

MUSICAL PORTRAITS

LÉON KOCHNITZKY

A GAME very popular with the avant-garde in pre-war Europe consisted of guessing the name of an illustrious man or woman by first finding his or her equivalent in the animal world or among utensils, tools, foods, beverages, landscapes. An orange dipped in old brandy evoked Byron. A mongrel lost, searching for his master in the night-shrouded snow was an animal representation of Dostoievsky. Is it possible for the human body and "that fiery particle," the soul, to find a musical equivalent, a musical representation in rhythm, melody, and timbre so that, hearing such a "portrait," the average listener can immediately identify it as Mr. So-and-So," or at least exclaim: "This is certainly Washington or Napoleon or Shakespeare?" To the question put this way, the answer is of course no. Music is essentially a non-figurative art appealing, in its higher forms, to the most indeterminate emotion and to the mind's most abstract speculations. Today we all recognize that purely imitative music is of an elementary and inferior kind. The musical interest in compositions entitled *Spinning Wheel*, *Waldwebung*, or even *La Poule* is to be found in their non-imitative elements. Mendelssohn, Wagner, Rameau, used such imitations as a mere canvas upon which to embroider their creative work. Features borrowed from human "days and works" have always attracted musicians and can be traced back to the most primitive tribes. Dances, marches – both military and funeral –, cradle songs, and *chansons de toile* are merely representative of human attitudes. Still they are completely impersonal. Even when a contemporary composer writes *Danseuses de Delphes*, *Minstrels*, *Mirandoline*, *Princesse des Pagodes*, or works similarly named, his evocation is necessarily without the unique, unmistakable characteristic of human personality.

Yet the composer still remains what God created him, a man among other men and women. Although his inspiration be exceedingly remote from any lyric or individualistic feeling, he can rarely forget his fellow men and women, his loves and his hatreds. Composers of opera frequently

contrive a kind of lyrical substitution wherein figures taken from their own intimate life experiences supplement and in fact replace their operatic characters. This substitution may be either conscious or unconscious. According to legend Constance Mozart and her sister are to be found in *Così Fan Tutte*. *Lucia di Lammermoor* is known to depict a real flesh and blood model, cherished by Donizetti and really named Lucia, rather than an abstract figure derived from Scott's novel. And then there is the famous contribution of Mathilde von Wesendonck to the conception of *Isolde*; it is also suspected that the Niebelung Mime is a caricature of Wagner's step-father Gayer.

But even this type of sublimation has little to do with real portraiture. At best it presents a certain analogy with the early Renaissance painters who modeled their saints and prophets upon their contemporaries – patrons or friends.

Nor can the symphonic "program works" written by nineteenth century romantic composers, be rated as musical portraits. The *Eroica Symphony* (Napoleon), Berlioz' *Harold en Italie* (Byron) and Liszt's *Dante* and his *Mazeppa* – all great musical poems, whatever their inspiration – are more in the nature of musical hero-worship than attempts to characterize definite human personalities.

By successive eliminations, however, we may arrive at a definition of a musical portrait. The essential feature obviously is musical representation of a determinate personality, physical and psychological, at a definite instant of its lifetime.

From here further enlightenment can only be given us by composers themselves. They have supplied evidence in goodly numbers. Some who have rendered musical portraits are illustrious, other are now obscure or quite forgotten.

Early eighteenth century France cultivated the genre, and so did romantic Germany and imperial St. Petersburg. It would not require much erudition to compile a catalogue for a musical portrait exhibition, although it would do little to clarify the relationship between the model and the completed work of art. For our purpose, let us recall those harpsichord pieces of François Couperin which, aside from their poetic or humorous title also bear the names of actresses, musicians, friends, and even enemies. Sometimes these allusions are veiled, however, as in *La Grande Menestrandise*; it is today almost impossible to recognize the subject who unwittingly sat for these portraits. Anton Rubinstein's *Kammenoi Ostrov* piano suite would surely have fallen into oblivion but for its introduction,

still appreciated and performed by virtuosi. The now forgotten parts of the suite were merely portraits of now forgotten people who gathered in Kamennoi Ostrov, the stone-island in the Neva. Sir Edward Elgar's orchestral *Enigma Variations* are also a series of portraits. Few people, however, now know who are the figures represented.

