

FORECAST AND REVIEW

THE BLUES

THERE have been folk songs ever since there have been folk to sing them; but until a generation or so ago, these folk songs were left to the folk. About that period they first began to be taken up in a serious way by our best people—musically speaking. Some composers took well-known ones and treated them honestly, enhancing their simple beauties; others maltreated them until they were almost ugly and unrecognizable caricatures of themselves. It became the fad to employ them copiously as thematic material for works in large form. Some of the masters had done this long ago, of course, but without making so much fuss about it. Richard Strauss himself mistook *Funiculi, Funicula* for a genuine Italian folk song and built a whole movement on it.

When the known supply of folk tunes had been more or less exhausted through exploitation, musical entomologists got out their butterfly nets and began to chase through forest and jungle, seeking rare specimens. Before many years every country in the Western world had its collections of folk songs. There were British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Grecian, Austrian, and Scandinavian folk songs; the numerous countries ending in "ia" proved exceptionally prolific in tunes, generally mournful.

Every country, it seemed, caroled out of its inner consciousness—except ours. In nearly three centuries we had not been moved to enduring song. This, of course, would never do, and, as a matter of fact, it wasn't so. As far back as 1867, three Massachusetts citizens working among the North Carolina negroes, out of pure love for music made a collection of their songs and published it under the title *Slave Songs of America*, printing

merely the vocal line and the words. This little volume has become the Bible of American folk song.

Back in those days few people in America knew and still fewer people (here or elsewhere) cared what a folk song was, even if they chanced to know; but when, if we would not blush with shame for our delinquency, it became necessary to have American folk songs, some ingenious person or persons took out these *Sperichils*, as the negroes called them, and nominated them for the basis of American folk song. In the absence of anything better, let them stand as such, with their secular cousins, the various varieties of "work" songs, also of negroid origin. Add to these the few Foster songs which have become genuine folk music, the minstrel song *Dixie*, a few country tunes of unknown origin, such as *Turkey in the Straw* and the *Arkansas Traveler*, perhaps half-a-dozen universally known tunes, (so called "college songs," *Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party*, for instance), a handful of Creole patois songs from Louisiana, and the tale of American folk song is pretty nearly complete.

It is in one of these secular cousins of the spirituals that we are particularly interested just now because of the recent appearance of W. C. Handy's book, *The Blues*, with its introduction by Abbe Niles.

Probably no musician has ever so genuinely and entirely fathered any single form in music as Handy the Blues. Traveling all through the South for many years as leader of the band of a large minstrel show, his acute ear caught the artless, simple tunes that came from the mouths of the common people of his race, and whenever he heard a new one, he noted it down, from a collector's love of collecting and without a thought of putting it to definite use. One evening he saw a hallfull of white people dancing, with vast enjoyment, to the monotonous repetition of one of these tunes as played by an extraordinary orchestra of three negroes, not one of whom could read a note of music, performing upon a mandolin, a guitar, and a bass viol. Before long, there came a city election in Memphis where Handy was living and conducting his own orchestra and band at the time (1910). Three rival candidates hired each a negro band. Handy's championed the cause of a certain Mr. Crump.

He bethought himself of one of those primitive tunes that he had jotted down, and elaborated it into a campaign song, "Mr. Crump." It had ribald words, but a catchy tune; and on the back of this tune Mr. Crump rode into the mayoralty.

Handy had learned his lesson. He renamed that tune, which became the *Memphis Blues*. Nobody would print it. It had only a twelve measure refrain instead of the conventional sixteen. So he printed it himself. It went. It is still going. So are a lot of the others that he began to arrange and publish from then on.

Though complications in copyright ownership have prevented Mr. Handy from including a number of well-known blues, the fifty-odd pieces in the book give a good view of the available material and its development. Particularly interesting are the examples of primitive blue themes in the introduction and the first part of the music section of the book. This introduction, by Abbe Niles, covers the subject with considerable thoroughness, especially when he writes of the texts of the blues. In treating their musical characteristics he is less exact. He invents the complicated and misleading term, "tonic third," by which he means merely the third note of the scale, and writes "diminished seventh" for "dominant seventh," though these are minor inaccuracies which would amount to nothing did they not give one the impression that the author is writing about something with the technique of which he is more or less unfamiliar. The illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias are superb. The artist has an uncanny power of suggesting motion. His black and white band plays so that one hears it from the page; his jammed hallfull of dancers wriggles and surges before the eye; and there is a portrait cartoon of Mr. Handy more like him than a photograph.

Blues is a book worth doing, necessary to the library of anyone interested in American music, and one that will be wanted also just for personal enjoyment. But there will be no need of a second volume. The blues are indeed folk songs, but most of them, to speak frankly, are pretty poor stuff. As a rule they are improvisations out of the mouths of musical illiterates—and they sound like it. When Handy had a good theme he knew

what to do with it—witness the *St. Louis Blues*, *The Beale Street Blues*, *The Florida Blues*, and a few others.

The blue *clichés*—the “blue note” (flatted third of the scale,) the twelve measure refrain, certain oft-appearing melodic phrases—soon pall on the ear; the harmonic pattern is restricted and monotonous; few of the texts have more than transitory interest or value. Handy himself, in the refrain of one of his newer songs, *The Harlem Blues*, (an original composition, not founded on a folk theme) has written a sixteen measure refrain and dropped the “blue note” entirely. Also it is a comment on the whole material that, from the aesthetic standpoint, by far the best song in the book is the artificial *The Half of It, Dearie, Blues*, manufactured by George Gershwin.

As a document the book was necessary and is valuable. It is the only anthology of a distinct branch of genuine folk music, part of the very little produced in our country; but it hardly seems material of sufficient strength or value perceptibly to influence in any way the development of music as an art, here or elsewhere.

Henry O. Osgood

PLAYING SAFE AT ZURICH

ONE noted with regret at the fourth festival presented by the International Society for Contemporary Music last June in Zurich, that no name entirely unfamiliar appeared on any of the six programs. In 1923 and 1924 a more adventurous spirit prevailed. Were undiscovered talents more numerous or were juries more perspicacious? In any event, this year's jury seemed quite content simply to offer a list of names which looked impressive, without concerning itself overmuch about the quality of the music played. If we were spared a great bore, we were also vouchsafed no revelations. The programs had an even, safe tone which augurs none too well for future festivals.

Of equal significance is the fact that no one work proved an outstanding success this year; but there was, so to speak, an outstanding failure—the Arnold Schoenberg *Quintet for Wind Instruments*. Seldom has a new work from the pen of a composer of wide repute suffered such universal condemnation