet* is brilliantly instrumented. Though the first movement is somewhat declamatory, the finale is of smoothest finish, with a finely sustained sense of motion. In the *Triple Concerto* for flute, harp, cello, and orchestra, color runs riot, and the chaste lines of its companion pieces are somewhat obscured. In all these works one feels that the basic motivic structure prevents the melodic lines from always attaining their fullest expansion. But this is a fault which succeeding pieces gradually eliminate.

The *Third Symphony* begins the process of change. Motives are less in evidence. The piece switches from the near-gaudiness of the *Triple Concerto* to a subdued, dark rich coloring, sustained practically through-



out the piece. The effect is almost portentous. Some fascinating rhythmic invention appears in the first movement. The sad, child-like song of the *Intermezzo* continues the mood. The finale, though energetic, closes very effectively as did the first movement, on a questioning note. The *Third String Quartet* is a more happy work, full of broad melodies, scored with fine feeling for the more sensuous aspects of the medium.

By the time of the *Violin Concerto* the mosaic method has disappeared, and there are only long phrases of melody. The severe classical lines have softened, the motory quality has given way to a more easy, natural flow. Since this composition all of Wagenaar's works have been small occasional pieces until the recently completed chamber opera, *Pieces of Eight*. This shows quite a sense of the theatre for one whose only productions outside of the abstract field have been a few sheaves of songs. It has lightness, wit, and charming sentiments. The work, in two acts, is a real *Singspiel*, the set pieces being interspersed with both spoken dialogue, accompanied and unaccompanied, and actual recitative. There are duets and trios a-plenty. The libretto, based on an old New England legend, offers several chances for apt quotations and references to other composers' styles. The expanded outlook suggested in this work makes one look forward to Wagenaar's next unprogrammatic piece of some size. But even though his range should remain somewhat limited by its introversion, there are few today whose music exposes more completely and confidently the personality of its creator. Elegant and sensitive, his work speaks of humanism and the nobility of honest personal emotion.

# THE MUSIC OF BERNARD WAGENAAR

DATE		PUBLISHER
<b>ORCHESTRAL MUSIC</b>		
1925	First Symphony - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Divertimento for Orchestra - - - - -	C. C. Birchard, Agent
1929	Sinfonietta for Small Orchestra - - - - -	Arrow Press
1930	Second Symphony - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Triple Concerto for Flute, Harp, Cello, and Orchestra -	Manuscript
1935	Third Symphony - - - - -	G. Schirmer, Rental Library
1940	Violin Concerto - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Fantasietta on Three British-American Ballads for Small Orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	Fanfare for Airmen - - - - -	Boosey and Hawkes
1942	Feuilleton for Orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript

<b>CHAMBER MUSIC</b>		
1922	Three Songs from the Chinese for Voice, Flute, Harp, and Piano - - - - -	E. F. Kalmus, Agent
1925	Sonata for Violin and Piano - - - - -	G. Schirmer, Agent
1931	Second String Quartet - - - - -	Arrow Press
1934	Sonatina for Cello and Piano - - - - -	Carl Fischer
1936	Third String Quartet - - - - -	G. Schirmer, Agent
1942	Concertino for Eight Instruments - - - - -	Manuscript

<b>SONGS WITH PIANO, PIANO SOLO, ORGAN</b>		
1918	At Dusk (Verlaine), May-Night (Koster), I Stood in Dreams of Darkness (Heine) - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1925	Song of Agamede (Arthur Upson) - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1925	From a Very Little Sphinx (Cycle on texts by Edna St. Vincent Millay) - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1928	Nuit Blanche, The Light Comes Back with Columbine, Your Face is Like a Chamber (all texts by Millay) -	Manuscript
1928	Piano Sonata - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Eclogue for Organ - - - - -	H. W. Gray Co.
—	Instructive Pieces for Piano - - - - -	Art Publications Society, St. Louis; Carl Fischer; T. B. Harms; Edward B. Marks

<b>STAGE WORKS</b>		
1942	Arrangement of Two Spanish Folk Songs, "El Trillo" and "No quiero tus anellanas",	Manuscript
1944	"Pieces of Eight", Chamber Opera in Two Acts - - -	Manuscript