

GRIFFES ON GRAND STREET

PAUL ROSENFELD

PAST the bright stage costumes, sketches and photographs of the Neighborhood Playhouse lately on exhibition at Rockefeller Plaza came a memory of going hesitantly through rancid slums, by pushcart flares, and arriving at a seat in an already darkened auditorium in Grand Street. The impulse carrying me, I recollected, had sprung from a word of Nikolai Sokoloff's over a punchbowl a few nights previously. The violinist-conductor had, it appeared, been called in by the small playhouse momentarily associated in my mind with Gertrude Kingston's delicious, sly performance of *Great Catherine*. There, he said, he had found — what I took to be — "poor Gwiffith" struggling at the piano to beat "three against four," while the music sounded as though it came from "somewheres in France." He had "taken over," and suggested I come and listen. Only the identity of this Gwiffith evidently familiar to him, and the background of the work — either feeble of sonority or of uncertain and Gallic lineage — which he had rescued, somehow eluded me. We were in the first weeks in 1917, and excitement and the idea of music by an American by birth could not intuitively be correlated.

Again the rich green flooding from beneath the rising curtain was permitting my playbill to identify the piece as a dance-pantomime, *The Kairn of Koridwen*. Before me on the stage a dancer clad as a druidess was addressing ritualistic gestures to the moon. Other druidesses, among them the Misses Lewisohn, promptly invaded the ocean-shrine of the Celtic Diana and all in a pattern of oak-branches, mistletoe, bronze altars, torches, commenced dances in the unclassic Isadora manner; signifying the circle of the universe and the three planes of existence; kindling fires and in a seething cauldron brewing potions from herbs and berries of the wood. The movements under the leadership of Blanche Talmud somewhat lacked Talmudic subtlety: still I was at ease. Music was flowing from the pit, from the piano, celesta, flute, clarinets, horns and harp under

Sokoloff's presiding hands and head: music modern in its superposition of tonalities, knitting of rhythms, irregular measures, unconventional combinations of timbres – those of split horn and piano, of chromatic harp, chromatic flute and celesta. At first it came indeed from "somewhere in France," patently the child of the eeriness of *The Firebird* and Ravel's modalism. Swiftly then nocturne-like pages developed from the mournful and glowing phrase for clarinet, the motto of the short prelude took on individuality, carried me away. The priestesses, following the first frenzy of their rite had consumed their brew, were prostrate, scattered about the altar. Shadowy soft torso after torso aspired toward the riding moon, told its vision, rhythmically sank back again: but more than the happy, dreamy pantomime, the music – pulsing, *lento misterioso e languido* – urged the imagination, expressed uncanny ardor and abandon, laved the stage with real moonfire. Acridly sweet phrases shrouded by notes of other instruments emerged from the muted piano and celesta. Flute and horn breathed sinuous long cantilenas over the mounting volumes; and in its glamor, the oceanic night was in the tones as in *Tristan's* – but more sublunary and druidical.

Brusquely into this feminine ferment burst Modred the Gael. The audience tittered: it was a boy in a helmet bearing a sword and shield. Aroused, the corps of druidesses brandished its spears at the intruder on the sacred precinct and fled, leaving a sacrificial Irene Lewisohn crouched by the altar. But the mental question of the male counterweight's age obliterated all. Was this warrior fifteen or might he actually be sixteen? I could not decide, until his movements did so for me. Whatever the number of his years, his unquestionably was the awkward age. Came the interlude before the second scene, the poetic little pastorale. Came also the mystic farewells of Modred and his Carmelis – a sad and "ethereal" version of the farewells of Siegfried and Brünnhilde at the commencement of *Götterdämmerung* – and the finale where, following the libretto's prescription, the Sène, "finding Carmelis atoningly dead," solemnly encircled her, repeating "the austere law of their faith 'What is to be, will be.'" Had the composer somewhat wearied with the business, I wondered, and written a little conventional dead-music sufficiently like the *Götterdämmerung* funeral-march to give his audience its cue? Nonetheless I was prepared to meet and congratulate Charles T. Griffes, and in *The Seven Arts* tell his detractors that he was no opportunist but a talent, a great promise, a musician with *métier* sufficient to the performance of

prodigies with his minute ensemble not incomparable to those of Strauss in *Ariadne*.

