

place in Milan where the cult of true music is still kept alive—true music, no matter the form in which it is expressed.

Domenico de Paoli

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN FOLK

THE AMERICAN SONGBAG, By Carl Sandburg: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

CARL SANDBURG'S assortment of some two hundred and eighty ditties from the American scene raises again the not too original question: "Should a folk song be harmonized as simply as possible?"

Of course, you may argue that some of Mr. Sandburg's baggings are not folk songs, in the pure sense of the term, but they represent the equivalent of traditional native airs. After all, a folk song is something that is sung by folks, and not a branch of anthropology, and Mr. Sandburg's selections come, says the compiler, "from the hearts and voices of thousands of men and women."

"Ballad singers of centuries ago and mule-skinners alive and singing today helped make this book," he observes. "Pioneers, pick-and-shovel men, teamsters, mountaineers, and people often called ignorant have their hands and voices in this book, along with minstrels, sophisticates, and trained musicians. People of lonesome hills and valleys are joined with 'the city slicker,' in the panorama of its pages." That seems to include almost everybody except musical saw virtuosi.

The arrangements, with a few exceptions, include complete piano parts which were made from sketches and verbal suggestions by Mr. Sandburg. The musicians who worked out Mr. Sandburg's notions are Edward Collins, Ruth Porter Crawford, Charles Farwell Edson, Arthur Farwell, Hazel Felman, Harry M. Gilbert, Lillian Rosedale Goodman, Henry Joslyn, R. Emmet Kennedy, Marion Lychenheim, Elizabeth Carpenter Marshall, Mollie Nemkovsky, Thorvald Otterström, Henry Francis Parks, Leo Sowerby and Alfred G. Wathall. From the literary world come Rupert Hughes (whose musical career seems to have been forgotten by those who know him only as a novelist) and—absolutely!—H. L. Mencken, who has arranged *The Drunkard's*

Doom. As you may have guessed, Mr. Mencken does his bit in a sound, diatonic manner.

Although Mr. Sandburg outlined the treatment of each song, the details were left to the arranger's fancy, and occasionally that fancy is very fancy. Edward Collins, who drew three of the great *Frankie and Her Man* series, inserts harmonies that make one suspect that the tale of *Frankie and Johnnie* was originally *Francine et Jean*. Mr. Sowerby also forgets the folks now and then, but he has at least one masterpiece—*De Blues Ain' Nothin'*. Some of the ladies, as some of us might have anticipated, overload their piano parts with stirring effects. However, there undoubtedly are perfectly good folks who wish that all of the songs had been treated as individually as possible.

Almost all of the arrangements are able and they present no great difficulties for anyone who has made his way through Grade 2½ of any piano school. Those who care to embellish them with new progressions or odd rhythms will do so. Those who want to simplify them can strip away eccentricities easily. My answer to the question of the harmonization of a folk song is that it all depends on how you feel at the time you're performing it.

It hardly is necessary to descant on the importance of *The American Songbag* as source material—but it may be well to add that it also is thoroughly entertaining for anyone, the folks included.

Robert Simon

