

AMERICAN PROCESSION AT ROCHESTER

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SINCE May of 1925, when the American Composers' Concerts were first organized at Rochester, over three hundred works written by Americans have been presented at these concerts and in connection with the American festivals. The majority have been performed for the first time. Though by far the greatest number were works for orchestra, they include some representation of operatic, ballet, choral and chamber music. The compositions were the work of over one hundred and fifty composers.

What does this music represent, not in terms of names in a catalog, but in respect to significant musical characteristics? Does the music of this highly diversified group reveal tendencies which are at all uniform, or do they easily classify themselves into self-contained groups? Above all can we see in the works of any individual or any group of individuals, developments of musical traits which might be called distinctively American?

The composers whose works have been performed here constitute a rather complete cross-section of American music. In the list we find such American music-masters of the past as George W. Chadwick, Henry F. Gilbert, Charles T. Griffes, Edward MacDowell, Horatio Parker and John Knowles Paine. We find also the names of men who, though not native-born, have left the impress of their personalities upon American music, such as Ernest Bloch and the late Charles Martin Loeffler. Then, too, side by side with the names of the older generation of contemporary composers, John Alden Carpenter, Arthur Farwell, Henry Hadley, Edward Burlingame Hill, Daniel Gregory Mason, are listed those of young men still in their early twenties, Gail Kubik, Irving Landau, Gardner Read, and, Frederick Woltmann.

While well-established contemporary idioms are represented by the works of Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Quincy Porter, Bernard Rogers, Edward Royce, Lazare Saminsky, Leo Sowerby, Albert Stoessel, Deems Taylor, Randall Thompson, Bernard Wagenaar, Emerson Whithorne and a score of others, the "left wing" is supported by George Antheil, Henry Cowell, David Diamond, Gerald Keenan, Wallingford Riegger and others of more or less experimental tendencies.

The group of composers who have, among other things, utilized what might be called a "jazz-technic" in symphonic forms is represented by men such as Robert Russell Bennett, George Gershwin and William Grant Still. And the ladies are not absent, for a glance at the repertory reveals the names of Martha Alter, Evelyn Berkman, Jeanne Boyd, Mabel Daniels, Henrietta Glick, Dorothy James, Marjorie MacKown.

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In an attempt to answer, however incompletely, the questions raised above we must guard against an over-simplification of classification. One of the most insidious tendencies in the mind of the musical amateur, and for that matter in the mind of a certain type of music critic and essayist, is the too easy labeling and pigeon-holing of creative characteristics, in order to secure for themselves a spurious clarification of the problem. It is well to remember, I believe, that there is no "ought" in art except the "ought" of creative integrity. No one can be a friend to the growth of an indigenous American art who attempts to force upon the composer the tenets of any theory, no matter how well intended. In the last analysis, the creative arts as much or more than any other form of intellectual activity demand a spirit of complete tolerance. The best thing that can be done is to consider, sympathetically and thoughtfully, music traits as we see them embodied in the works of individual composers, and to draw, if we will, from those observations conclusions which may be of interest and perhaps of importance.

The first observation which seems fairly clear, if we consider the case impartially, is that the mass of music which we are discussing does not, as a whole, exhibit values which can be called beyond question of a doubt distinctly American. By this I mean

to imply that, as far as I am able to see, there is no one characteristic which is common to all of this music, which can be classified as indigenous to our soil. On the other hand, there are many indications in the music of different composers that the leaven of Americanism is at work. It might almost be said that every group of composers under consideration exhibits traits which might be regarded as American, if we accept the broadest definition of the term.



Turning first to those whom we might assign to the "classical" group, we find in the composer, such as John Knowles Paine, a style of writing which is both in turn classical and romantic. In the *Prelude to Oedipus Tyrannus*, written in the latter half of the nineteenth century, one discovers a solid nineteenth century technique, displaying an affinity to the dynamic clarity of Beethoven. This is true particularly of the introduction, but the principal theme and later episodic passages turn rather to the romanticism of Von Weber and his great successor, Richard Wagner. There is nothing in this work, in my opinion, that has a national characteristic. This, of course, is meant in no way as a disparagement of the music, which in its fine simplicity deserves as music greater consideration than it has had at the hands of our conductors.

The fact that the composers of Paine's generation, and those immediately following him, did not discover typically American paths is no cause for wonderment. Their inspiration, their musical sustenance, was drawn almost entirely from Europe. The United States of that period had little to offer them from the musical standpoint in the way of encouragement or assistance. The path of the pioneer in a land which is new to creative values is a difficult one, and it has always amazed me that such a vital force as that typified by Paine's music could exist in the comparatively barren soil and almost hostile climate of that period.

Of the later composers belonging to this same group, we find in the works of Henry F. Gilbert a determined although somewhat self-conscious attempt to embody in his music the dance rhythms of his native land. His music may seem to us today to be somewhat naive, but the importance of this early attempt to break away from European tradition can hardly be overestimated. The

music of George W. Chadwick, Edward MacDowell, and, to a certain extent, Horatio Parker, has for some of us a certain American flavor, though it may be possible that we are thinking of their Anglo-Saxon characteristics rather than traits purely American. There is a certain lusty quality about a work such as Chadwick's *Tam o'Shanter* which, though it may not be typically American, is certainly neither Gallic nor Latin! MacDowell, too, though he owes allegiance both to Scotland and to Scandinavia—a duality which as a matter of racial inspiration is in reality not at all contradictory—nevertheless, has at the same time to my ear the unmistakable echo of America.

