

THE NEWEST AMERICAN COMPOSERS

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INTO my memory there suddenly have popped certain happy scenes from the mid-twenties. One of them shows me the face of the painted upright piano in my Westport cottage and the solid back of the young man sitting and playing on the bench before it. The owner of the solid back and the round head surmounting it is Ernest Bloch's gifted young pupil Roger Sessions; and, "stately at the clavichord" in his plus-fours he is giving me an idea of the score of his macabre ballet *The Black Maskers*. It has just received its first performance at Smith. My person is dimly somewheres in the low room; and before it there revives my joy at the advent of a musical experience, and a young American's, too, as distinguished and as rich as the one in process of being revealed to me. I had long awaited such a phenomenon. And here, all on a summer's day, it is!

Another scene shows me the queue of the Steinway in Claire Reis' apartment on 77th Street. A musical party is in progress in the great high room. On the window-seat before the polished queue, Minna Lederman sits beside me. She wears a rose-colored jacket; and farther away, at the keyboard, playing and singing one of his own compositions, sways a slim, beglassed, shy and still self-assured young fellow with the aspect of a benevolent and scholastic grasshopper. He is a pupil of Nadia Boulanger's and has just returned from Paris. Swiftly there revives my delight in the fresh, entirely individual sonorities. They have the pure quality of things in a cold and early spring; and the composition has much of its wistfulness. At last the composer comprehends our pleasure in him and his music. For the first time, he looks at us and openly smiles. It is Aaron Copland: still half-boyish but a personality.

Still another scene shows me the music-room in Helen Teschner Tas' apartment on Central Park West. Richard Buhlig has just

entered and dynamized the company; and behind him, there appears a robust, masterly and unassuming young man in a double-breasted suit of blue. His complexion is swarthy, his black hair tousely, his beglassed countenance somehow Schubertesque. It is the young Mexican Carlos Chavez whose brilliant *H. P. Varèse* had given a few months before. Now Buhlig is at the grand, playing the young composer's sonatine. It is as compact as himself; it has a rattling, buzzing little scherzo as Mexican; and it is as serene as he is. I am hearing a new classical music, at once Latin and earthily American! Now we are about the supper-table. Buhlig has us all laughing at his stories, but the stories only increase the spiritual satisfaction. The room appears to sparkle with it as much as with its light, its cheer and the laughter.

And a fourth scene shows me the white, half-starved and Abraham-Lincoln-American face of a lean, loose-jointed man of about thirty at the keyboard of my own miniature in my rooms on Irving Place. The young man has lately been earning his living as a truck-driver, and was sent to me by Alma Wertheim. He has just finished playing an andante from a symphony of his; and both for the reasons that I am recuperating from an attack of grippe and that the andante has a MacDowellish limpness, I am depressed. But suddenly the composer strikes up something else. Everything including myself instantly comes to life. The movement is a polytonic irregularly polyrhythmic scherzo, the scherzo of a piano-sonata. I hear the instrument speaking in American. Music is speaking in the language of Mark Twain and of Carl Sandburg. Never have I heard it speak with an accent more definitely native. Of course the young composer with the white and Lincolnesque visage is our friend Roy Harris.

And still other scenes have rearisen; and all for the reason that history is repeating itself. During the last year, new creative talents have been striking my attention. New composers have been sitting at my piano trying to give me an idea of their orchestral and choral scores. What if not all of them seem of equal stature with their predecessors? All have originality, some indeed a great one, and all are spontaneous musicians and therefore comparable with the older group and Piston, Donovan and the

rest. So the past has risen up, and prophesied concerning the future. Those images of the 20's have seemed to say in their symbolic language "Do you see these young composers, Copland, Sessions, Harris and Chavez? In the decades since they were juveniles upon the great stage as these newcomers now are, they have immeasurably added value to your and multitudes of people's existence and swellingly continue to do so. What is to prevent these newcomers of the later date from also adding immeasurably to its worth? True, conditions have changed. When the aristocrats of the 20's appeared, the air was full of hope; and now it is equally full of despair. One and all will have to do their work practically in defiance of their poor faithless, hysterically apathetic countrymen. Still wasn't it a wise man who said 'the body is subject to the world. But to the spirit, the heavens themselves are subject?'"

