

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XXIII

### BERNARD ROGERS

HOWARD HANSON

THE works of few contemporary composers reveal a more completely personal form of expression than do those of Bernard Rogers. In this intensely intimate and individual quality lie both his strength and his problem – strength in relation to his art and problem in relation to the listener. For Rogers is neither a conservative nor a modern, neither a classicist nor a romanticist. His form of expression is quite his own and those who wish to understand him must approach his music directly, with as personal a sincerity in listening as he brings to the creation of that music. This is difficult for a public accustomed to evaluate new music in terms of definite modes and manners.

Music of a highly personal character, which is not easily classified, is also difficult to describe. Any characterization, to be effective, should be followed by the playing of the music. Perhaps in some happy future day when the recording of contemporary works becomes the rule rather than the exception, a description such as this may have some real value.

The external characteristics of Rogers' music, however, can be enumerated. Like the music of many other Americans, much of it is intensely rhythmic. It is not, however, rhythmic in an obvious, stylized fashion. It is subtly complex. It involves no patterns repeated until they are hammered into the brain of the listener – a modern device which is not very modern. Any rhythmic pattern set up in the beginning of a Rogers' phrase is almost certain *not* to occur again in the same phrase. These rhythms are not standardized. They bear no relation to Broadway. Rather they may be compared to the artless but highly complex rhythms of primitive music whose minute and seemingly unstudied variations constantly surprise the listener. The rhythmic variations may result in extensions or diminutions of the length of the figure, the measure or the phrase, or they may occur within regular metric divisions. They may effect the melodic line itself or they may exist as purely subordinate phenomena punctuating the flow of sound and heightening its tension.



**BERNARD ROGERS**  
A Drawing by  
E. M. CLARK

This fondness for rhythmic experiment, if it may be called experiment in the hands of so accomplished a master of his craft, is naturally accompanied by a unique use of the percussion section of the orchestra. In Rogers' hands this frequently maligned group assumes virtuosic importance. It should not be inferred however that he is prodigal with these instruments for he employs their resources with great discrimination. In a Rogers' score the balance within the percussion section is quite as important as the balance between the woodwinds. Interesting examples can be found in *Colors of War*, *Dance of Salome*, the *Three Oriental Dances* and the *Third Symphony*.

A second and equally important feature of Rogers' style is his mastery of orchestration. Few contemporaries understand the instruments of the orchestra so completely, and fewer still have so intimate an acquaintance with the unusual possibilities of each of them. So early a work as his tone poem, *Fuji in the Sunset Glow*, already exhibits mastery of the exotic possibilities of orchestral tone. Its sensuous, slowly-changing color conveys a curious bi-sensorial-effect — as though one were both seeing and hearing the music.

Besides this rhythmic gift and command of the orchestra, he has a powerful dramatic urge, all the more poignant for being rigorously controlled. The sense of drama is present in *Supper at Emmaus* and many more of Rogers' works. He has already written one opera, *The Marriage of Aude*, and is now engaged in writing another for radio, commissioned by the League of Composers in co-operation with the Columbia Broadcasting System.

From the harmonic standpoint Rogers is frequently considered by the layman to be a "dissonant" composer, but this is not technically true. His material is essentially simple and direct, he does not use complex sonorities to confound his listeners, he does not use a five-tone sonority when a four-tone or three-tone one would serve the same purpose. The fact that his sonorities are not always conventional in organization may be confusing on first hearing; repetition however discloses a well-ordered harmonic vocabulary which remains consistent. It is not necessary to learn a new vocabulary with each new composition!

This sensitivity to sonorities might lead one to seek an impressionistic technic in Rogers' music but examples are difficult to find. In *Mississippi*, from *Two American Frescoes*, there are instances of the use of one sonority for an extended period. An even clearer example occurs in

the first of the *Three Oriental Dances*. The sonority, however, is projected in terms of a rhythmic pattern so striking that any sense of the use of the sonority for its own sake is lost in the general feeling of rhythmic form and design.

Rogers' polyphonic technic is equally personal. He has a unique ability to break up a long melodic line into small, significant figures and present them as parts of a large formal design in which the element of rhythm is always important. In the use of a familiar device such as the ostinato, for example, the ostinato becomes a constantly changing pattern within an over-all architectural plan until the figure itself disappears in much the same way as the individual pieces of a mosaic are lost to the eye in the appreciation of the complete design.

It is this particular aspect of Rogers' orchestral music which presents special problems to the conductor and performer. These problems are concerned primarily with accuracy of rhythmic detail and dynamics. Every Rogers' score is conceived with a delicate sense of tonal balance. The effect of the whole can be fully achieved only if the graduation of dynamics throughout the orchestra is accurately realized. Furthermore the mosaic-like patterns must be fitted together with the utmost precision. In a Rogers' score everything must be heard, there are no "subordinate" parts.