The compatriot to whom in surprise I was introduced was a young man my senior by a few years; short, with a round head both boyish and tonsured. Nothing definitely distinguished his appearance but he was direct, high-spirited, unassuming. He told me he was teaching at Hackley School. Lately he had occupied a studio next Laura Elliot's: the gracious singing-teacher had become interested in his compositions and persuaded The Neighborhood Playhouse to commission the score whose piano-part he just had executed. He had played one of the two pianos in the Neighborhood's performance of *Petrouschka*. *The Kairn of Koridwen* was his first adventure in orchestral form: he had completed it last August and September.

What poor Griffes could not know was the fact that the work brought forth by *The Neighborhood Playhouse* was predestined to prove his best in the medium. Despite the tenuity of, the absence of strong emotion in the latter half, the eminently romantic music moving "in thrall to keltic magic" exhibits at the very least as much talent and certainly more taste and sensibility than does the famous *Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*.

III

It came to mind, the distant evening, largely in subconscious corroboration I think of a truth patent amid the stage costumes, playbills, sketches and photographs of the productions of the Neighborhood Playhouse exhibited by the Museum of Costume Art. This truth was, that of all the theatrical institutions which since the century's beginning have attempted the coordination of the arts, the plastic and decorative as well as the literary and mimetic – institutions such as the Abbey Theatre in Ireland, the Manchester in England, the Vieux Colombier in Paris, Reinhardt's theatres in Germany, the Moscow Art in Russia and the McDougall Street Playhouse and the Washington Square Players in New York – of all these groups the little theatre in Grand Street alone in its curious mixture of art and welfare had the wisdom to bring about the full coordination of fresh instances of the composer's craft with those of the painter, the dancer and the poet. (Since they entirely eschewed the spoken word, *Les Ballets Russes* cannot be included in the category). The Abbey Theatre indeed had trained its actors in the art of reciting to the psaltery, and Reinhardt combined a new score with the violently colored partly verbalized dance-pantomime *Sûmurun* – brought to New York in 1912. But the tunes utilized by the Abbey Theatre

were traditional, and Victor Hollaender's score for *Sûmurun* was musical-comedy. The Neighborhood Playhouse however gave the first American performances of *Petrouschka*, of *Chout* by Prokofieff, of *Ritornell* to Bartok's *Dance-Suite*, and commissioned scores not alone by Griffes but by Eichheim, Whithorne and Fuleihan.

Moreover, *The Kairn of Koridwen* was representative as the finest instance of the Neighborhood's creativity in the musical sphere I knew. Griffes' style indeed had purged itself of reflections by the time he came to compose the second of the ballets, *Salut au Monde*, to which the Neighborhood played the midwife: the vigorous fugue in this score is in his starker, native idiom. Unhappily he died before the work to Whitman's poem was completed. The practical arrangement was by a heavier hand. Whithorne's *Sooner or Later* and Eichheim's *A Burmese Pwe* unfortunately I missed; but I did see *An Arab Fantasia* for which Fuleihan collected and composed Arabian melodies. A memory lingers of a stage-design, Esther Peck's, representing the head of a stairway. Wound in dark draperies and balancing water-jugs on their heads, women were supposed to be descending the steps with sinuous movements and ascending them again. Someone was droning interminable Levantine monodies on a bagpipe or guitar; the bayadères gave me the impression of a number of excessively respectable females taking their good time about going to the well and coming up from it; and "*dans l'Orient désert quel devint mon ennui!*" No, *The Kairn* to my mind was the jackpot: if we are to find any comparable item among the Playhouse's achievements in the musical field, it must be something as representative, say, as the unique discrimination the institution exercised in adapting its choreographic style to the category of the score it momentarily was utilizing, and combining an heroic choreography with symphonic pieces and an intimate with chamber works.