

# MODERN MUSIC

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## AMERICAN COMPOSERS. III\*

Louis Gruenberg

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**I**N this teeming period, in which composers are more numerous than at almost any hour in the comparatively brief history of music, the problem of contemporary criticism would seem to be to assign to those men who work in the creative field something of a definite place, to bring the sharp light of an analytical examination of their talents, as exemplified by their works, on what they have done and what one may believe they will accomplish.

Never before have composers in the United States displayed so progressive an attitude. Nor have they been given a greater opportunity than now. Though European musicians and critics believe but little in American music of serious intentions, we are beginning to win their ears. We are gaining recognition on their important festival programs, small as that representation still is.

No composer of parts can hope to be considered a significant figure until he has received international acceptance. The American composer must battle for that goal, if he would be ranked with the composers of the world.



To my mind Louis Gruenberg is one of the few men whose gifts entitle him to such consideration. Born in Russia, he came to us as a child and was educated here. He has lived and studied

\*This is the third in a series of critical portraits to appear regularly from now on in the issues of MODERN MUSIC. The first two, of Ernest Bloch and Edgar Varese, were published in earlier numbers.

abroad, has had the benefit of the teaching in both composition and piano of that great master, Ferruccio Busoni, a name to conjure with in the musical annals of the late nineteenth and first two and a half decades of our century.

Gruenberg has also worked in Vienna and Paris. His outlook is that of a musician of the world. He has been heard abroad as well as here; his name and fame are at this time on an ever growing crescendo.

His equipment, too, is that of an international artist, untrammelled by those things which, for the want of a better word, we call provincial. He has long since acquired a technical mastery which enables him to express himself as can but a handful of our composers. Listening to an orchestral composition by him one is impressed with the thoroughly competent handling of his instrumental forces, his freedom from all that is insecure, tentative, unformed. There are few composers in any land today who surpass him in the knowledge of how to compose on big lines. In short, he is a distinguished musical craftsman, who has studied profoundly the art of composition and who possesses the skill to put into action the results of his learning.

His career as a concert pianist was relinquished so that he might develop his creative side. He has labored arduously to win the place which he has earned in contemporary music.

The road was not an easy one for him. Recognition has come only within the last decade. Now that it has come he works untiringly to maintain a reputation achieved despite numerous obstacles that retarded his advance.



Thirty-five opus numbers comprise his work to date, ranging from Opus 1, consisting of a fairy opera, *Die Hexe*, an *Overture to a Comedy* and a set of piano pieces, *Bric-a-brac*, to his newest opera, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. He has written in all forms, several operas, a symphony, a half dozen or more orchestral pieces, a piano concerto, chamber music, songs, piano music, in short, all that a serious minded composer writes in a quarter of a century's activity. (Gruenberg is forty-six: most of his composing,

it is reasonable to assume, was done in the period referred to.)

His best known works are his *Daniel Jazz* and *The Creation*, both for solo voice and chamber orchestra, his symphonic poem, *The Enchanted Isle*, and his *Jazz Suite* for orchestra. These and many others have attained publication. They have been praised greatly; they largely have made for him the position he has been given in the music of our day.

The *Jazz Suite*, Opus 28, belongs to the period in which the composer devoted a considerable attention to working in this field. He believed then that jazz had a definite place in the scheme of musical composition. For he wrote in addition to the *Daniel Jazz*, the *Jazz Suite* already mentioned, some *Jazzberries*, Opus 24, for the pianoforte, *Jazzettes*, Opus 25, for the violin, and three sets of pianoforte pieces, called *Jazz Masks*, *Jazz Dances* and *Jazz Epigrams*, comprising his Opus 30. Today he seems quite definitely through with all this and speaks of it as a period which he has completed.

Undoubtedly aroused by the imaginative poetry of Vachel Lindsay's *Daniel Jazz* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Creation*, Gruenberg set himself to find appropriate musical expression. Jazz lent itself in his opinion, and in ours too, to such a procedure. Deft as is his treatment in both these works he has in neither of them written music equal in quality to the poems.

All the jazz works are of a striking cleverness, replete with technical exhibitions that confirm one's opinion of their composer's skill. But they are similarly artificial; they lack pulse. One feels quite certain that they are essays propounding a jazz theory, rather than emotionally felt utterances.

Only the *Jazz Suite* for orchestra (of the entire jazz group) stands out as an achievement of personal quality. And this may be attributed in a measure to the uncannily dexterous instrumentation. It certainly is not to be charged to the themes themselves, for they are no better than their weakest link, in this case, jazz, a mode of expression diametrically opposed to thematic distinction.



In 1919 Gruenberg planned a series of four tone poems, two of

which, *The Hill of Dreams* and *The Enchanted Isle*, he has written. The former won a prize in 1919, the latter was begun before the composer left for Europe the same year and completed a year or two ago, having lain in manuscript form for some eight years. In re-writing it a few years ago Gruenberg employed that knowledge which he had acquired in the intervening period, so that the work, although conceived in what he chooses to call the wistful romantic days of his youth, has a genuine validity today. No one who knows the Gruenberg music will fail to recognize in it traits that he has exhibited in his composing career. Its faults are a certain prolixity, lack of definition of style and lack of melodic authenticity. Its merits, superb orchestral painting, individuality of instrumental timbre and perfect adjustment of values.

