

MODERN MUSIC

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GRASS ROOTS FOR AMERICAN COMPOSERS

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UP to about ten years ago most of us, musicians and amateurs alike, would have agreed with the "very kind reader" quoted some time ago by Mr. Olin Downes in an article in *The New York Times* entitled "Native Folk-Melody." The reader asked "where a genuine American folk-music is to be found" and finally wound up with: "The American is too modern, too kinetic, too contemporaneous in all his thinking and doing, to express himself in terms of the simple and untutored art of a past period. In music, as in other expressions, he must look ahead and not behind him."

We knew that old English ballads were still sung in our backwoods, French folk-songs in Canada and Louisiana, German in Pennsylvania, Yiddish in New York, Spanish on the Mexican border. And we supposed they were dying out rather rapidly.

At the same time we agreed with Mr. Downes' own view: "It is surely evident that a national musical art must rise from a popular base and not consist of forms superimposed from more rarefied regions above." We looked with envy upon the European composer, upon the unbroken tradition in his hands, upon his clear-cut social function and his root in the soil of a native folk art. Resigned to not having these things, we were comforted with the hope of a new experimental art, distinguished, abstract and precious, a contribution to an eventual international music which might some day evolve.

In the 1920's we knew that we had still to find in our music, as Haydn once found, the link between the stylist and the life

about us. Had not American painting, the drama and the novel "arrived" by discovering the American scene and learning to deal with the stuff of American life? Music surely would also find content of an American character!

But how this was to be done was a vague matter. Very few tried seriously to follow the lead of Henry F. Gilbert and Charles Ives in utilizing American popular tunes for symphonic writing. Their work was admirable in many respects and sometimes, as in the case of Ives' *Barn Dance*, intriguing when it handled this material. But as the foundation for a school of American music it seemed a blind alley. The bodily introduction of folk and popular melodies, whether from India, Greece or our own backwoods, into an eclectic, international sound-palette seemed nothing more than a facile escape from having to roll one's own. Most composers have tried this recipe at one time or another but after two or three attempts, the effect seems usually pretty bad—a few fresh daisies in a bunch of orchids.



The first break in this jam came, I think, in 1925 and '26 with the realization that the jazz boys had hit upon something the academic or fine-art composer had missed. In the beginning this seemed to consist of certain technical innovations. Utilizing them in academic writing produced "jazz concertos" and "jazz symphonies." Meanwhile dance bands had begun to jazz the classics and produced eventually a new product of their own—"symphonic jazz." In the rapprochement one could hardly distinguish between the jazz symphony and the symphonic jazz! But as an American national style this too left much to be desired. For a number of European composers were quite as able to produce it as were the Americans.

Further experiment with the jazz technic resulted, however, in a closer familiarity with its history and with its improvisational aspect, often referred to as swing. These disclosed the fact that the success of jazz was due not alone to its technical innovations but in an even greater degree to its basic root in an art totally unknown, or unrecognized, by the bulk of the American professional musicians. This art of music, the folk music of America, had embodied for well over a hundred years the tonal and

rhythmic expression of untold millions of rural and even of urban Americans. Contrary to our professional beliefs, the American people at large has had plenty to say and ability to say it, so that a rich repertory has been built up — thousands of tunes each for the dance, for the ballad, the love song, and the religious song. Wherever English is spoken, the idiom is clearly consistent, though it varies in different regions and with different age-groups. Wherever large foreign-language groups are found, the predominant idiom and repertory produce fascinating hybrids with French, Spanish, German, or more recently imported folk music.



The astonishing thing is that we have had to wait until the 1930's to discover these facts. To understand the situation we must go back in history. About a hundred years ago Lowell Mason and some other "enlightened" professional musicians set out to prove: (1) that America was unmusical; (2) that it could be made musical. These two preposterous propositions became the creed of a cult which is still strong. Indeed, most of us still follow it. According to its thesis, German folk songs were "music." They had been sanctified by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Latterly, folk songs of other European nations have been found to be "music"—"good music." Our public schools are still full of earnest expounders of Italian, Czechoslovakian and French folk songs. At least several "Folk Schools" are teaching Danish folk dances to the American backwoods!

