

AMERICA'S POPULAR MUSIC

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AMERICAN popular music is in the enviable position of needing no apologist. It speaks for itself. From Shanghai to Bermuda and back again, either way around the world, wherever young people gather to dance or to sing, it reigns supreme. Articles about it (like this one, for instance) are gratuitous, adding nothing, subtracting nothing from its value in the eyes and ears of those for whom it is intended; those men and women who are blessed with the healthy faculty of spontaneously recognizing a good tune when they hear it. Articles such as those which appeared in the French highbrow periodicals shortly before this war, articles on *Le Jazz Hot*, which was their name for Swing, are baroque or Victorian, as you will; they are the painted lily come to life, the gilded horseshoe standing uselessly on Grandma's dressing table. The commentator who wishes to write about American popular music resembles the old lady who goes to the priest to confess an amorous lapse of her youth, but who can find no justification for bringing up the matter except that she likes to talk about it.

Some of us thrill to Gershwin and to Beethoven; some of us just to Gershwin and some just to Beethoven. It is easier for me to understand those who thrill just to Gershwin than those who thrill just to Beethoven. And as for those who thrill just to Bartok and Schönberg (without any preliminary training), I just do not understand them at all.

American popular music has been in the ascendant for many years. It occupies the place held by the music of Offenbach in the sixties and that of Johann Strauss in the eighties — except for the fact that the world of today, being so much more unified (in some ways) than was the world of seventy years ago, its range of popularity, both geographically and numerically, is far greater than was that of its beloved predecessors.

When did it begin to emerge? Not in the 1890's; for although there were some fine tunes in the Ragtime Age, tunes which showed we had the stuff, they did not, I believe, attain much more than local fame. *The Geisha* ruled in England and on the Continent perhaps it was the *Valse*

Bleue. Nor was it the music of Victor Herbert which brought us out of our provincial obscurity, for Herbert never competed successfully abroad with the Franz Lehars and the Leo Falls. It seems to me that our Royal Line stems from Louis Hirsch, a man scarcely remembered now though he undoubtedly was the progenitor of Jerome Kern, who in his turn begat George Gershwin who in his turn was the father of Richard Rodgers. These are the men who were able to write music which was gay without being vulgar, sentimental without being trite. With them our popular music acquired a certain mellow patina; we came out of the grange, so to speak, and into the ballroom. Rhythmically more nervous, harmonically more subtle and melodically more refined, they have created a music which is sophisticated without, I believe, being in the least decadent.

Kern's special contribution? A nostalgic charm which derives from the Viennese. He is rhythmically less alert than his successors but his melody is suave and elegant, and his harmony, fastidiously chosen, is wistful and warm. *Very Good Eddie* was a milestone in its day (1915): it is unpretentious yet thoughtful, sentimental and essentially refined. These qualities have pervaded Kern's music ever since: through *Show Boat* down to his more recent scores for the screen — *Roberta*, *Swing Time* and so on. *The Way You Look Tonight* is, I believe, a glamorous tune even without Ginger Rogers dancing in her prime; and *Bojangles of Harlem*, with its magnificent little "extension," is a memorable picture of the inimitable Bill Robinson, lithe, pulsating and vivid! Many of us remember Marilyn Miller, the special and emphatic lilt with which she sang *Look for the Silver Lining*, in *Sally*. It is the recollection of a fresh and gifted young artist who since has died. In our regret for her — for youth, evanescent yet eternally hopeful — lies, perhaps, the essence of Jerome Kern.

Gershwin has everything — or almost. His melody is instrumental rather than vocal but it has the Kern charm plus the Gershwin character and bite. His harmony is attractive, expressive and amusing and his rhythm is irresistible. The form in his best songs is perfect; each is a neat and rounded entity to which the least structural change would come as a shattering blow. When he tried writing in larger forms he failed rather miserably, as I have pointed out in an article written for MODERN MUSIC in 1937. And this leads to the thought that one of the greatest differences between music called popular and music called serious lies in their respective attitudes toward the structure of the phrase. In so-called serious music an element of strength, immensely important but frequently ignored, derives from

the diversity of the structure of the phrases and in the variety of their juxtaposition, one to another. The fact that a five-measure phrase may be followed by one of twelve makes of the serious piece of music a jewel of many facets where balance and interest are the goal rather than symmetry and easy assimilability. And this is one of the purely musical reasons – in addition, of course, to the lesser degree of emotional depth – that Offenbach is no Mozart and Johann Strauss no Brahms. Gershwin's lack as a serious composer lies in his inability to construct phrases in any but the most conventional shapes. It is indeed more than amazing that, sticking to their proverbial last, Gershwin and the rest of his gifted colleagues have been able to bring to music so much which is novel, attractive and even emotionally moving.

