

MODERN MUSIC

THE AMERICAN SCENE CHANGES

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THE chief thing that people generally and accredited critics in particular have against the younger American composers of today is that they express themselves in the musical idiom of today. Many other charges of course, are directed against them, for nowhere does the business of finding reasons for the rejection of American music flourish so splendidly as in America. But the special crime of these young men seems to be the exasperating fact that they are their own contemporaries. It never strikes their critics that it is perhaps slightly unreasonable to expect them to turn time and nature upside down and become something else; or that, after all, it would be at least remarkably odd if they spoke the language of anything but their own twentieth century. Nonetheless, it is their preoccupation with a new freedom of harmony, a new freedom of rhythm and a feeling about ideas and form no longer greatly cramped by an older rule of thumb that arouses so much hostility.

This hostility, which indeed amounts to a kind of dogged determination to have no truck with the newer American music, is obviously not only unintelligent, but also hopelessly futile. Whether our diehards like it or not, the future of American music lies in the hands of the young American composers of today; and this for the simplest of all possible reasons—the mere process of time must make them the American composers of the next generation. In a word, they are the men who necessarily will write the American music of the next thirty years.

Nothing new and nothing different from what we already have is now to be expected, we suppose, from the Chadwicks, the Loefflers and the Converses, or even the Masons, the Hills and the Carpenters of America. And we believe no one would have enough hardy pessimism to consider their output the highest achievement possible in the growing history of native music. It follows inevitably, then, that the creation of essentially American and truly important music still lies ahead and that our hopes are perforce bound up in the young men of the moment and the still younger ones already discernible behind them. If the idiom they seem committed to is displeasing, the fault lies perhaps with those to whom it is irksome. In spirit or in fact the views of these latter are outdated and they themselves remain too sluggish or indifferent to make an effort to come to grips with an unfamiliar thing. In any case they are faced with what they cannot help and cannot change.

It is remarkable that such an attitude or the still worse one of quite callous disinterest should be general in the United States. The evidences of a new ferment in American music might be expected to stir up some enthusiasm over the possibility that now a thing both distinctively our own, and of genuine worth to boot, may at last be created. For there is not much doubt that this ferment has actually begun. The history of the art in this country is comparatively brief, but it is a conscious history and never before have we been so aware of wide activity in carrying it forward. Where in the last generation there was a handful of composers, today there are scores; where, formerly, they were centered in two or three of the so-called cultivated communities of the East, they are now springing up East and West, in places near and remote.

There are more than a hundred living American composers whose works have been publicly performed and among them by far the greater number are in their earlier thirties or are not yet thirty. A tabulation of their names and the music they have written would occupy too much space, or we should set them down here as a convincing illustration of what is now going on in American music.

But while it is impossible to print the whole catalogue of these

men and the constantly increasing quantity of what they have written or are writing, it may be illuminating to name certain of the youngest representative talents among them, say a half dozen who in differing ways exemplify what is being done by the rest.* Without going into the matter too analytically or with too much nicety of appraisal, such a half dozen might include Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, Robert Russell Bennett, Virgil Thomson, George Antheil and Alexander Lipsky.

Of these the best known is Copland, who has already fought his fight for recognition, something that we are convinced the others will also succeed in doing before long. His music, which is a great deal more plentiful than is casually supposed, holds an energetic emotional quality and a new sort of concealed soundness and economy of workmanship that gives a distinct contradiction to the older, cachectic symptoms formerly afflicting American music.

Harris is one of the most hopeful phenomena among native composers. Although he has spent the last two years in France, his newest music is, curiously enough, more thoroughly reflective of the American spirit than anything that preceded it—American in the sense that it creates the feeling of something giving voice to American habits of thought and to the characteristic turns of expression for such matters of inward rumination as engage the native when he really becomes artistically articulate.

Antheil, in spite of his bumptiousness and his relish for the considerably overplayed game of outraging the bourgeois, is quite likely to contrive something that will not only be unmistakably American, but that may also conceivably become popularly so. Just now he is badly tarred over here with his rather silly *Ballet Mécanique*, but he has written much music since that unfortunate affair and such of it as we happen to have heard indicates primarily his possession of the American brand of humor. And certainly that is something that America, of all places in the world, is destined to contribute as a part of its share to the future history of music.

Virgil Thomson's music is that of the sophisticated American,

*It is to be understood that any special survey of the great number of living American composers would readily yield several such representative groups of significant names, and that the half-dozen here singled out include simply those whose achievements or promise occur to the writer most pointedly.—I. W.

alert for new things to engage his expressive talent. Young Bennett, not yet well known, has nonetheless already proved himself to be interesting and two of his latest works, unperformed thus far we believe, undoubtedly will be heard before long. One of them was a close second to Ernest Bloch's *America* in the *Musical America* prize competition. Lipsky, one of the youngest of all these men, attracted marked attention during the season just ended.

It should have some pertinent significance that these several composers of the new generation come from all over the country. Copland was born in Brooklyn and comes of Russian-Jewish stock. Harris is an Oklahoman and his forbears penetrated the West as pioneers. Antheil is of German-Jewish descent and was born in Trenton, New Jersey. Thomson is a Missourian, of Scotch origin. Lipsky was born in Poland but came to New York as a child more than twenty years ago.

