

WHEN NEW YORK BECAME CENTRAL

PAUL ROSENFELD

NO anniversary is a birthday if there's no identification of past experience. Hence this history: it concerns the musical centrality of New York prior to the League of Composers' period. My history curiously enough will be manageable in the available short space, the continuity of New York's central tendency and position in the musical sphere having begun only seven or eight years before the formation of the now twenty-year-old alliance.

The statement may shock the naive. New York a point of force in music continuously only since the first years of World War I? New York with its perennial operatic seasons and concerts multiple as the leaves in Vallombrosa. New York of the famous folk-migrations to the halls where Lind and Patti sang and Paderewski played; the moss-bearded Philharmonic; the venerable horseshoe whose earliest gleams coincided with the antiquity of the Academy of Music's tiers. The claim is false, it will be said. Inevitably, it will be said, in all the city's decades prior to 1915, incalculably thick-strewn as they must have been with sentient performances of music in all its varieties – from those of Pat Gilmore on the Mall to the Kneisels' in Mendelssohn Hall: inevitably, in these long rich eons there must have occurred an immense dissemination of musical feelings, an heroic maintenance of the thread of upward life. What but the criterion of music-centers is such an abundant dissemination and manly maintenance?

Doubtless it is. Still the test of your central points is more than a mere power of scattering musical feelings: even an immense and unflagging one. Very largely it is an ability to radiate experience with intense clarity, sincerity, infectiousness. Also it is the power to purvey not only the unifications of experience which have emerged above older human chaos, but the unifications victorious over the fresh struggles which ineluctably followed these former triumphs. The criterion above all is the capacity for the discovery of unknown resources, the origination of new

feelings, the continuous enrichment of the world with utterances of new minds passionate about uprightness and strength, courage and beauty. Centers in the last analysis are points where generous creative forces base themselves. Naples, Leipzig, Paris, Petrograd, even London at times, in past centuries were such vigorous sources: Petrograd, Vienna, Paris as lately as recent years. And New York?

It is plain one would have to possess the memory which is the mother of the muses authoritatively to speak of the artistic level of New York's music in the gaudy ages prior to World War I; to fix the precise degree of its conformation to the standard of infectiousness which is a primary criterion of music-centers; its conformation to the very standard of technic. Wanting this memory, we still possess evidence sufficient to a strong conjecture. This evidence, the long-since-given testimony of our elders supplemented by our own infant observation, prompts the opinion that infectious performances were preternaturally rare, the achievements of uncommon individuals such as Anton Seidl, Lilli Lehman, Jean de Reszke. It suggests that the entire level was inferior to the European centers' and present-day New York's. The Metropolitan to be sure blazed with the galactic company formed by Maurice Grau, inherited by Heinrich Conried. From experience however we know that while the stars of heaven form harmonies, compose patterns, those of earth strive mainly to outshine; and complex works of art speak not through individuals but ensembles. We also know that not all these luminaries or their successors were artists – the artist being someone generating feeling. Pol Plançon possessed only one encore-number, *Les Deux Grenadiers*. Emma Eames "sang *Who is Sylvia* as though Sylvia was not on her calling-list." The dawning of Caruso's voice may have resembled the summer-morning sun's. His mentality nonetheless was clownish. The supporting orchestra was appallingly thin; the *mise-en-scène* oftentimes ridiculously neglected. Nor would it appear that the impresarios invariably grasped the operas' ideas. In 1908 Gustav Mahler startled the city with a dramatically as well as musically coherent *Don Giovanni*. Yet the surprise of Mahler's version was the result of nothing further than a revelation of the precept, old as E. T. A. Hoffmann, that Donna Anna's hysteria flows not only from her parent's murder but from the knowledge that the assassin was her lover.

The Philharmonic, at the time under a system of guest conductorships, included a good number of ill-sounding instruments. People attributed their cacophony to the fact that many were played during off-hours in

restaurant, dance and theatre bands. The Oratorio and Symphony societies also were provincial, the first sporting Frank Damrosch, the second his brother as its conductor.

Neither can this New York be thought center-wise to have used past victories as spurs to new efforts. Rather more the enormous mart must be thought snugly to have reposed in the arms of past achievements. After producing *Parsifal* in the century's early years, the Metropolitan replied to all objections to the quality of its performances with the promise of producing *Salomé*. The excisions in, rathermore than the concisions of *Salomé* having distressed Anne Morgan, the house desisted from audacity; became an outlet for Ricordi and Co.; gave *Siberia*, *Fedora*, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*. It was left to Hammerstein to introduce *Louise*, *Pelléas*, *Elektra*. Hammerstein and his live repertory having been eliminated, in the following years sporadic performances of *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Boris Godunov* and the short-lived *Mona* at the Metropolitan alone reminded the public that the opera's hoary form was embodying new tempi. As for the Philharmonic, it never pretended to assume a responsibility to the best contemporary effort. One remembers its programs as regularly composed of a standard overture, a familiar symphony, a trusty concerto and *Three Dances from "Henry VIII,"* its audience as overwhelmingly hirsute. During the leadership of Safonoff, the massy introductions of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov did add a note of revolt, orgiastic at that, to the regular expression of an almost infantile parasitism. Still one recalls the Philharmonic concert at the beginning of January, 1911, the concert at which poor Mahler in the wintriest of atmospheres offered the first American performances of *Iberia* by Debussy and Chabrier's *Ode à la Musique*, as something of a unicorn.