This symphonic poem, which embodies, according to Gruenberg's own statement, at least two periods in his career, seems to us despite its faults his best single composition.

Listening to it one almost wishes that he had halted here and worked out his future along lines which this poem indicates are for him a natural and spontaneous expression.

But the tendency of the creative artist is ever to enter on a new adventure. So with Gruenberg. Like most moderns he has little use for thematic development and a symphonic poem without it cannot hold the attention or interest of an audience. Thus symphonic poems have gone out of style. Festivals of modern music know them not. Twenty-odd year old composers scorn the form. Yet what has come to take its place in orchestral programs?



Over the creative world of our day hangs a cloud. It is one of uncertainty of direction. Where lies salvation? is the cry. And no one knows. Gruenberg is one of the finest thinkers we have. His mind is a deeply penetrating one, philosophic, understanding. He belongs to the meditative school, if one can classify him as belonging to any. Music is to him a far more serious matter than it is to many of his colleagues. He is the most sincere of men; at the same time there is an intellectual, almost scientific side to his



LOUIS GRUENBERG  
An unpublished sketch  
by the late  
ENRICO CARUSO

makeup, which is in direct conflict with his natural sincerity.

He wants to sing in his music, yet he can not allow himself to. Try as he will he finds himself suppressing the spontaneous melos. Not in one work but in a dozen do we note this. Instead of a number of string quartets in the regular divisions of the sonata form, Gruenberg writes for string quartet *Four Whimsicalities*, Opus 13, *Four Indiscretions*, Opus 20, and now again *Four Diversions*, Opus 32. Such titles do not require singing; what is more they forbid it. That being the case the conflict disappears. Not musical you say, viewing such a situation. Of course not, psychological.

This then is the problem of Louis Gruenberg. Make certain that he has sensed, if not understood it. For his is a mentality of a very superior order. Pessimism and geniality are blended in him as in few creative men of our time. They are not at peace. Because he controls only imperfectly his fundamentally pronounced gift must he be ever in search of new idioms.

His music is the outcome of study, thought, talent, industry, and sincerity. Of that we need have no doubt. But up to now it has taken on the outer aspect of more than a few manners of utterance. We do not mean influences; for all composers are influenced by men who have preceded them. Gruenberg has rather allowed himself to write in too many styles, and in so doing has not established his own. Hearing his music you can not recognize it as his. Pronounced physiognomy is lacking. Until he can bring to his creative art the outcome of his deepest experience, an incontrovertible personal something, which as yet he has not succeeded in doing, his achievement can not be called significant.

One has no assurance that he will do so. Nor has he given us a hint that he will continue in his present path. But with his big gift, his prodigious composing knowledge and his fine sincerity of nature, we earnestly hope that the next decade will find him writing music that will be indisputably the music of Louis Gruenberg.

## LIST OF WORKS BY LOUIS GRUENBERG

OPUS	PUBLISHER
1. a) Die Hexe. Fairy Opera	C. C. Birchard
b) Overture to a Comedy (orchestra)	Manuscript
c) Bric-a-brac (piano pieces)	Manuscript
2. Die Götterbraut. Opera in One Act	Manuscript
3. Suite for Piano and Violin	Schirmer
4. Puppet Suite for Orchestra	Manuscript
5. Impressions for Piano	Composers' Music Corporation
6. Quartet for Strings	Manuscript
7. Trio for Piano, Violin and Violoncello	Manuscript
8. Piano Concerto	Manuscript
9. First Sonata for Piano and Violin	Composers' Music Corporation
10. Hill of Dreams (orchestra)	Manuscript
11. The Enchanted Isle (orchestra)	C. C. Birchard
12. Bagatelles for Violoncello	Composers' Music Corporation
13. Four Whimsicalities for String Quartet	Manuscript
14. The Dumb Wife. Opera in Two Acts	Manuscript
15. Eight Songs	Composers' Music Corporation
16. Polychromatics (piano)	Universal Edition
17. First Symphony for Orchestra	Universal Edition
18. Second Sonata for Piano and Violin	Universal Edition
19. Poem for Violoncello	Universal Edition
20. Four Indiscretions for String Quartet	Universal Edition
21. Daniel Jazz	Universal Edition
22. Animals and Insects (songs)	Universal Edition
23. The Creation	Universal Edition
24. Four Songs	Universal Edition
25. Jazzberries (piano)	Universal Edition
26. Jazzettes (violin)	Universal Edition
27. Vagabondia for Orchestra	Manuscript
28. Jazz Suite for Orchestra	Cos Cob Press
29. Music to an Imaginary Ballet (orchestra)	Cos Cob Press
30. a) Jazz-Masks	Universal Edition
b) Jazz-Dances	Universal Edition
c) Jazz-Epigrams	Universal Edition
31. Nine Colors (orchestra)	Cos Cob Press
32. Four Diversions for String Quartet	Cos Cob Press
33. Quintet for Piano and String Quartet	Cos Cob Press
34. Overture to a Farce (orchestra)	Cos Cob Press
35. Jack and the Beanstalk. Opera	Juilliard Foundation