

COMPOSERS OF THE PACIFIC

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THE war has fastened our eyes on the Pacific coast where the danger we were always aware of has taken a sharper outline. But the danger from the East is not that of musical infiltration – not any more, at least. We do not quite gather that the Orient is already upon us. South California, of course, is Oriental; Hollywood, eminently so. Hollywood is East minus uniformity; not a house but looks like no other, not a man but looks like no other. And it is not coincidence that the foremost Western creative minds of Oriental heritage – Schönberg, Bloch and Milhaud – have settled, after much drifting, on the Pacific shore. No coincidence, but a gravitation.

On a lecture tour through the key universities on the Pacific Coast, shortly before Pearl Harbor, I had a close view of the younger creative forces and of other elements of our far Western musical life that count. The ensemble of these impressions is of a fast growing musical empire *sui generis*, and can be summed up thus:

a. The academic centers along the Pacific present a more fertile concentration of young power, and the level of training and direction of musical life is far higher than at the music learning centers of the Atlantic East.

b. We know little about many things out there. For example, Hollywood's second face, an entirely new growth of gifted young musicians who are unrelated – creatively, that is – to the oleographic, front-line, money-heavy motion picture barony.

c. Two distinct circles, the American Orient of Southern California radiating from Los Angeles, and the vigorous Upper Pacific section, with Seattle as focus, seem to be sources of fresh creative streams in American music. On the elbow of Vancouver Bay one finds as much quiet originality in a composer such as George McKay, as one does in the industrial pioneers of this coastal area.

Hard by Silver Lake and close to Santa Monica is the mansard where "Evenings on the Roof" take place – the valuable concerts of the South

California avant-garde. These are directed by the gifted pianist, Frances Mullen, a determined modernist, and by Peter Yates, an agile and amiable combination of writer, municipal worker, new music enthusiast and experimenter with new percussion instruments. Not the least significant detail of these courageous evenings, is their printed motto, one to be envied and followed: "Programs are for the pleasure of the performers and will be played regardless of audience." If Los Angeles is the new Vienna, as some say, those "Evenings on the Roof" show us the latest product of the bright, young minds of Southern California.

It is curious that in a land of strong light and sharp contour, the common denominator of the younger composers should be a stark atonalist leaning. True, it is tempered by respect for the *Gebrauchsmusik* idea and also by a considerable polyphonic trend, an interesting counterpart of the choral polyphony cultivated by our gifted Easterners, Elliott Carter and Normand Lockwood. Such kindred phenomena are signs of wide reaction against the American Victorian homophony still with us.

One finds a marked new tolerance in this South Californian group, even in such older members, both of them prominent and implacable Schönbergians, as the composers Adolph Weiss and Paul Pisk. The latter is the League of Composers' regional director, a lecturer, pianist, organizer of and performer for the new-music forums in California. Adolph Weiss, whose Menckenesque mentality I have always enjoyed, is now engaged in studies of higher acoustics. I heard his *Rondo* for woodwind. He remains the same dyed-in-the-wool radical and atonalist, but there is a novel vivacity in this work, and the instrumental sonorities are exploited with much skill.

One of the youngest, and also the most unusual, members of the South California constellation, George Tremblay, lives up to his faith that there is an impelling urge in every true composer to write music that never existed before. Krenek and Schönberg, of course, ignited Tremblay's young self; yet the outcome today is no echo, but the gifted expression of a strong spirit with something in it that is parallel, not subsidiary to Schönberg's medium and emotion. Tremblay's music is dark and stern yet pliant, and it is strikingly personal. Atonalists are notoriously alike – all gray. But in spite of its atonal loam, Tremblay's grim and whimsical speech reminds us of no other. His music couples an excellent logic with a draconian austerity. This trait is indeed the one that relates his mind to Schönberg as a parallel, not a derivative. Tremblay is among other things also an extraordinarily gifted improviser – an almost extinct type of creative genius.