It is in this swift obscurity that the chief difference between a plastic human representation and a musical one lies. When such a work is withdrawn from its original temporal and spatial surroundings it loses, good music though it may be, all its power of evocation. The listener is compelled then to have recourse to written program notes or to substitute his own personal portrait gallery for that of the composer.

But the genius of Robert Schumann gives us an exception to this rule. His *Carnaval*, composed in 1835, has not only preserved the freshness and complete candour of its romantic reverie, but still remains easily decipherable. Every intention, every one of the twenty-five year old poet-musician's allusions is understood by the listener today without the assistance of any program. Let scholars consult the first issues of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.* Let them retrace the half-real and half-imaginary league of the *Davidsbündler* and their struggle against the Philistines. The *Carnaval* is but a poetic illustration of this. Schumann, the critic, the fighter, the *Sturm und Drang* hero, is *Florestan*. He is also the tender, shadow-loving youth seen walking in the moonlight through the septolets of *Eusebius*. The graceful and vivacious *Estrella* is Ernestine von Fricken, adopted daughter of the landlord of the Castle of Asch. The notes A-S-C-H develop from the chrysalis (Sphinx) into variegated and fluttering butterfly wings – *Papillons*. *Estrella* is the fiancée of Schumann's early days, whom he abandons for his immortal beloved, Clara, the dreamy and delicate *Chiarina* of the *Carnaval*. Our generation may not be able to see Clara and Ernestine as they physically were, but the psychological contrast between the two girls is fixed forever in these few musical bars, and each of us may recognize these girls and compare them to women of today. The names of Chopin and Paganini are written for all to see in the *Carnaval*. Here is an allusive pastiche for the violin acrobat, and here is another in the nocturne style, which immediately indicates Chopin. The Chopin phrase gives us a temperamental similitude to the model, and even something of his very demeanor. I do not know where, in the whole history of music, among all the attempts to picture human individualities, there is a more perfect achievement than the *Carnaval*. *Ut pictura poesis*.

*In the very first number Schubert devotes a dialogue to praise and criticism of the Chopin *Variations on Don Giovanni's "La ci darem la mano"*. Eusebius and Florestan are characters in the dialogue. In later issues Chiarina and Estrella also take part in the discussion as well as other contemporaries who do not appear in the *Carnavals*: Wieck, Clara's father (nicknamed Raro), and Mendelssohn (Meritis).



VIRGIL THOMSON



JEROME KERN



AARON COPLAND

MUSICAL PORTRAIT PAINTERS OF 1942

Sketches by B. F. Dolbin

Since 1928, Virgil Thomson has been composing musical portraits. He has written more than eighty of them. Some are for a solo violin, some are for a piano and violin, but most of them are for the piano. *Sauguet d'après nature*, *Miss Gertrude Stein as a Young Girl*, and *Cliquet-Pleyel en fa* were the first of this long series. Thomson's inspiration had its source in Gertrude Stein's literary portraits. But he also hoped to find a musical equivalent to draughtsmen's sketches and *croquis*. Many of these portraits he considers a sort of exercise in musical creativeness. They are his scrap-book in much the same manner as the *Inventions* were J. S. Bach's and the *Etudes* were Clementi's. And as these glorious predecessors achieved out of just such an *étude*, splendid works of art, Thomson frequently, in attempting to jot down from life a little sketch of Mrs. Tony Kristians or Miss Florine Stettheimer, writes a very beautiful contrapuntal or canon-piece. In many of these portraits authentic lyricism overflows although the composer has utilized an extreme economy of musical means.