But to the joyful matter. The names of the new composers who have particularly impressed me—most of them are known to the alert public and a few are not—are Hunter Johnson, Theodore Chanler, David Diamond, Elliot Carter, Paul Bowles and Marc Blitzstein and Robert McBride. The first of them, Hunter Johnson, is the first important composer who has come from the South since the days of Louis Moreau Gottschalk. He was born in Benson, N. C. in 1908. Like Paul Greene and Thomas Wolfe he is an alumnus of Chapel Hill; and as a composer he is entirely beyond the class of the tinselly old sentimentalist. An earnest and impassioned musician, for all his individuality he is not unrelated to Roy Harris. There is a distinct folk-feeling to his music, and an American feeling the consequence, as in Harris, of uneven polyrhythmical patterns, and in this instance of syncopations and occasional blue-ish phrases. The music like Harris' has a rich and sorrowful background; and if it is dissonant it is not acridly so. But its closest spiritual kinship is to the writings of such southerners as Faulkner and Wolfe. It has their frenzy and their nostalgia. This analogy is plain in one of Johnson's most recent and purely written compositions, the *Piano Concerto* performed under the baton of Lehman Engel with Harry Cumpson as soloist, last spring. A short work in two movements, a passacaglia and a fugue, it has great rhythmic vitality, a warm if sad feeling

and particularly moving little passages for solo flute; and the fugue gradually develops into a wild, hard-boiled barroom ballad, and dies away in rich nostalgic polyharmonies. The concerto marks Johnson's progress from the over-complexity of his symphony through his piano-sonata toward the simplicity of his sonata for flute and clarinet. And it is one of the tensest, most expressive and satisfactory of very recent American pieces, and an indication of very sizeable talents. A veritable addition, this young composer!

Unlike Johnson, my second subject, Theodore Chanler, is a newcomer only in the sense that he is a new arrival in the front rank of American composers. Born in Rhode Island in 1903, he is the author of a handful of exquisite songs and chamber-music which has been known to the inquisitive public for some time. His recent advance is due to his song-cycle *Epitaphs* on diminutive poems by Walter de la Mare: five of the eight effortless little songs composing the cycle were sung over the radio on February 28th. In *Epitaphs* one finds the limpidity, the grace and the tender lyricism which rank some of Chanler's early songs among the loveliest of American. One also finds the sensibility to the style of the texts which distinguished them. De la Mare's verselets are quaint, in the manner of old churchyard epitaphs; and Chanler's settings reflect their singularity. But the depth of feeling and the elfish humor of the music is new. The spare little forms have the strength flowing from a beautiful economy of means. There is no surplusage, and a continuous movement; and there is a formal balance: for the slow movement of the initial semi-monodic songs develops naturally into more rapid, scherzando and emphatic movements with thorough accompaniments and later returns to the mood of the beginning. The experience is rich: comprehensive of the eternal essence of lives, the dreamy, the spinsterish, the rebellious, the religious and the poverty-stricken; and of the fact of death, the secretiveness as well as the peacefulness of the grave. Because of the nature of this experience and its tenderness and chastity, the limpid, economical little forms representing it seem to take their place beside certain of Moussorgsky's finest songs.

Meanwhile in David Diamond—born in Rochester in 1916—

we have a prodigy. The lad's prolificacy is wonderful and not incomparable to Schubert's. Compositions pour out of him as periodically as waters from a geyser, and they are mainly complex machines for orchestras of various dimensions. Wonderful also is his gift for instrumentation. It is sure and individual; and while his orchestra sometimes has a raucous sound, it frequently has an originally magnificent one, a reverberation as of metal sheets and gongs that may be related to Stravinsky's and Varese's but is his own. And this sound has a deep emotivity. The sometimes uncouth forms it constitutes are the equivalents of experience, and, what is still more amazing in a man so young, an experience without personal reference. The feeling seems to comprehend the fierce and sinister prodigies of the times, above all the splendors and tragedies of idealism in this world. This content is emphasized by the circumstance that the works articulating it are elegies inspired by the grave of Wilde and the deaths of Ravel and Roussel. What is still incompletely developed is his personal idiom. This idiom disengages itself from alien influences in his splendid little *Psalm* and his amazingly intelligent score for E. E. Cummings' ballet *Tom*. It is a curiously primitive and not altogether fluent one. The melodies tend to angularity and the breaths to shortness; and one has the feeling that such devices as the frequent sudden syncopes and changes of mood and tempi are external ones applied to incompleted forms. Nonetheless with each new piece we find this idiom and the forms flowering a little more completely; and in the latest, the *Heroic Piece*, the melodies have a new length and the form seems natural and full.

