

the masses if it is satisfied to embellish its art and reputation simply with the aesthetic virtues of good chamber music. By playing beautiful works beautifully the small ensemble can gather only a small clientele. It ought to be satisfied with that and its art. No doubt the audience would increase, for a moment, if the first violinist were to kill his wife, swim the English Channel, or marry the Queen of Roumania, but music cannot make the first page consistently without contamination.

The American vaudeville circuit is an accurate meter of the public taste. Its morality is simple: acts applauded are booked, and those little approved are quickly discarded. Variety is the essence of vaudeville. I went the other day to hear a concert pianist who is having success in variety. Her program, which by the Orpheum standard is typically representative of the best in music, consists, from city to city throughout America, of Paderewski's *Minuet*, Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*, Beethoven's *Turkish Patrol*, and Saint-Saen's *The Swan*. If this artist were to dare play a great sonata she would risk ejection from her engagement as a "flop."

To draw the universal crowd art must compete in the mart of showmanship with "Babe" Ruth, and the Prince of Wales. Supreme music cannot, any more than Keats, commune with the heart of the multitude, any more than Santayana can speak to its mind. Intelligence and specialized sensibility are not distributed with the voting privilege.

*Alexander Fried*

## THE BALLADS OF THE NINETIES

THAT dim remote period, affectionately spoken of as the Gay Nineties, is fast assuming the proportions of a cult. Thomas Beer sought to capture some of its elusive wistfulness between the highly decorative covers of *The Mauve Decade*; Gilbert Gabriel succeeded in saving much of its genial charm; Mark Sullivan reported it faithfully and accurately. Now comes Dr. Sigmund Spaeth and in his most recent opus, *Read Em and Weep*, (published by Doubleday Page and Company) collects for the edification and irreverent amusement of a sophisticated generation the artless balladry of that period.

Although he has covered the entire field of popular music in America with commendable scholarly thoroughness, the chief attraction of his book will be found in the latter part in which he discusses the sentimental sob songs of the last half of the past century and gives the words and music of such classics as *Break the News to Mother*, *After the Ball*, *My Mother was a Lady*, and *Take Back Your Gold*.

To us whose ears have become attuned to beauties of contemporary jazz the songs sound indescribably quaint and ingenuous. True, they all have tunes and frequently good ones. This is hardly strange as the classical ancestry of many of them is readily apparent. The successful writer of popular music is the one who steals from the best musicians. Too many composers (Heaven save the mark!) today are trying to write their own tunes. Rob them of their harmonic clichés and their rhythmic stereotypes and you leave them bankrupt. In the gay nineties they wrote melodies even though they stole them.

But the lyrics are the principal source of innocent merriment to us sophisticated moderns. They had, of course, a sort of rudimentary literacy and invariably a plot. But compare these simple primitive efforts with the songs of our more enlightened age. Take for instance a gem of present day poesy, a highly cerebral effort from the gifted pen of Mr. Ira Gershwin, brother and lyricist to the inspired George. This is the song hit from their show *Oh Kay*:

“Do, do, do, what you’ve done, done, done before,  
Baby,

Do, do, do, what I do, do, do adore,  
Baby,

Let’s try again, sigh again, fly again to Heaven

Baby, see, it’s A, B, C,

I love you and you love me.

I know dear what a beau, beau, beau should do  
Baby,

So don’t, don’t, don’t say it won’t, won’t, won’t come true,  
Baby.

We are the inheritors of the ages. No wonder Dr. Spaeth calls his volume *Read Em and Weep*.

*Newman Levy*