



**DARIUS MILHAUD**  
Self-portrait, 1940  
Made shortly after  
arriving in America

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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## OUR LYRIC THEATRE

DOUGLAS MOORE

SUPPOSE you lived in a city where there was only one theatre. For four months of the year this theatre housed a company which included Katherine Cornell, Helen Hayes, Lynn Fontanne, Paul Muni, Alfred Lunt and Lawrence Olivier. The repertory consisted of *Dr. Faustus*, *Hamlet*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. Once a season, perhaps, as a gesture toward the contemporary stage, a production (without any of the leading members of the company) might be given of a play not by Werfel, Kapek, O'Casey or O'Neill but by someone who conscientiously imitated the style of Ibsen or Pinero. This would immediately prove a box office failure. After the season ended a popular priced series of the same repertory without stars might be available. You would probably support the theatre as a fine cultural enterprise, send the children to the Saturday matinees and drop in occasionally yourself, but you would miss your plays by Sherwood, Saroyan, Anderson, Wilder and Barry. There wouldn't be any plays by these men anyway for without a chance for production, they would turn their talents in other directions. If someone came along with a new model and some new ideas the managers of the theatre would very properly say that their public wouldn't understand such a piece, and the critics, in between long articles on the meaning of "To be or not to be," would deplore the lack of inspiration of contemporary playwrights and sigh for the never to be appearing genius who would write the great American drama.

This is the picture of the lyric theatre in America today. Only familiar works of familiar composers need apply. It is like a museum dedicated to the greatness of the past. But even the art museum has occasional exhibi-

tions of contemporary painters and sculptors. In Pittsburgh the annual contemporary show is the high point of the year. In Cleveland, in addition to housing the Carnegie Institute exhibition when it travels all over the country, there is an annual May exhibition of local artists. Practically the entire museum is given over to it. The Cleveland public is thus made aware of the creative art which is flourishing in the city. What is more, the museum encourages the purchase of works of local artists and every year a number of sales are made right in the museum.

Modern music has had a difficult time establishing itself in this country. One reason is undoubtedly the experimental character of much that has been written by twentieth century composers. Another reason is that we have been developing somewhat tardily as a musical audience and the old familiar works are still new and exciting to a majority of concert goers. But thanks to certain conductors and performing artists who have believed in the importance of the music of today, modern instrumental music has been increasingly heard and understood, especially in the large cities. The radio too has endorsed the principle that contemporary music should be heard even though its listeners are theoretically less experienced in the standard repertory and would undoubtedly prefer it.

It is in the opera house alone that modern music is denied a hearing and the museum principle is carried to stern and inexorable lengths. This cannot be attributed to sinister motives on the part of the management. The gentlemen who control our operatic destinies may not be passionate devotees of twentieth century music to the extent of adding to their by no means inconsiderable financial risks espousal of a supposedly unpopular cause. But if the public were to demand *Wozzek*, *Mathis der Maler* or *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and would promise to support them as well as *Pagliacci* or *Die Walküre* they would be glad to oblige with productions. They, rightly or wrongly, are inclined to follow rather than lead the public taste. In their defence let us remember that no American patron has come forward to do for modern opera what Mrs. Coolidge, for example, has done for contemporary chamber music. We must also recall that opera has seldom been possible without subsidy because it is the most expensive of all entertainments.

Must we therefore give up the hope ever of achieving an American opera repertory and abandon the idea of the lyric stage as something obsolete and unrelated to modern civilization? Some musicians are inclined to this opinion and place their faith in the future development of the motion

picture. Music is indispensable to the films, and the motion picture theatre is certainly a vigorous part of our national culture needing no altruistic patronage and steadily improving as an art. There are signs that the industry, while by no means impressed with its importance, will tolerate contemporary instrumental music of good quality in the films. Aaron Copland's music for *Of Mice and Men*, Gruenberg's score for *The Fight for Life* show what American composers can do in this respect. But toward a celluloid opera, the steps have been halting and apologetic. Deanna Durbin, overwhelmingly popular, is still surrounded by musical comedy plots to bolster up her arias and Miss MacDonald and Mr. Eddy stick closely to the pre-war Herbert, Friml and Romberg type of entertainment which seems increasingly preposterous today. The movie public likes singing and it is accepting more adult scripts. It is barely possible that some day the Hollywood impresarios may fashion the two together, take singing seriously and give us some new kind of lyric entertainment, but the hope seems rather remote.