The Symphony Society and the Russian Symphony Orchestra were more adventurous. The first experimented with works like Dukas' symphony; the second imported Scriabin and his pianoforte-concerto. But many persons had the impression that Walter Damrosch performed novelties chiefly for the purpose of ridiculing them. Mainly it was the visiting Bostonese under Max Fiedler that impressively brought in new ideas, and woke critical agonies with d'Indy: cries of rape and murder by minor seconds and ninths and elevenths; sarcasms over the "rarefied taste" of the "cultivated city opposite Cape Cod."

And New York's performance of the central function consisting in origination? Excepting the invention of ragtime, it was comprised in little

more than Foster's productions during his metropolitan stay; Dvorak's during his incumbency of his chair at the National Conservatory in 1892; MacDowell's during his unhappy Columbia professorship. Onwards from 1902, Ives was at work, but underneath the hat. Thus, for all its fabulous resources, the giant seaport was less of a point of force than smaller Boston with its first-rate Symphony, Longy Club and C. M. Loewler. An organic need existed up there. Till the hour when, quite suddenly, New York consistently began harboring certain musical personalities, of high esthetic temper, who almost in one gesture performed excitingly; radiated new ideas; established new values.

The progress was wondrous to those who underwent it. The wonder has not died. Music but an instant previously had seemed a failing, fading art. On the city streets, a state of things inimical to the function, the very existence of composers, seemed plain in the mechanized, industrialized landscape; in hard pavements, steel and concrete piles, the plate-glass windows of showrooms exhibiting shining metal auto-bodies. Dominant science, fierce technics, one fancied, had produced a soulless, hard, dry world where song could not as hitherto arise. They and electricity had extinguished the soft underday of the musing, natural era in which lyricism bubbled as from a spring in the woods. Not only the power of self-reproduction in music seemed at a close. What the musical world considered the art's main embodiments (actually a narrow, hackneyed selection from nineteenth-century compositions) was wearing thin. Cheerlessly one foresaw a period when, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner and César Franck having completely lost their savor, one would find oneself completely without benefit of Polyhymnia. (Contributory to this fantastic conception of course were three little facts; the first of which was the absence from about the material phenomena of an experience of the new music capable both of supporting a feeling and enjoyment of the rhythms of the visible and illuminating new values in the accepted music. The second of them was the circumstances that through Dr. Muck's solicitude one was hearing some of the symphonic works of Strauss, Reger and Mahler. The third was the Philharmonic playing the classic romantics under Stransky.)

Contemporaneous European essays on music vaguely were referring to a new movement; surrounding certain new names – Scribian, Ravel, Cyril Scott, Szymanowski, Schönberg – with a nimbus of super-Straussian, post-Debussian bizarreness and black magic. (The gods said: impression-

ism; bitonalism; antitonalities.) From Berlin Huneker cabled a satiric account of the nerve-scraping sonorities of *Pierrot Lunaire*. The harrowing composer's *D-minor Quartet* was played in Aeolian Hall; transported one to a musical Antarctic haunted by echoes of German singing-societies. Then, of a memorable afternoon early in 1915, a shadow moved in the wings of the dim-lit theatre of the Washington Square Players. From the auditorium, for an audience mainly attracted by a curiosity about "cubistic" music, it was not at first easy to divine whether the shade was or was not someone slinking if not crawling in the direction of the concert-grand black in the middle of the platform. It proved to be a formal distortion by Picasso or Max Weber in the flesh; a mannikin all muscular arms and shoulders, topped by a turret of a neck tapering in a slim curly-black and ivory skull. This was the nineteen-year-old pianist-composer, Leo Ornstein: Russian by birth but formed in New York, a pupil of Mrs. Thomas Tapper's. At fifteen, in total ignorance of Schönberg and Stravinsky, he had begun improvising in antitonal schemes. Before the war he had made sensations playing his compositions in Paris, Oxford, London. Dismally the mannikin bowed to the stage's right recess and slumped onto the piano-bench. His performance nonetheless was not neurotic. With the finest feeling, a magically shining touch, masterly pedalling, indelibly that afternoon and on three subsequent others he achieved a completion of the most actual experience: such a one as no contemporary European capital could have received; the like of which certainly never had been given New York. Composed with the keenest ear for musical values, his four programs revealed the essence of the notorious "modern" music in all its exquisite tastefulness, sensitiveness, originality. One heard the major Debussy; the Ravel of *Gaspard de la Nuit*; d'Indy in his intricate *Piano Sonata*; Schönberg in Opus II; piano dances by Scriabin and Bartok; certain of Ornstein's own musical wild cries of fear and fury. Hysterical laughter from the audience greeted the releases of ecstatic and daemoniac feeling. Here, suddenly through daring innovations in harmony, sonority, rhythm, came beautiful unifications of the delicate and troubling sensations afloat in the air of the cities, and with them experiences of the life-fears and birth-pains coloring our own consciousness. Music curiously cast bridges to the primitive mind, simultaneously domesticating one in the industrial scene by interpreting the fierce elemental force in its apparatus and appearances. Music was accomplishing a reconciliation with a New York suddenly an independent source of song.

