

VARIATION ON THE GRASS ROOTS THEME

PAUL ROSENFELD

THE theme I'm proposing to repeat with fresh touches of interest and present under new lights, is that of "Grass Roots for American Composers," Charles Louis Seeger's stimulating essay in the March-April MODERN MUSIC. It is an important subject, that of the means which may be thought to end the American composer's apparent and keenly felt separation from the musical life of the vast body of the American people and bring about the fuller function of music. Admirably, almost in recapitulation of Tolstoy, the essay restates the oftentimes forgotten truth that genuine music and for that matter all genuine art, is the communication of feelings important to the full life of the community and therefore of the highest utility. It also repeats the equally frequently forgotten truth that the most important instrument of communication is style, characteristic phraseology: itself a method of expressing thought and feeling by a selection and collocation of plastic elements and one determined by nationality, period, form and individuality. Only in achieving the style of American life, it tells us, will our music become "cultural"—culture being understood as a unity of style in all the manifestations of life—and the means of community.

To Mr. Seeger one of the main obstacles to the achievement on the part of American composers of a characteristic American style appears to be the circumstance that American composers tend to superimpose on their conceptions, forms derived "from more rarefied regions above." By these forms he means the methods of composition which European composers developed to the end of giving unity and proportion to their works and which, since they sounded well in the ears of the early European-trained American musicians, were snobbishly and naively considered sacrosanct by them and binding on American music. The true

American style, meanwhile, is found in the American folksong, which, we are reminded, still is the musical expression of the preponderant portion of our population and a vital element in jazz and swing. (His appreciation of this folksong is eminent among the many values of his article.) And he would have American music and the American composer find their green roots in the common ground. There should be a closer association between the composers and the population which expresses itself in these ballads, a study of their idiom on the part of the trained musician and a deliberate effort to "work with this musical lingo and show (the people) that he can do something they want to have done and cannot do for themselves without his help." The aim, therefore, is *Gebrauchsmusik*. "The music of a people is not the music they listen to but the music they make for themselves." This *Gebrauchsmusik* will initially be humble, for "the people of America cannot and for a long while will not be able to make much high art music." Only, the reason for his discouragement is curious: it is set forth in the sentence "The very kind reader forgets how few houses in America have running water in them." (To the best of my knowledge, the hydraulic systems in the days of J. S. Bach were quite as primitive as in the days of Palestrina, or for that matter, those in Plato's time.) But I think I know what is referred to: a material and economic condition conceived as inhibitive of spiritual integrity or energy. Certainly, it is impossible to suppose the word "houses" is being used in Sherwood Anderson's poetical sense of "souls" or "women."

His instructions in the manner of procedure in the meanwhile for all their gentleness and informality are plain. The professional composer is first of all to discover for himself "his own peculiar American lineage." He is to expose himself to phonograph records of the ever dynamically changing popular music; to the end we suppose of being "found" by tunes and ballads which embody his values quite as Coleridge, in his own words, was "found" by the Bible. Next, he should "discover America" by getting away from cities, suburbs, summer colonies and going to some mountain-county, even though he can "learn as much in the sand-hills, plains, valleys, deltas, sea-coasts and for that matter in the large cities." The composer should enter a community as

a guest, an appreciative guest, a plain, unpretentious person." (It is evident that Mr. Seeger entertains some doubts of the constancy of the connection between music and good manners.) "The composer should find out who are the singers, the best fiddlers, banjo-pickers, and the best square-dance callers. He should play at least one of these (popular) instruments. If he can take with him a portable recording phonograph he will be able to make vastly faster progress. The more places he can go and the longer he can stay, the better." As for the final step in the making of an American composer, it must be his digestion of his experience. "He is now ready to be forged into the link we are talking about. He will find he has learned a new language."

It is for the reason that while finding Mr. Seeger's general aim capital and healthy I cannot believe his directions for achieving it the soundest and best available ones, that I am moved to add a small variation of my own to his most engaging subject. For one thing, I cannot believe that even the *Gebrauchsmusik* he has in mind is attainable by composers who merely visit rural communities and sojourn in them as temporary guests. The "music which the people make for themselves"—as contrasted with "the music to which they listen"—is made by persons who are the match for very special situations, whose instincts react infallibly to very special impressions. The truth the artist feels—the most popular as well as the most austere—would appear to be the expedient relation between the universe and his spirit. We can spontaneously give form only to what we experience; and *what* we experience is relative to the conditions of our life. If the daughter of Barney Graham can move Mr. Seeger intensely by the ballad she sings about her father, to the tune of *The Blind Girl*; if Aunt Molly Jackson can excite him with her *Join The C.I.O.* sung to an American version of the tune of the old English ballad *Lay The Lily Low*, is it not for the reason that Barney Graham's daughter and Aunt Molly Jackson are peculiarly conditioned by life and the match for special situations which would make even the most sympathetic of visiting composers with a portable recording phonograph half-idiotically flounder?