Hearing the finely shaped melody with scarcely any accompaniment, entitled *Mrs. Germaine Hugnet*, one thinks of an eighteenth century chaconne. The polka inspired by Miss Ettie Stettheimer, the "magic flute" that characterizes Dr. Mabile (the famous French psycho-analyst) reminds one of the very best Mendelssohn *Lieder ohne Worte*. Sometimes the composer remains on a rather colloquial level, as in the waltz which represents the Catalan painter, Ramon Senabré. At others, the harmonic investiture is rather sophisticated as in the portrait of Picasso, which one connects with the *époque des baigneuses*. The formal construction, often neglected, appears highly developed and studied in a sort of *sonatine* representing Peggy Guggenheim. Great variety is the chief characteristic of these piano pieces in which the whole psychological gamut is surveyed, from the emotionless and rather dry designs (the Italians would underrate that as *aridita' francese*) to the exquisite romantic *rêverie* in C# minor, representing the Russian exile, Nicolas de Chatelain, an authentic masterpiece of sensitivity and wonderful *nuance*.

Last spring the conductor, André Kostelanetz, commissioned three American composers to write orchestral portraits which he has since introduced in various parts of the country. These works were *A Lincoln Portrait* by Aaron Copland, *The Portrait of Mark Twain* by Jerome Kern, and Virgil Thomson's *Mayor LaGuardia Waltzes* and *Canons for Dorothy Thompson*. The Copland and Kern works I know only from records made during performance. The Thomson pieces I heard Kostelanetz conduct at

the Lewisohn Stadium. Judging from my naturally limited experience with the records, I should say that Copland has written a very effective symphonic poem which retraces episodes from Lincoln's life and vividly sets forth certain characteristic features of the hero. The achievement as a whole, however, belongs rather to the category of program music, along with *Harold en Italie* and *Eulenspiegel*, than to musical portraiture as we have here tried to define it. In his *Lincoln* we find again plentiful evidence of Copland's remarkable capacity to appeal to a large audience and thrill it by purely musical means. The romantic opposition between the *maestoso* theme of the opening (in the rhythm that the eighteenth century musicians called *a la française*, used by Bach in the *Praeludium XVI*, first part) and the *affetuoso* allure of the cantilene, is very beautiful. The introduction of popular melodies in an atmosphere both martial and pastoral, an atmosphere which depicts a battlefield as accurately as a military painter could, is also striking. Yet, effective though it may be, this *Lincoln* cannot be compared with another recent and truly splendid achievement of Copland's, the profoundly impressive *Piano Sonata*, also performed for the first time this summer.

The portrait of Mark Twain by Kern is as good as one could possibly expect it to be. It is a real portrait. Somewhat academic, of the *pompier* variety with its Puccinian, Straussian, and Debussian reminiscences, it contains nevertheless excellent features such as the polka, and it has a poetic atmosphere which helps the auditor evoke Tom Sawyer rather than the equally legendary figure of his creator.

Thomson's austere choral, inspired by Miss Thompson, conveys the unquestionably appropriate effect of grandeur. The waltzes for Mayor LaGuardia, punctuated by the bass drum, also give us a perfect projection of the subject's thundering cordiality while in the heat of his daily work; the huge audience at the Stadium burst into spontaneous laughter upon hearing it. Yet, despite the effectiveness of these two works, I remain more impressed by Thomson's achievements in his scrap book of musical portraits.

Kostelanetz should be encouraged, his generous example followed. There are more musical portrait painters to be discovered in America. Paul Bowles has written several works in this genre for the piano. A few weeks ago Howard Barlow at Carnegie Hall, introduced Robert Russell Bennett's *Etudes*, each of them sub-titled to indicate a personality: *Walter Damrosch*, *Aldous Huxley*, *Noel Coward*. The results are more than interesting. They promise to give us a new American vogue in composition.