With my fourth subject, Elliot Carter, we reach one of the young composers who are beginning to find their musical function in connection with the theatre. Carter, a New Yorker born in 1908, not only is musical director of the Ballet Caravan, but the author of a ballet on the subject of Pocahontas which it has commissioned. As the score isn't yet complete, I'll say nothing more about it than that the treatment is lyrical and romantic, and confine myself to the three little choruses which make me feel that in this young man we may have another natural, open-hearted singer. Two of the choruses are on poems by the prince

of English song-writers, Robert Herrick. They are a-capella: the third, on a lyric of John Gay's, has a two-piano accompaniment; and all three pieces exhibit a sensibility to the style of the texts similar to the one we have observed in Chanler. The Herrick settings are delicate and pleasantly archaic. The voices lie at intervals of fourths and fifths and give the form transparency. The setting of Gay's poem is more robustly popular. All three pieces are fresh, unpretentious and sincere, charming and light and clear in sonority, and have much rhythmic life. They excite feeling, and since the little forms are complete and come to climaxes, release it again. What I wonder, however, is whether the choice of the text of Herrick's *The Hock Cart* was entirely an innocent one? The poem sings to

"Sons of summer, by whose toil
We are the lords of wine and oil,
By whose tough labors and rough hands
We rip up first, then reap our lands,"

and recommends them

"To the rough sickle and crooked scythe."

I do not know what Mr. Carter will say. But personally, I feel that by virtue of the poem and the musical values of the setting, the work constitutes one of the best of leftist chants.

Paul Bowles is another gifted young composer—he is twenty-seven—who is finding his function in connection with the theatre. An opera on African folk-material *Denmark Vesey*, to a text by Charles-Henri Ford, is at present on his stocks. And the Ballet Caravan has been giving performances of his charming little ballet-voyage *Yankee Clipper*. *Yankee Clipper* is not a ballet of the stature of Aaron Copland's exquisite *Hear Ye, Hear Ye!* But it is music of a kind no civilized community can do without. It is hard of edge and light in content, music in kid-gloves, the music of a dandy; but it has artistic value, liveliness, color and a classical contour, and thus a social function. Like much of de Falla's, it might be performed in cafés, which is nothing to its discredit: since cafés are most civilized and civilizing institutions. If it is ballet-music, it has form and facture. The sailor-dances, tangos and other characteristic folk-dances which compose it, satisfactorily work out their musical material, and form a bright

little suite. As for the first act of *Denmark Vesey* which has had a couple of concert-performances, it too is effortless and graceful classically formal music. Whether it is dramatic, remains to be seen. But it makes one feel at ease and at home; and one looks forward to the completed score with keenest relish.

The inclusion of the names of Marc Blitzstein and Robert McBride in my list has undoubtedly caused some wonder in certain of my readers. The revelation of Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* has concerned a brilliant dramatic talent more thoroughly than a musical one. This dramatic talent is exhibited by the continuity of the form of the part-sonorous, part-dramatic material. Neither in *The Cradle* nor in Blitzstein's radio-play *I've Got the Tune* does the tension relax, and sounds and words and gestures are interrelated and continuous. At the same time, not all of either work functions *as music*. Their expressivity of feelings of a sort is constant; but then, musical values are the consequence not only of expressivity but of an appropriate and individual exploitation of the sonorous resources. And in *The Cradle* only the duet of the Poles definitely seems to constitute such an exploitation; and in the radio-play, only the clever caricature of *Pierrot Lunaire* and the final scene and marching-song. Yet on their strength, Blitzstein figures in the little list.

What argues against inclusion in Robert McBride's case, is the circumstance that much of his work, in contrast to Blitzstein's, seems to be the lively and appropriate exploitation of the material means, the sounds of instruments, but almost without content or feeling, and in some cases, with a definitely coarse or insipid one. The question arises whether the young musician—he hails from Arizona and is about Bowles' age—is much besides a virtuosic instrumentalist; and whether his numerous "work-outs" work so little because he has little to work out in them, or because he shies away from his experiences. At moments in his ballet *Show Piece*, he begins to sing. But the lyricism stops short, and the virtuosic exploitation of the material dryly and ultimately formlessly continues. Yet McBride is the author of at least one musical experience. It is the orchestral piece entitled *Prelude to a Tragedy*. And until it can be decided whether or not it was an accident—and we greatly pray it wasn't, and that McBride is an artist—his name too must be included.