



EDWARD BURLINGAME HILL

*Portrait by*

KATHRYN NASON

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XIV

### Edward Burlingame Hill

GEORGE HENRY LOVETT SMITH

**H**ALFWAY down the long, shelf-like first balcony in Symphony Hall during any Saturday evening of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's season are two adjacent pairs of seats long inhabited by Koussevitzkys and Hills. The conductor seldom sits there; indeed an amputated handful of occasions would serve to count his appearances off the stage. But as regularly as the conductor is on the stage, Edward Burlingame Hill is in his accustomed place with his wife, Madame Koussevitzky and the distinguished guest of the moment.

The conductor and the composer have been close friends since Serge Koussevitzky arrived in America in 1924 laden with new works for first performances. Hill was among his discoveries here and he has introduced with care and considerable success each new score. He has often been quoted on Hill's work. "It shows the mature intelligence and understanding of a true artist, one who has the best interests of music as an art always before him in the molding of his ideas."

It is not possible to draw a cunning likeness of a man who has learned to be brilliantly normal. Hill does not, like Hindemith, make himself appear tinier than he is by sitting on a low hassock; nor like Stravinsky does he dramatize the thin lines of his face with gargantuan spectacles. The chances are that if Hill were of less than normal height he would try to rise to normality; if he had extreme features he would unquestionably minimize rather than intensify their eccentricity. Perfection of understanding, keenness of wit as dry as a 1938 *Brut*, as glowing with inner sparkle and intuition, are qualities that transfigure this "normal" man. Reliant upon regular exercise, energetic, and endowed with a mind of lightning rapidity, he is at once eager for stimulus and sensitive to it. Once when Koussevitzky signalled for his appearance on the stage after a performance in Carnegie

Hill, and Hill appeared belatedly, covered with cobwebs, after a frantic expedition in the labyrinthian cellars of the Hall, a critic reported in some disillusionment that he looked "just like a business man!" Hill recounts the tale as a compliment.

He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts on September 9, 1872, the grandson of Thomas Hill, mid-century President of Harvard (1862-1868), and son of Henry Barker Hill, Boylston Professor of Chemistry at the University. He was inoculated with music at his father's house where he heard the eminent critic and writer on music, William Foster Apthorp, play the classics with especial attention to the works of Bach, a favorite composer of his father's, who was an accomplished singer of *lieder*. At Harvard he studied with John Knowles Paine, pioneer in American university instruction in music and, after graduation with George Chadwick, Arthur Whiting and Charles Marie Widor.

A tentative occupation as teacher of piano and harmony and composer of numerous published songs and piano pieces was interrupted in 1908 by a commission to write a ballet-pantomime *Jack Frost in Midsummer* for a benefit performance to aid the Chicago Orchestra. At once the composer cast off the all-pervasive influence of MacDowell, the dominant figure in American music at the time, and wrote in this first score for orchestra a music that suggested his future predilection.

As a result of the success of this venture, he was invited to teach in the Division of Music at Harvard, where he has remained since 1908, lecturing on music history, French and Russian music, and orchestration. He has long served as its chairman.

Hill's next major venture was a setting of Ernest Dowson's poem, *Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration* for women's voices and orchestra. Hearing the score in Birmingham, England, in 1911, Ernest Newman became interested in this "American" composer and his work. He settled at once on certain important characteristics of the writer: "Mr. Hill has evidently studied all that is good in modern music, but he has assimilated it and has been able to add something of his own to it: nowhere do we get the impression of a mere echo or imitation. . . Mr. Hill evidently has a delicately poetical inspiration, and he has reproduced the half mystic, half passionate mood of the poem with singular success.

The music falls very gratefully on the ear throughout, the orchestration being particularly effective."

A second pantomime *Pan and the Star* (1912) was hailed as significant American theatre music. Hill has long cherished the notion of writing music for an abstract ballet, the dancing to be determined simply by the inspiration and meaning of the music. The theatre is ideally suitable for music of such rhythmic propulsion and color as he writes.

Two symphonic poems *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (1915) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1919) were considered "terse, incisive, concentrated, economical." The first and second suites of *Stevensoniana* date from 1915 and 1922 respectively. More than any other works they have contributed to Hill's reputation as a composer of delicate and discreet humor, facile invention and whimsical fancy. The orchestration is both apt and witty, the harmony piquant and characterful, the rhythms alert and propulsive, the feeling sincere. Both suites were played widely in many performances. With the symphonic poems they represent the height of their composer's experiments through what one may call the "second" period. He had been invited to represent America at the *Congrès d'Histoire et de l'Art* at Lyons, and to lecture at the University of Strassburg. Material used in these lectures and in a series of Lowell lectures given in Boston found place in a study of *Modern French Music* which appeared in 1924 and remains the standard work on French music from the Franco-Prussian war to the date of its publication. Since the inception of his course in French music in 1910, and his quick mastery of the orchestra during the preceding decade, his work had lost whatever trace of MacDowell's influence that had adhered to it from his student days. Rimsky-Korsakoff, whose *Scheherazade* and *Spanish Caprice* have always been called the "Bible" and "Book of Common Prayer" of his instrumentation courses at Harvard, and d'Indy, Dukas and Ravel have reared their heads in the work of this period, but rather as counsellors than as models. Whatever devices Hill has acquired from contemporary practice have been made wholly his own and elaborated in an entirely individual fashion.