Therefore it would seem as though Tolstoy and not Mr. Seeger

were right: that if the composer would like to show the people "he can do something they want to have done and cannot do for themselves without his help," he must first subject himself to and share the conditions of their existence. In Russia, "intellectuals" reacted to this verdict by throwing away their tooth-brushes, since these articles were not in general use among the people. In America, it would seem as though a more strenuous response were inevitable, and that the composer who desired to compose "the kind of music the people make for themselves" would have to farm or work in a mill or mine or at the very least, *function* in some practical musical capacity, as choir-leader or bandmaster in a rural, small industrial or mining community. (One would like to see as convinced a populist as Mr. Elie Siegmeister essay it.) For only in this way would it seem that a sincere and shapely *Gebrauchsmusik* might evolve.

Besides, the gifted composer who cannot subject himself to these conditions or aim at a humble *Gebrauchsmusik* to my mind does not seriously run the risk of remaining eternally alien to the American people, nor do I believe that the study of American folk-music and close association with the singers of folk-songs is his inevitable way of attaining the style "characteristic and western." I do not even think that style can be acquired by these external means. Style is the most intimate expression of the personality, and very possibly is not to be at all deliberately acquired. Attempts to develop style on folk-song models have produced a deal of composite, charming folk-lore-music. But where as in Moussorgsky's case the results surpassed the composite and folkloristic, they did so for the reason that composers like Moussorgsky were moved by a "nationalistic" inspiration, and lovingly recognized their people in themselves and spontaneously inter-fused the popular idioms with the traditional ones of music. Again, I suspect that the personal style of a genial composer is to some extent that of his time and people. By definition the creative musician, like the creative artist, is a man whose personal truth is valid for others besides himself, in some cases valid for his whole community and in rare instances for vast portions of the race. As has been said the artist is the most related, conditioned and limited of men. If he flounders like an idiot when

subjected to the conditions of Barney Graham's daughter and Aunt Molly Jackson, it is for the reason that he is the match only for less specialized and more general situations. What conditions and limits him approaches oftentimes the totality of Nature; and the measure and degree of his impressionability and validity is precisely proportionate to the extent of his circumscription by this continually changing, multiple and varicolored reality. The fact that his truth is often not immediately recognized as valid for many others or for great portions of humanity does not prove it will not eventually be so recognized. There are artists who speak for only a few contemporaries but for a community which stretches through the centuries, as there are others who speak for numbers of their contemporaries and are empty for later times. There are still others whose following is always small. But in every case, what alone is prerequisite of them is probably sincerity. For the man indubitably is the style, and the style to a degree which in all likelihood is predetermined and not materially to be augmented by himself, is life's. To be sure, Mr. Seeger seems dimly aware of this truth. Willingly, he exempts a certain sort of artist from the manoeuvres he prescribes. Only, he misconceives them as "those among us—who must of necessity sing their difference from their fellows and fight the predominating trend." The man who has nothing to sing but his "differences from his fellows" is likely to possess no voice at all.

Thus, to my small and perfectly respectful Variation on *Grass Roots For American Composers*. It is simply this. Let the professional American composer, if he inwardly is so impelled, go out and share the people's life. Or, if he is not inwardly impelled to do so, let him study the American folksong and visit rural communities and try to write for every organization which is willing to try out his work; giving always of his best in recognition of the truth that music is one and men merely vary the texts they set to it. No harm is likely to flow from the adventure and it may possibly clarify the conditions of his existence and induce a creative reaction. And if he is impelled not to follow these suggestions and impelled to accept Emerson's advice to the poet that he "leave the world and know the muse only—abdicate a manifold and duplex life and be content that others speak for

him—lie close-hid with Nature, unafforded to the Capitol or the Exchange," let him cheerfully sit in his tower of ivory and write if he wants to only for the Boston Symphony Orchestra or ensembles as they may be constituted in the year 2000. And let him doubt himself all his life, since it is the artist's nature ever to doubt himself but never to doubt Art.

Yet whatever he does, in the name of Heaven let him ever be true to his own feeling and represent what he feels to be the truth, completely with indifference to external and materialistic considerations. Let him be true to his own soul! It may cost him his life. But he can function in no other way. For there in his soul lie his ever-greening grass roots and the source of his utility to men. There at its base is his principle of unity with them. He has the authority of the American people for believing so. One of the exclamations most frequently upon their lips is "Be yourself!"