His most characteristic and best works are, perhaps, the *Woodwind Quintet* and the suite, *Modes of Transportation*. The latter piece points to that trait in Tremblay's creative nature which I have described as pliant. The *Covered Wagon* movement shows a striking tone-painting talent. The *Mayflower* section reveals the same pictorial inventiveness. Very remarkable are the means by which Tremblay tone-paints the crude wooden vessel, its sea struggle and woes; yet the frank, noble elegy that closes the movement rests on a far higher plane.

Gerald Strang, of the University of Southern California, is a fine practical musician. He plays the clarinet, horn and trombone, even teaches wind instruments. Being a chief lieutenant and close friend of Schönberg's, Strang is not an atonalist at all costs. Neither is he a fanatic for extreme unity in structure and development. His *First Symphony*, premiered by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Klemperer, broadcast by the Columbia Broadcasting System and played by various school orchestras, is tonal and keeps the usual classical relationship between the movements, that is, the traditional variance of mood and form. Both the opening section and the symphony's scherzo are closely knit thematically in spite of a certain caprice in the layout. A nature still and deep is mirrored in the serene andante. The orchestral sonorities are of delicate coloring and not heavily massed. A splendid theoretician, Strang has cooperated with Schönberg on a textbook for young composers and students, *Fundamentals of Composition*, that should make history in music teaching. Taking Beethoven's sonatas as their main area for exploration, the co-authors present a brilliant visual analysis of form by showing the graphic contours of themes in time, pitch and structure. This is followed by extracts illustrating the biological growth of a theme-cell to larger forms.

Among the youngest members of the Los Angeles group are subtle, highly cultured Ingolf Dahl, pianist, organizer of the New Music Forum and author of an interesting *Rondo for Two Pianos*, and a gay young lad, David Raksin, another Schönberg eaglet, full of spirit, talent and humor. He has written two ballets and a great deal of film music.

Moving along the North California shore we come upon the invaluable Berkeley center, where Albert Elkus, a musician broadminded and gifted, educator, composer of orchestral *Impressions of a Greek Tragedy* and *Concertino after Ariosti*, has transformed the university school into an agent for living music.

In the Seattle corner musical activities and creative work of great

vitality focus around the music division of the University of Washington. This splendid center of new music is the Far Western counterpart of the Eastman School under Hanson. The dean of music at Washington University Dr. Carl Paige Wood, himself a composer and author of vigorous choral works, songs and string music, has gathered superb young forces under him.

George McKay, the outstanding composer of the American Northwest, is one of the most independent creative minds of our present younger generation. He is a prolific writer, his orchestral and choral works have already swept from Tacoma and Seattle to the East, as far as Philadelphia and Rochester. He prefers American subjects, and among his symphonic works we find *A Pioneer Epic* and a Lincoln tribute, *To a Liberator*. He is not afraid of being called folklorist even if he uses the American folksong but indirectly. Vitality, conviction, fresh organization of material, not the kind of building brick he employs, make the composer a man of today. *To a Liberator* breathes an agile force. Its theme is clear and positive; there is a fresh modality in this work resulting in a novel flow of harmony. The runs and figures have a strong touch of the personal. McKay's *Woodwind Trio*, an enchanting piece, is of a very unusual diatonic substance. Its chord marshalling has astonishing freshness; fine logic and a right sense of climax bind the whole with an uncanny propriety.

In the rest of his copious work McKay has shown himself an outstanding theorist and a master of utility music as well – his orchestral pieces for schools, for example, and the newly published *Choral Rhapsody*. His *Technic of Modern Harmony* (a "laboratory for advanced study") gives us a lucid codification of present-day harmony, a picture of its historical growth; and he also reveals the "legitimacy" and historic inevitability of many of today's harmonic innovations.

Among the young men gathered about Wood and McKay, one finds drive, depth and experimenting spirit in the spring pieces of the very talented John Angus Campbell of Tenino, Washington; an individual and subtle lyric strain in *Episodes for Piano* by Paul Velguth; delicate imagination in Dorothy Cadzow's *Children's Suite*.

The beautiful Upper Pacific country is no more a land of mere musical promise. Some splendid shoots are already growing up which will be integrated into the body of American creation.