But American songs, hymns and dances were not, and still to practically all musicians and teachers, are not music at all; partly because they have not been sanctified, but partly also because they go counter to sanctification as it was done in Europe a hundred or more years ago. Our hymns and spirituals too often run to parallel fourths, fifths and octaves. Our ballads are sung too often without "expression" and without accompaniment. Our instrumental music defies too many "laws" of harmony and sounds terrible when played on the pianoforte. Our play-party games and singing games are often not "refined."

Exactly what Mr. Downes quite rightly says should *not* be done, has been done—and done for a hundred years—by professional musicians and their patrons. "Forms have been superim-

posed from more rarefied regions above" upon a not unresisting America. The cult has made amazing headway. But still, all is not well. Mr. Downes and many others voice serious protests. Millions of Americans, uninitiated in the last quartets of Beethoven, still hear little or no swing (believe it or not), and hold quietly to the good old traditional music that the "very kind reader" doubts has any existence. And the American composer is still more admonished than admired.



If proof of resistance is needed, gather together a dozen average people from various parts of the country, people who are not too ingrained with the prejudices of music-professionalism, great wealth or smartness, add a guitar or a banjo (no piano), and see how many songs you can get out of them—"folk-songs" if you're a sophisticate, "old songs" or mere "songs," if you are nice and common. Will there not be *Down in the Valley* and *Careless Love*? And how about *Frankie and Johnnie*, *Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven*, *Red River Valley*, *John Henry*, *Shortnin' Bread*, *Cripple Creek*, *Maple on the Hill*, *Buffalo Gals*, *Barbara Allen*? Perhaps there will be *Jesse James*, *Sam Bass*, *Old Joe Clark*, or even *The Golden Vanity*, *Pretty Saro*, *Lord Lovel*.

How long would the list be before the possibilities of even a casual gathering could be exhausted? Really, I do not know and doubt if anyone does. There are singers like blind old Mrs. Dusenberry in Arkansas who can sing one hundred and thirteen; like Bascom Lamar Lunsford of North Carolina who can give you three hundred and fifteen (and if you will let him consult his "ballit-book," three thousand variants of these); collectors and students such as Alan Lomax and Robert W. Gordon whose individual repertoires mount up well beyond five hundred apiece. Then there are probably more than twelve thousand phonographic recordings in the Archive of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress and as many more in other collections—voices of men, women and children of all parts of the country, of all walks of life. No matter how elaborate the survey of the actual music made by the people of America upon the basis of a purely oral tradition, it is to be doubted we could ever plumb

the bottom of this deep well-spring. Is the American "too modern, too kinetic, too contemporaneous to express himself in terms of a simple and untutored art?" Listen to the ballad of Barney Graham, heroic union organizer who was shot in the street in Wilder, Tennessee, in 1933. It is sung to the tune of the *Blind Girl* by his daughter. Or listen to Aunt Molly Jackson's *Join the C.I.O.* sung to an American version of the tune for the old English ballad, *Lay the Lily Low*. Hundreds of these songs are in use today in labor struggles up and down the country.

But now that we know this, what are we doing about it? Where is the "link between the stylist and the life about him?"



The first thing, it seems to me, is for the professional composer to make up his mind that his place in world music will depend upon finding his place in American music and in American life. He knows and admits his European heritage, be it Brahms, Debussy, Schönberg, Stravinsky, — one, several or all of them. He must discover, for himself, his own peculiar American lineage. This is not easy. Books are of some little help. Phonograph records — if he can get at them — are much better. Let him ponder, however, upon the following facts: (1) American folk music is probably as alive as that of any "advanced" country, excepting, of course, Spain and the U.S.S.R.; (2) our popular art is universally recognized as the most brilliant of its kind in the world today; (3) both of these have come to be what they are in spite of the hundred years' bitter antagonism of professional musicians; (4) serious composition is still, after considerable patronage and some most promising beginnings, little more than a beginning. This should make us sufficiently humble for the second move.