The first two symphonies of Sibelius were generally considered

to be patterned after Tchaikovsky until the succeeding five exhibited the precise spirit and idea that had motivated the first two. After the appearance of the others, it became the fashion to note the peculiar characteristics that made the first and second so individual. In Hill's case, the critics found the label of "French impressionism" and proceeded to overwork it as a synonym for his style. It is true that Hill's music stems from sources similar to those that gave birth to the muses of Debussy, Fauré, and Ravel. These men matured their styles as contemporaries, responding to program influences, to the illusive charm of impressionist poetry, to the dazzling and strident color of the painting of their time. (Hill regularly counsels his students of orchestration to seek relaxation and inspiration in frequent visits to collections of the effulgent aquarelles of John Singer Sargent and Dodge Macknight and, above all, the mysteries and drolleries of nature.) But as the Frenchmen have matured in their own land so has the American in his. Hill's music is not a reflection of French impressionism; it is an independently grown New England impressionism, derived from the ecstasy and color of the composer's native haunts. Reading back from the symphonies, *Lilacs*, and the late chamber music, one is impressed with the steady growth of this impressionistic technic, a growth through the Americanism of MacDowell, through the discoveries of the impressionistic movement, to a kind of speech that is at once American and individual, native New England and characteristic. In the early piano pieces of 1900, despite their evident immaturity, may be observed traits and devices that were being matured for the precise purpose of a musical description of New England. One of the few successful American composers to draw his inspiration from his own land, his music is idiomatically of our day and our feeling.

It is with *Lilacs*, a tone poem after his friend Amy Lowell, that Hill found this individual voice. Stirred by the lines:

"Lilacs,  
False blue.  
White,  
Purple,  
Color of lilac,  
Your great puffs of flowers  
Are everywhere in this my New England."

he has written a sensuous, persuasive score, with a peculiar fragrance to the instrumentation that sets him at once apart as an American composer whose means are the servant of his thought, and whose style, while alert and contemporary, is obedient to the subtleties of penetrating imagination. There is no vagueness, so often found in music of impressions, but evidence in every significant detail of the designing mind.

The *First Symphony* (1927) has a disarming simplicity. In the *Second Symphony* (1929) and in the *Third* (1936) it is still more developed. The *Violin Concerto* shows a further simplification of style and an avoidance of the chromaticism that one may note in Hill's earlier work. The fault, if it may be called one, of chromatics, had already been transcended in the *String Quartet in C-major* (1935) which exists also in a version for string orchestra. It is one of Hill's most characteristic works, sprightly, witty, energetic, contrived by a stylist; it has a slow movement of deep feeling and effective contrast.

Jazz has reared its head to be mimicked and adorned in the epigrammatic *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra* (1931), the *Jazz Studies for Two Pianos* (1922-1938) and other works. The composer has extracted its bouquet.

The distinguished *Piano-Quartette* of 1937 and the effective *Sonata for Two Clarinets* (unaccompanied) of 1938 show Hill progressing more and more toward the ultimate simplification and personal expression for which he has been eloquently striving during the last ten years. As a master stylist, it is certain that he will retain the best qualities of his work in this growth. His skill in instrumentation, development, contrast and transition assures the technical perfection of his future music. The sting of his harmony, with its meticulous avoidance of the commonplace, and the vigor of his rhythm suggest even more propulsive vitality: the high spirits, wit, and charm of his future work he cannot alter. All that one can require of him is the rejection of facility for its own sake, the constant turning inward that the essential spirit may stand forth. What his work may lose in wit it will gain in depth. As it stands today, it is an accurate reflection of the complexity and sophistication of the modern mind.



## WORKS BY EDWARD BURLINGAME HILL

### DATE

- 1907 Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration  
(After Ernest Dowson) — For women's voices and orchestra.
- 1915 Stevensoniana (First Suite)
- 1915 The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere  
(Symphonic Poem after Stephen Phillips)
- 1919 The Fall of the House of Usher  
(Symphonic Poem after Edgar Allan Poe)
- 1920 Waltzes for Orchestra
- 1922 Stevensoniana (Second Suite)  
Published by G. Schirmer
- 1922-36 Jazz Studies for Two Pianos  
Published by G. Schirmer
- 1924 Scherzo for Two Pianos and Orchestra
- 1925 Sonata for Flute and Piano
- 1925 Sonata for Clarinet and Piano
- 1926 Lilacs (after Amy Lowell)  
Published by Cos Cob
- 1927 Symphony No. 1, in B-flat
- 1929 Symphony No. 2, in C
- 1930 An Ode for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra—For chorus and orchestra
- 1931 Concertino for Piano and Orchestra
- 1932 Sinfonietta
- 1933 Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (Revised 1937)
- 1934 Sextet for Wind Instruments and piano in B-flat  
Published by the Society for Publication of American Music
- 1935 String Quartet in C  
(Also a version for String Orchestra in 1936, titled Concertino for String Orchestra)
- 1936 Symphony No. 3, in G
- 1937 Quartet for Piano and Strings in A
- 1938 Sonata for Two Clarinets, Unaccompanied
- 1938 Concertino No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra

*Note:* Not listed are many early songs and piano pieces published by Breitkopf & Härtel and G. Schirmer. Other performed works not included in Mr. Hill's list are the following: 1907, Ballet-Pantomime Jack Frost in Midsummer; 1912, Second Pantomime Pan and the Star; 1920 Prelude to The Trojan Women of Euripides; 1927, Divertimento for Piano and Orchestra.