

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XX

### DOUGLAS MOORE

OTTO LUENING

**D**OUGLAS MOORE'S creative work is characterized by its variety. His compositions do not readily fall into categories modern or conservative. To each task his approach is new; he imitates neither his own works nor those of others. His teachers, d'Indy, Bloch and Boulanger, influenced his craftsmanship, though his music is not warped by fixations which are recognizable in the works of others. Esthetically perhaps, it was Horatio Parker who set him on the path he has consistently followed.

Within the variety of his output there is, however, a unifying factor, and that is his melodic drive. In spite of external stylistic differences each work reveals a new aspect of this lyric urge – whatever the purpose of a particular composition, it is achieved primarily through the melodic-rhythmic line.

Moore has been strongly influenced by the rhythms and inflections of English prose and poetry. Extremely sensitive to dramatic values, he creates a sense of dramatic tempo and uses dramatic contrasts, so that his music often becomes a play in sound.

He possesses the one quality which can't be learned, that is, the desire to sing. In his music this is manifested as an emotional drive; his spring of melody seems everflowing. Harmonic innovations, new rhythmic devices, complicated contrapuntal manipulations may follow as a consequence of this drive. More often however in Moore's music tried and well known harmonic progressions take on new life, a rhythmic pattern is animated and counterpoint becomes counter-melody through the magic of his song.

Since early childhood he has had an interest in the stage, a fact of importance to his development as a composer. From 1921 to 1926 he was an actor in leading roles at the Cleveland Playhouse. A second extra musical influence has been his association with three distinguished American poets. His friendship with Archibald MacLeish began in prep school, a chance meeting with Vachel Lindsay in 1923 was partially responsible for Moore's creative awakening, and his collaboration with Stephen Vin-



DOUGLAS MOORE  
drawing by  
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cent Benét has been long and fruitful. Musically his earliest inspiration was drawn from the romantics – Chopin, Grieg, McDowell and Tchaikovsky, lesser salon composers, and the Broadway composers of the first two decades of the century, Jerome Kern, Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml and Harry von Tilzer. While at Yale, Moore wrote college songs, and during his service in the Navy (1917-19) composed a number of pieces for the entertainment of the sailors on watch. Before joining the Navy he spent two years in graduate study with Horatio Parker at Yale, and after the war some time in Paris working intermittently with d'Indy and Nadia Boulanger. Returning to America, he carried on his music studies with Bloch. For some years he has been a member of the teaching staff of Columbia University where he is now Professor of Music.

His earliest songs to MacLeish texts (1910) were typically American in feeling; *The Song of a Canoe* is as good as the best American lyrics of that period. In *Ghosts* (1919) his use of modal mixtures introduces a technic which he has developed since and which might be labelled poly-modal. *The Pageant of P. T. Barnum* is too well established to delay us here but other early works need to be discussed, for they are less well known to musicians and the public. Just why this should be is hard to say, for some of them certainly belong in the permanent American repertory.

Moore's association with the American Laboratory Theatre resulted in the incidental music for *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* in 1925. Shortly afterward Paul Rosenfeld posed the question in *An Hour with American Music* ". . . whether Douglas Moore is not the most competent and tasteful composer of incidental music among the Americans." The *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1929), his first essay in the field of chamber-music, is still a grateful work to play and to hear. In the first movement, dissonances, sharp and daring in their relationship to the rest of the piece, are brought into the texture with great skill.

The *Symphony of Autumn* (1930) has been performed twice within the last year and four times altogether. The orchestration is clear, economical, and expressive; the musical ideas noble and interesting. Unusual acoustical effects obtained by the juxtaposition of tonally unrelated seconds and fourths in the second movement, are combined with other strange instrumental colors in a very personal orchestral statement. Because of some intricate rhythmic patterns, the last movement is difficult to execute, but when properly performed the effect is fresh and brilliant.

The *Overture on an American Tune*, originally entitled *Babbitt*, was composed in 1931. This miniature tone poem describes our old friend in

a sympathetic manner, weaving some familiar Americanisms into the symphonic pattern with great skill. The orchestration is neat, yet almost Straussian in its power of projection, the rhythms are lively, the movement forward has irresistible momentum. Its form is just right.

The three-act opera, *White Wings*, based on Philip Barry's play, was composed in 1935. After hearing parts of the piano score several years ago, the impression remains that it is a dramatically unified work which should be performed.

Moore's only string quartet (1933) compares favorably with much contemporary quartet literature. The first movement is polymodal, remarkably lucid, with a great feeling for transparent part writing. Carefully spaced dissonances augment the natural resonance of the quartet in a unique manner. The lyric mood is personal and poetic. In the second movement a marchlike, American, folkish tune is clearly developed. Both movements reveal a growing mastery of form. The third is less definite in outline but the melodic lines are in themselves expressive. The finale is dance-like in character, carefully developed and in sharp rhythmic contrast to the others.

Like any composer who follows his own path, Moore's problem has been to achieve a mastery of style. Not that his early works don't wear well; on the contrary, they still seem remarkably spontaneous and undated. Nevertheless they have their obvious weaknesses. At times even his melodic gift fails to save him from falling into harmonic dead spots. The orchestration is occasionally muddy and one instrumental group may cancel out the other. Sometimes the form is rough and unbalanced; an undue abbreviation of ideas may leave one breathless; a too sudden ending, too startling in its context, may bring one up short.