The Ritz-Carlton's ballroom elegantly enclosed the meeting of a new musical association. Timidly the Society of the Friends of Music had emerged with a performance of a Dohnanyi quintet at the Kneisels' hands. Now it presented Stokowski in the Schönberg *Kammersinfonie* of the piled-up fourths. . . . In Aeolian Hall an orchestra assembled for Maud Allen's dance-tour played under the direction of an ourang-outang-form newcomer with a jawful of teeth "the better to bite you with, my dear!" He'd arrived from Switzerland bearing a letter of Romain Rolland's to Waldo Frank. Of course this was Ernest Bloch with a bagful of music for which Europe had no use. Daily he was paying visits to the New York Public Library for the purpose of reading Bach cantatas "so that his life would not be a failure." This evening only the delicate, popular orchestral suite *Hiver-Printemps* represented his work: but some nights afterwards at Louis Untermeyer's he went to the piano and played passages from *Trois Poèmes Juifs*. Pungent and sumptuous, reverent and disillusioned, they seemed to utter something of what was racial in the Jew; starrily to intone Old-Testamentary sublimities. Thereafter one had the experience of some acrimony but much of an hitherto unknown generic energy and will, of clear ideas and a verdant joyous culture, which is an upshot of the privilege of acquaintance with an active and mature creator. Who introduced Bloch to Mrs. Lanier and The Friends of Music we cannot say. But, in Carnegie Hall under Bodanzky, shortly after the declaration of war, there occurred a concert which, justifying the sponsoring association's existence, maintained the struggling centrality of New York. Formed of Bloch's important orchestral music, it revealed the existence of a body of declamatory, orientalist but unproblematical and grand-style new work; tragic, idealistic, prophetic for all its lachrymose and Pucciniesque passages; marvelously sonorous; bronze-gold in color, like dark old aromatic precious wood.

Diaghilev's ensemble had arrived, intensified our sense of the generosity of the music of the "Five" and their heir, Stravinsky, with divulgations of the existence of the epic "male and female" pages in *Prince Igor*; the sumptuously imaginative *Oiseau de Feu*; what seemed vodka and caviar to Huneker, *Petrouchka* of the epoch-making mechanism - music, polytonal style, neo-classic orchestration. Ballet, that Cinderella, was exhibiting its potential princess-royalty and parity with music-drama Griffes' pantomime at the Neighbourhood Playhouse had revealed the emergence of a hopeful leaf on that arhythmic pilgrim-staff American music. . . . Varese looking like a locomotive - black force, blazing headlight,

plumey smoke – had arrived from the audacious group of innovators about Guillaume Apollinaire. The Berlioz of our time; an orchestral virtuoso inspired by a mysticism in the perspectives of science, he mounted his spiritual ancestor's monster-requiem at the Hippodrome; circulated scores out-hectoring Hector for orchestras of two hundred. Naturalization in tall Manhattan having induced his no less prodigious but more practicable pieces beginning with *Offrandes*, after the peace, with Salzedo, Gruenberg, Saminsky and others he formed The International Composers Guild: again New York was treated to a passionate completion of the most actual experience, a connection with things' center such as no contemporary European capital could have achieved. Along with *Renard* and its post-war irony, *Pierrot Lunaire* and its refinements on the romance perpetually flushing life's grey face, a new audience open to the impassioned expression of the contemporary mind heard the tensest release of the daemonic and divine in the taut rhythm, and percussive sounds of *Hyperprism*. The Guild's programs to be sure were sadly mixed: nor were all its performances convincing. Still the first included Malipiero, Ruggles, Honegger, Goossens; the second, under Stokowski, Salzedo or Gruenberg, in instances were excellent. One felt the post-war effort of renovation; music's struggle for reintegration with its great tradition; heard new surges of force, above all a power in American life.