### III

It may seem anomalous, after the emphasis devoted to Rogers' mastery of orchestral idiom, to say that in the writer's opinion Rogers' greatest works are choral ones. In a very practical sense Rogers is an orchestral composer. His study of the orchestra has been exhaustive and his knowledge of its resources is tremendous. Yet in no work, save perhaps the *Supper at Emmaus*, has he found such complete expression as in his choral music. The emotional content of the words stimulates a melodic gift less apparent in many of his orchestral works. His first large choral piece, *The Raising of Lazarus*, uses the voices in a completely lyrical sense foreign to many contemporaries. This is true not only in the solo passages, such as the poignant "Song of Martha," but also in the mighty concluding chorus. Here we have a fusion of rhythm, orchestral and vocal color, dramatic urgency with diatonic melodic writing.

The next large work, a sacred cantata, *The Exodus*, was succeeded by a still larger one, *The Passion*, which marks what would seem to be a new period for Rogers. This broadly conceived and large-dimensioned

choral piece is both strange and powerful. Excerpts were first given at the Festival of American Music in Rochester in 1942 with myself conducting; it was presented later in complete form at the Cincinnati May Festival under the direction of Eugene Goossens.

Rogers approaches the gigantic problem of setting the *Passion* in a highly personal, subjective, deeply reverent spirit. He has poured into it the full resources of his creative ability and it is, as a consequence, far removed from the conventional. An intensely dramatic, emotional work, it embodies a strong personal reaction. It is conceived in the spirit of the East rather than that of the West, suggesting the barbaric colors of the Orient. A work of startling power, it is an important milestone in contemporary choral writing.

Rogers' principal teachers were Percy Goetschius and Ernest Bloch. He has profited by the thorough training of the former, and has received inspiration from the works of the latter. But his style follows the example of neither though his work undoubtedly derives a spiritual quality from Bloch.

As a teacher, Rogers himself follows the fine traditions of his own masters. He believes in the creative talent of American youth, and he has enthusiasm. More than this, his tolerance permits him to guide young composers who represent many different points of view. He is intolerant only of shoddy workmanship and insincerity. To the many gifted young composers from the Eastman School of Music who have had the benefit of his guidance, he has imparted his credo of artistic integrity, his belief in honest craftsmanship, and his devotion to the development of the individual. As a composer, Bernard Rogers makes important contributions to the growing literature of American music. As a teacher, he shows young American composers the path to significant accomplishment in the creation of an American tradition.

## THE MUSIC OF BERNARD ROGERS

DATE		PUBLISHER
<b>ORCHESTRAL WORKS</b>		
1918	To the Fallen - - - - -	Manuscript
1922	Soliloquy for Flute and Strings - - - - -	C. C. Birchard (Eastman School of Music)
1922	The Faithful, Overture - - - - -	Manuscript
1925	Symphony No. 1 (Adonais) - - - - -	Manuscript
1926	Prelude to Hamlet - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1927	Fuji in the Sunset Glow - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Rhapsody—Nocturne - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Symphony No. II, A $\flat$ Major - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1928	Three Eastern Dances - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1931	Two American Frescoes - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1935	Five Fairy Tales - - - - -	E. F. Kalmus
1936	Symphony No. III, C Major - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1938	Soliloquy for Bassoon and Strings - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1938	Fantasy for Flute, Viola and Orchestra - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1938	The Supper at Emmaus - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1939	The Colours of War - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1939	The Dance of Salome - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1939	The Song of the Nightingale - - - - -	Free Library, Phila.
1940	The Plains: Three Landscapes - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	The Sailors of Toulon - - - - -	Manuscript
1943	Invasion - - - - -	Manuscript
1944	Characters from Hans Andersen - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>CHAMBER WORKS</b>		
1924	Pastorale for Eleven Instruments - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	String Quartet - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>PIANO WORKS</b>		
1937	Music for an Industrial Film (2 pianos) - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>WORKS FOR STAGE AND RADIO</b>		
1932	The Marriage of Aude (opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
1944	Samson (opera) - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>CHORAL WORKS</b> (With soloists and Orchestra)		
1927	The Raising of Lazarus (Sacred Cantata) - - - - -	C. C. Birchard
1933	The Exodus (Sacred Cantata) - - - - -	C. C. Birchard
1941-42	The Passion (With organ) - - - - -	Elkan Vogel, Inc.
1944	Response to Silent Prayer - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>RECORDINGS</b>		
	Soliloquy for Flute and Strings - - - - -	R.C.A. Victor
	Fairy Tales (in Preparation) - - - - -	R.C.A. Victor

Miscellaneous Songs and Arrangements