With *White Wings* and the *String Quartet*, Moore seems to have reached a turning point in his career. *The Headless Horseman*, a high school operetta, the book and lyrics by Stephen Vincent Benét after Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, appeared in 1937. This is Gebrauchsmusik at its best. The work has been widely performed and a second edition is being printed. *Simon Legree* (1937), a setting of Vachel Lindsay's poem for male chorus and piano accompaniment, is also a convincing demonstration of how this type of composition can be realized in the American idiom. Its verbal inflections are beautifully placed; the accompaniment is a unit in itself, yet it supports the singers. The work has the character of some of our great ballads.

The well known *Devil and Daniel Webster*, produced in 1939 by the

American Lyric Theatre, in association with The League of Composers, was set to a libretto adapted by Stephen Vincent Benét from his famous short story. This one-act opera moves with increasing dramatic momentum from beginning to end. It is one of the few American operas in which the textual problem is solved; every word can be heard. The music is transparent but never thin. Traditional harmonic materials are used in a highly personal way. Altogether it is one of the brightest and most natural of contemporary operas.

For the documentary film, *Power and the Land* (1940), Moore's scoring is more brilliant than usual. He has drawn on movie devices to augment his orchestral language. His approach is symphonic, and the music is a compact addition to the picture. As an orchestral suite it still needs some slight adjustments to make it compelling for a concert audience.

The *Passacaglia* for organ (1939) is a solemn piece in which the rise and fall of the melodic lines carries one to a majestic, affecting close. The contours of these lines have special interest because each one leads into the other without a break. It is a sound pattern in which even the arpeggios and scale passages fall into melodic relationships. The piece evokes sombre and tragic images and is a moving expression of our time.

Undoubtedly the most mature expression of Moore's gifts so far is to be found in *Thou Hast Made Me*, one of three songs set to poems by John Donne in 1942. Here his strongest qualities are integrated in a completely unified musical statement. The logic of the voice leading produces harmonies that are at once daring and smooth, the vocal line is expressive without being lush. The song moves us by its power.

His most recent work, the *Prayer for the United Nations*, for alto solo, chorus, and orchestra, composed for the Treasury Department in 1942-43, is an adaptation by Stephen Vincent Benét of President Roosevelt's words. Moore has contrived here a forthright vocal setting whose orchestral score is only moderately difficult. This is solid and impressive Gebrauchsmusik of high calibre.

A review of Moore's work leads to the conclusion that here is a man who has expressed his American heritage and his own ideals. His recent pieces bring stronger dramatic elements and more sombre undertones to a musical language already abundant in lyric, poetic charm and genial humor. The gradual mastery and the crystallization of his style have earned for him a place as one of the most individual leaders in his generation of American composers.

# THE MUSIC OF DOUGLAS MOORE

## ORCHESTRAL WORKS

		Publisher
1922	Four Museum Pieces - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	Pageant of P. T. Barnum - - - - -	C. C. Birchard (Eastman)
1928	Moby Dick - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	A Symphony of Autumn - - - - -	Manuscript (G. Schirmer, agent)
1931	Overture on an American Tune - - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Suite from Power and the Land - - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Suite from Youth Gets a Break - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	Village Music - - - - -	Music Press

## CHORAL WORKS

1932	God Rest You Merry Gentlemen, a cappella - - - - -	Carl Fischer
1937	Simon Legree (Vachel Lindsay), men's chorus, piano accompaniment -	Carl Fischer
1937	Perhaps To Dream (S. V. Benet), women's chorus, a cappella - -	Carl Fischer
1938	Dedication (Archibald Mac Leish), mixed voices, a cappella - - -	Arrow Press
1941	Prayer for England (W. R. Benet), men's chorus, piano accompaniment	Boosey Hawkes
1943	Prayer for the United Nations (S. V. Benet), alto solo, chorus, orchestra or piano - - - - -	H. W. Gray

## CHAMBER MUSIC

1926	The Ballad of William Sycamore (S. V. Benet) For baritone, flute, trombone, piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Sonata, for violin and piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1933	Quartet for Strings - - - - -	Society for the Publica- tion of American Music
1942	Quintet, for woodwinds and horn - - - - -	Manuscript

## SONGS

1929	The Cupboard (de la Mare) - - - - -	Harcourt Brace
1928	Fingers and Toes (Guiterman) - - - - -	Harcourt Brace
1937	Adam Was My Grandfather (S. V. Benet) - - - - -	Galaxy
1942	Three Divine Sonnets of John Donne - - - - -	G. Schirmer
1942	The Token (Donne) - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	The Sea That Is My Songs (Mirza Schaffy) - - - - -	Manuscript

## PIANO WORKS

1920	Waltz - - - - -	Manuscript
1921	Museum Piece - - - - -	Axelrod
1935	Careful Etta - - - - -	Carl Fischer
	Fiddlin' Joe - - - - -	Carl Fischer
	Grievin' Annie - - - - -	Carl Fischer

## FOR ORGAN

1927	Scherzo - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	A March for Tamburlaine - - - - -	Manuscript
1939	Dirge (Passacaglia) - - - - -	H. W. Gray

## MOTION PICTURES

1940	Power and the Land (documentary) - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Youth Gets a Break (documentary) - - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Bip Goes to Town (documentary) - - - - -	Manuscript

## STAGE WORKS

1925	Incidental Music, Twelfth Night - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Incidental Music, Much Ado About Nothing - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Incidental Music, The Road To Rome (R.E. Sherwood) - - - - -	Brady and Wiman
1934-5	Opera, White Wings (Philip Barry) - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	The Headless Horseman, operetta (S. V. Benet) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1938	The Devil and Daniel Webster, opera (S. V. Benet) - - - - -	Boosey Hawkes