Gershwin has a worthy successor in Richard Rodgers. It is amazing how well the Rodgers songs have stood up against the ravages of time which ordinarily destroy popular music so much more quickly than music more seriously conceived. I have followed Rodgers' work for over twenty years: from the time when, as a youth, he composed the music for the end-of-the-summer show at a boys' camp at which his future collaborator was a young counsellor, only slightly older than himself – Lorenz Hart. In one of the songs occurred the following lines: *I'd Go to Hell for Yer – or Philadelphia*, which already has the Hart flavor. As I remember it, the music already had something of the Rodgers flavor too. At this point it might be well to mention the fact that lyrics have played no small part in the shaping of the music of some of our most popular composers. It is hard to think of George Gershwin without thinking of Ira; of Rodgers without Hart. And Cole Porter, composer, is an admirable collaborator for Cole Porter, lyricist. But whereas in Gilbert and Sullivan (top-ranking collaborators in musical history) the greater strength seems to lie in the words, among our own composers precisely the opposite seems to be true: their music lends itself admirably to the dance and one misses the words not at all when the music is heard from the ballroom floor. How different from Gilbert and Sullivan, as anyone can testify who has ever heard *Sweet Little Buttercup* played by the theatre orchestra before the curtain goes up! Rodgers' songs from as far back as the *Garrick Gaieties* (1925) still hold their own while tunes from the admirable crop of successful shows around 1927 – *The Girl Friend*, *Peggy Ann*, *The Connecticut Yankee* – seem to be a permanent part of the repertory of our radio and dance orchestras. Each of his recent successes – *I Married an Angel*, *Babes in Arms*, *the Boys from*

Syracuse – has in it at least one song which is suffused with the youthful and pungent Rodgers charm – gay, humorous, good natured, sentimental, energetic, full of sex appeal – and which is compounded with complete mastery of melody, rhythm, harmony and form. He too, like Gershwin, has tasted comparative failure in his more serious attempts: *Ghost Town*, produced by the Ballet Russe, showed, among other things, a touch of vulgarity. And this is a quality otherwise completely absent from Rodgers' music.

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Victor Herbert has been no favorite of mine. His music seems to me to be trite and rickety; his jaunty airs are the musical counterpart of those lyrics which inevitably make Blue rhyme with You and which each time present this well known rhyme as though it were a new invention. He orchestrated charmingly in the style of Sullivan which, in its turn, derived from Mendelssohn and Mozart. But all the ballyhoo in the world cannot make me think of him as an important composer. Not even historically: for it was only in breaking away from the Herbert tradition that American popular music finally found itself. Equally overrated, in my mind, is Irving Berlin. He has been a highly successful publisher and producer but the best that I can say about his music is that it has been almost miraculously timely; and the worst, that he has had an infallible instinct for tapping the lowest possible denominator in his appeal to the taste of our large American public. In his most typically successful moments his music has had the vulgarity of the comic strip. There have indeed been some good songs in his recent movies: notably in those which he wrote for Rogers and Astaire. Subtle and sophisticated, they are quite different from the songs for which he is famous. One cannot help feeling that in moments such as these Berlin has been subject to novel influences, the effects of which have been both surprising and beneficial.

Swing and jazz? Swing, it appears, is the baroque version of jazz and I think it is doomed to fall, if it has not already done so, by the weight of its own over-elaboration. The spirit of improvisation, the unexpected, the "fine frenzy of the moment," are things much to be desired. But they must, in any art, be combined with clarity and cool-headedness. I understand that Kern disapproves of swing. Rodgers and Hart, in their song *I Like to Recognize the Tune*, have apparently expressed their own feelings, as well as my own, when they tell of "a well known drummer" who "plays his drums like thunder. But the melody is buried six feet under." Boogie-

woogie is an ostinato, another form of variation; and I think the Women's Temperance Leagues will be happy to know that we are inevitably returning to a period of Sanity In Art. A word, however, must be said for the incomparable brilliance of our expert arrangers, of whom Ace No. 1 seems to be Russell Bennett. And for the magnificent technical perfection of the playing of our dance orchestras – not only those nationally famous but also the general run. Were our serious composers blessed with such fine-sounding orchestrations and such smooth performances we should have fewer compositions whose first performances are also their last, and more which would become part and parcel of the general repertory.

As for our lesser men; we have the immensely clever, if slightly decadent (the only one who deserves this adjective) Cole Porter, who errs between the poles of a wonderful, if somewhat over-complicated song like *I Get a Kick Out of You* (can anyone forget the sinuous, restrained and good-humored vulgarity with which it was sung by the incomparable Merman?) and songs which are simple to the point of dadaism. Through the years Ray Henderson has done some fine stuff and so also have Arthur Schwartz, Vincent Youmans and a raft of others. For popular music has been our National Genius. It is no wonder that men like Krenek and Kurt Weill turned to it for direct inspiration and that indirectly it has even influenced such Europeans as Ravel, Milhaud and Stravinsky. It is different from the music of South America in that it is more forthright and less morbid. And as for the rest of the so-called civilized world, their light music has for some years been almost non-existent. We in the United States have found in our popular music a nationalism which is neither self-conscious nor over-blown: an expression of sentiment and vigor which has clothed itself in a form perfectly adapted to its needs. More one can scarcely ask even of great art. Let us hope that in the sterner days which are apparently before us we shall not forget our talent for dancing and singing and that we shall properly cherish what now appears to me to have been something of a Golden Age.