The theatre is a little more encouraging but seems to lack conviction to follow up its few successes with new ventures. Several theatre productions of modern American operas have been artistic successes and have attracted good audiences. *Porgy and Bess*, *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Cradle Will Rock* have all demonstrated the vitality of opera as a form of contemporary expression and have proved that our composers have talent and technic, but in each case there has been no follow up with a second production. One suspects that the financial return for a success of this type is not sufficient to attract other managers. These successes do indicate however that from an artistic point of view further experimentation is justified and that opera may prove to be an important outlet for American music of the future.

Since they each proved to be attractive to audiences in contradistinction to the production of American operas at the Metropolitan, it is interesting to examine their points of excellence. All three had modern, vivid books appealing to theatre audiences as well as to the musical public. Not one was a "grand" opera or "music drama" in the Meyerbeerian or Wagnerian sense. Two of them included spoken dialogue and in the case of each, the words could be understood whether spoken or sung. From the musical point of view, Gershwin's score had a large admixture of popular music which proved to be more interesting and individual than the purely operatic parts. The orchestra was undoubtedly too large and too noisy for the

moderate sized auditorium and incidentally too costly for the management, but the effect was brilliant and the public liked it.

The Thomson opera was especially effective in the skillful treatment of the text and the employment of the singing voice. The music was surprisingly simple but it had a profile and it fell gratefully upon the ears. Of course the originality and freshness of the production with a cast of Negroes glittering in cellophane contributed much enjoyment to the evening, and one must not forget the absurd delights of Miss Stein's book. *The Cradle Will Rock*, largely by accident, turned out to be a production with none of the customary operatic equipment. Blitzstein had deliberately planned that the singing was to be done by actors and would stress the words at the expense of the music but he had counted upon scenery and an orchestral accompaniment. When the Federal Theatre refused to open the production and the players went ahead as a co-operative venture later adopted by the Mercury Theatre, the scenery, costumes and orchestra were abandoned and the work was presented in practically concert version with only an upright piano and the redoubtable Mr. Blitzstein to assist. But what a delightful evening it turned out to be and how clearly it showed that drama and music can still unite to entertain audiences today.

For we must not forget that the main purpose of opera has always been to entertain. *Figaro*, *Tannhäuser* and *Aida* were not designed for study clubs or earnest seekers after culture but for audiences to enjoy. They filled their mission too. If you want to know something about the tastes and pleasures of the residents of eighteenth century Vienna or nineteenth century Dresden or Naples, examine these operas from that point of view. Naturally our audiences are different today and we approach these operas, usually given in a foreign language, with a sort of Baedeker or Grove's Dictionary mind. Education and culture are important objectives but they should not be used as fences to divide us from the contemporary spirit of pleasure and entertainment.

If the opera house must continue to be a museum and the movies and theatre to be timid there is one more possible field for experimentation in opera, our schools, universities and conservatories. The Juilliard, Curtis and Eastman Schools all have opera departments and singers and performers galore. While a great deal of their effort must be directed to training singers along routine lines, they can experiment and have experimented to some extent with productions of operas by contemporary Europeans and Americans. The schools and universities have no especial obligation to

routine training. Many of them have good mixed choruses and excellent orchestras. Their great difficulty would probably be in providing soloists for the operas. Co-operation with local singing teachers or conservatories might well supply this deficiency and the cost of production need not exceed possible revenue at the box office. One may hazard the opinion that if such a movement for experimental productions were undertaken and our composers were shown some such kind of outlet for their efforts that the start which has already been made in developing an American type of opera would be carried forward to something which the theatre and even the opera house eventually would find indispensable.

America today has a fine modern theatre, its singers are as good as any in the world. It has composers who understand the theatre and find it their natural form of expression. All we need is some way of bringing these forces together and a chance of addressing the long suffering but greatly under-rated American public.