If there were the opportunity to present anything like an exhaustive account of what these men have already put to paper, and to supplement it with what has been done by the two or three dozen others whom we have not even named, we feel sure that such a tabulation would in itself indicate very conclusively the beginning of a genuine American renaissance in music if one can call anything that when nothing of a similar nature has preceded it.



There are many aspects of this new creative impulse among Americans, besides the numbers from whom it comes, that stimulate one to believe in it very firmly. For one thing, and perhaps at the moment the most important, much of the music they are now writing, as we have already intimated, is no longer German, or French or Russian, as our native output has been until recently. It is something discernible as American.

And when we say American, we don't mean jazz—pure, mixed or toplofty. The use of jazz in what, for lack of a better word, one speaks of as serious music, doubtless has its immediate national significance, but this is obviously merely external and only

reflects what it is supposed to in much the same way as the label, "Made in the U.S.A.," stamps a native product. At its best, this employment of jazz is perhaps analogous to the literal employment of folk-song among European composers which, although it has in some instances yielded an inveigling quality of national music, has never in itself produced anything incontestably first-rate. When one thinks of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann or Brahms, one does not think of folk-song, but one nonetheless thinks of German music. When one thinks of Couperin, of Massenet, of Debussy, one equally thinks of French music but there is no question of folk-song. Nationality in music, insofar as it involves the folk spirit, is a narrower thing.

What is it then that makes Schumann's music German and Debussy's music French? That is a far more subtle matter than the forthright and unmistakable implication in folk-song or in jazz, since jazz too, for all we know, may be American folk-song in the making. One's sense of nationality in the greatest music, although not at all vague, is nevertheless baffling to bring to book, to define. It is far more easily and certainly felt than explained. But analysis yields something, and one concludes that it lies within a peculiar kind of characteristic idea and expression, a particular sort of reaction to mental and emotional stimuli. It envisages certain ways of thinking, certain ways of feeling about the experiences of life. A German thinks and feels one way about them, a Frenchman another. And in great music this is carried over into the special apparatus of expression. So that in the end Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony becomes a German conception in music of a heroic figure; Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, a German conception of romantic tenderness and wistfulness. One may travel up and down the whole length of French or Italian music and find nothing like them. And on the other hand, one may do the same throughout German music and find nothing like the delicate, ruminative beauty of Debussy's *Nuages*.

In this same indefinite and perhaps indefinable fashion, one begins to sense a distinctively American quality in some of the American music that has been written recently. One senses it in a distinguishing virility—the virility with which it so constantly seeks to express its ideas and its feelings. This characteristic was

absent before. The older American music was a labored and generally weary reiteration of thoroughly alien forms and styles. The virility of the newer American music is, moreover, not mere bumptiousness (though even if it were that and no more it would have its plainly national touch). But its blooded health, its robust spirit, are not paraded vaingloriously for its own sake, at least by those younger composers who are not branded with the aims of sensationalism. It emerges, rather, as a constituent in the substance of their music and in their quest for the fitting and the apt form, in their experiments with variety and complexity of rhythm, and in their own adaptation of the current freedom of harmonic invention.

Beyond this virility one finds in some of the newer American music the conscious purpose to make it an expression that reflects certain aspects of the American scene or certain characteristics of American life. And in a little of quite the best of this output one finds the most hopeful quality of all—a strong indication that the men who wrote it have been influenced, probably unconsciously, to express themselves according to the traditions of their surroundings and their upbringing, according to the mental and emotional habits of Americans.

From these beginnings it seems not too optimistic to expect a fairly full-bodied quantity of distinctively American music by the end of another generation. Conditions have already so changed that the young American composer is practically helped in his need to learn the business of his art, so far as it can be learned. They have not yet been altered to such a degree that he can earn a living at it after he has learned it, but that too may come before long. Moreover, he now has the opportunity to hear his music performed before he becomes gray-haired and too old to profit by it. Native orchestral conductors, and even some of our imported ones, are no longer too hesitant about including new American compositions on their programmes. And special agencies now exist in many cities of the country and especially in New York through which American music in the smaller forms is played fairly often and in considerable variety.

All this is unmistakable evidence that the time has arrived for us—as it has always come to every nation upon its emergence into

a condition of settled wealth and consequent freedom from the insistent business of simply feeding, clothing and housing itself—when the creation of a native art is stimulated to make its appearance. Stimulation alone is of course never enough to create anything that is truly great or even of striking and mature worth. Whether the present generation will eventually produce either one or the other need not concern us. The important matter is that it has made a noteworthy beginning and is headed along the right way, which happens to be its own way. Moreover, in a curiously encouraging fashion, this new music has been recruited generously from truly American stock, in some outstanding instances from forbears who could not boast so much as an artistic thought in their whole pedigree. The truth is that throughout the history of all art, by some strange and unfathomable working of the creative impulse, when the soil is ready the seed mysteriously germinates and the flower appears in splendor.