The second move should be to discover America. To do this, the professional composer must get away from cities, suburbs, summer colonies, large estates and the sweet solitude of little retreats where urban atmosphere, ignorance and prejudice cling ever so easily. Almost any county will do. (One must learn to think in terms of the county, township or parish!) For a first venture I hesitate to suggest a mountain county; one can hear and learn as much in the sand-hills, plains, valleys, deltas, sea-coasts,

or for that matter in the large cities. But the way is a bit better charted for one in the mountains. However, wherever it may be, the composer should enter a community as a guest, an appreciative guest, a plain unpretentious person. He should meet and learn to know well many types of Americans. If anyone says to him "We like you—you're so nice and common," he will know he is on the right track. He should find out who are the best singers, whether of ballads, blues, hymns, work songs, love songs, etc., and who are the best fiddlers, banjo-pickers, guitar-, harmonica-, dulcimer-, accordion-players, and the best square dance callers. He should play at least one of these instruments. He has much to learn, not only of music, but of ways of living. If he can take along a portable recording phonograph he will be able to make vastly faster progress. Of course, the more places he can go and the longer he can stay, the better.

The third step in the making of an American composer must be the digestion of this experience. If he is good iron and red hot, he is now ready to be forged into that link we were talking about. For the composer himself must be that link. He will find he has learned a new language—not a mere collection of songs and dances. A folk art, or for that matter a popular or academic art, is primarily an idiom, only secondarily a repertory. Any good swing player can demonstrate the difference between his art and that of the professional musician. But it often takes considerable time and patience for a professional musician even to perceive that folk art is different from anything he has ever known. He has an enormous amount of bias, professional pride and plain hokum to get rid of. The folk musician is such a "natural" that he is not much help in the situation.



So there we are. Plainly, if we are to compose for more than an infinitesimal fraction of the American people, we must write in an idiom not too remote from the one most of them already possess—their own musical vernacular. A music has its life in the making of it. It is not the music they listen to that is the music of a people, but the music people make for themselves. The people of America cannot, and for a long time to come will not be able to make much high art music. (The very kind reader forgets how few houses in America have running water in them.)

They cannot and will not make much jazz or swing either. All of these are too difficult and demand too much equipment and training. The people will, of course, make more and more music of all these types. But always there is the proviso that the farther any urban art strays from the idiom determined by the tastes and capacities of the people at large, the smaller in the long run, will be the role it plays.

Music is unquestionably the most highly developed of our native arts, excepting only speech. It is a dynamic folk art—while it continually loses old songs, it continually adds new ones. It is changing very rapidly today. But the attempt to sing in a foreign music to America is almost as absurd as the attempt to talk to it in a foreign language. Music is, to an extent only slightly less than speech, a means of communication between people. To an extent possibly greater than speech, it serves to embody what is common (or strange) between them. If, therefore, a composer is going to sing the American people anything new, if he is going to celebrate his oneness with them (not his difference from them), if he is going to teach them that their undoubtedly limited musical tastes and capacities, crippled as they have been by a century of savage industrialism and sophisticated snubbing, can develop to a higher level, he must first get upon a common ground with them, learn their musical lingo, work with it and show he can do for them something they want to have done and cannot do by themselves or without his help.

This is, of course, a purely critical determination. There are those among us—and I hope there always will be not too small a number—who must of necessity sing their difference from their fellows and fight the predominating trend. I would like to see, however, a few of the younger men follow out some such lines as I have indicated. I am convinced there is already an immense, though still mute, demand for the type of composition here outlined. It may have to be, at first, crude and ordinary. It may not, at first, be in any sense national, but rather, regional or even local. America is large and varied. But our culture has definitely graduated beyond the colonial phase. The people as a whole know it. Professional musicians seem to be among the last to admit it. Is it not time for a change?