In Charles Tomlinson Griffes we find a highly creative, poetic and sensitive genius, whose impressionistic music, written at an early age, gave unmistakable promise of a rich future. What would have come from his pen had he lived to fulfill these promises can only be imagined. It can hardly be debated that, even in his short life-time, he contributed a significant page to the development of the musical history of the United States.



Leaving the music of those who are gone, and coming to the music of contemporary American composers, we are confronted with such an array of differences both in native talents and in direction of endeavor that it is hard to propose any classification that will do the individual composer justice. In these composers we have every type of attitude toward the American scene in music, ranging from entire dislike to warm affection, varying equally widely in respect to the particular part of the American scene which holds their interest and allegiance. We have, for example, in the music of Daniel Gregory Mason the works of a profound and serious scholar, a sensitive and thoughtful musician. He is, however, essentially a classicist, although perhaps one should call him a romantic classicist; for, after all, what classicist has not since the day of Beethoven, and even before, been at times imbued with the spirit of romanticism? His works, unmistakably Anglo-Saxon in type, bear, however, no immediate relation to the American scene as such. As a matter of fact in his delightful *Suite After English Folk-Songs*, he goes behind his immediate environment and seeks inspiration in the traditions of

the race of which he forms a part, a source which seems to me to be one of the most profound as well as natural fountains of creative thought. His *Chanticleer Overture*, on the other hand, catches the spirit of Thoreau with an accent which is both New England and American.

In the works of John Alden Carpenter one finds the combination of great catholicity of taste, varying with a distinct pre-occupation with American life. The ballet, *Birthday of the Infanta*, contains within itself all of the glamor and nostalgia of Spain; whereas the even more interesting *Skyscrapers* glorifies American urban life, and is founded upon distinctively American rhythms. The *Adventures in a Perambulator* are undoubtedly the experience of a typically American baby, though the policeman in that adventure may perhaps be Irish! Finally, in his masterly *Sea Drift*, after Walt Whitman, Carpenter achieves a series of musical portraits which are a fitting embodiment of the moods set forth by the great American poet.

In the same way Leo Sowerby finds inspiration both at home and abroad. His famous *Wind Quintet*, based upon *Pop Goes the Weasel*, is as American as the most ardent nationalist could desire. In his *Ballade for Two Pianos*, he turns to the old Scotch legend of King Estmere for stimulation, but in his symphonic poem, *Prairie*, he is back again on the plains of the Middle West creating what to me is one of his most significant works.

In discussing the various compositions I have mentioned, I do not wish to imply that the Americanism of a work should be judged in terms of its title. An apt illustration which comes to my mind is the *Second Symphony* of Randall Thompson. The *Symphony* as a musical form is constructed with the precision, economy, and clarity characteristic of the most ardent classicist, but the music itself gives forth an aroma distinctly American. It is impossible to conceive that either the second or fourth movements could have been written by anyone who had not been born and reared in these United States.



The long continued discussion as to whether or not Indian and Negro music constitute a suitable folk background for compositions distinctly American in color has been too thoroughly de-

bated for me to be able to add to or detract from the arguments propounded. My own conviction is that no such source is valid unless it forms a natural background for the work of the composer. Any attempt to turn to such material with the self-conscious aim of creating an American music seems totally foreign to the basic theory that music should spring from sub-conscious sources which form an integral part of our emotional and spiritual life. In the case of Negro music this last mentioned condition may actually obtain, for the Negro spiritual has, I believe, had almost as profound an influence on the life of the white race as it has upon the race from which it has sprung.

In this connection the basing of an American idiom upon the so-called "jazz technic" has a real point. It is impossible for any American to escape the influence of our popular music, not only in terms of rhythm but in terms of harmony, melody, and color. Indeed, the technic of the jazz orchestra has already greatly influenced the whole art of contemporary scoring, even though the subject matter may be greatly removed in spirit. Certainly the music of Robert Russell Bennett, George Gershwin, and William Grant Still could have been written only by Americans. It may be, and indeed has been argued that the emotional field is a small one, but it is very probable that the exploration of this source has only begun and that contemporary popular music may prove to be a stimulus in ways more subtle than we have even dreamed of.



In closing, there is another kind of Americanism in music, which also has to do with the American scene but which does not fall readily into any of the classifications so far proposed. This can, in my experience, be best exemplified by the work of a young American composer, Burrill Phillips. His Suite, *Selections from McGuffey's Readers*, performed for the first time two years ago, suggests wide-spread and fascinating vistas. This young man is preoccupied primarily with the American scene as he knows it, a situation analogous to that which is taking place in contemporary literature and painting. Again it is not merely the title which is American; the music derives from a curious and un-self-conscious mixture of purely American idioms, jazz rhythms and

orchestration, and old-fashioned dance and folk tunes. The actual material is not traditional, but the mood is. A new work which we are to play at the coming Festival is entitled, *Court House Square*, and portrays with an unmistakable American accent the familiar scenes which form a vital part of the memories of all of us who were raised in the typically American small town. The *Suite*, needless to say, achieves its climax in a rousing finale entitled, *Saturday Night*.

These Rochester concerts, to which must also be added a long series devoted to student orchestral works, have led me to the firm conviction that the country is teeming with creative talent, talent that, adequately trained as we are now equipped to train it in America, is "all set and ready to go." They are not only all ready to go, but, in my belief, they know where they are going, and the direction in which they are going is toward the creation of a rich American music literature, a literature which, perhaps we will not be able to tag and classify with one label, but which will be an amalgam of all the rich backgrounds, racial, social, and climatic, from which they are sprung.