

OF CRITICS, PUBLISHERS AND PATRONS

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THE short period of the past ten years has shown amazing changes in attitude toward the American composer. In this space of time he has developed from a being who felt himself an apologetic and self-effacing guest at the banquet of his rich but distant relatives to a man respected and confident of his strength. It is no longer an unheard of thing for the work of an American to be performed by all the orchestras of this country and even to be sought after abroad. There have indeed been times when foreign conductors have secured first performances of American works before our own had time to move.

The reasons for this change are many but undoubtedly one of the strongest factors has been an awakened interest among American audiences and musicians. Anyone who will read history with a discerning eye may observe that the composer is never a single unit. He is always the product of his civilization, the expression of the thoughts and feelings which surround him. There is never one composer, there are many or none! The composer is merely the musically creative impulse of the people made articulate.

The present development of American composition is, I should say, an evidence of the growing creative spirit in the country itself and is fostered by an outgrowth of this spirit. From this point it is easy to argue further that the conditions which surround the composer largely influence what he will do and therefore that the responsibility belongs to the generation whose music he is creating. Imagine Johann Sebastian Bach born in 1685 in the village of Boston and fulfilling his destiny in that pioneer settlement!

With these premises I should like to consider certain general needs in the future of American composition.

First, American composition needs a critic, I should almost say an apologist. Perhaps the critics themselves should not be blamed. Many of them fell asleep awaiting the arrival of "The Great American Composer" and have either failed to wake up or have not been able to understand what happened during their long trance. Of all the critics now practising their profession there are but a very few who have carefully watched the growth of the new American music and who have any idea as to what the noise is all about.

Our writers, for the most part—I except such rare examples as Lawrence Gilman and the few of like calibre—still refer to the American composer as though he were a special type of animal. There is no "The" American composer. We need a few more men who can talk about American composers as individuals; who know the difference between the music of Sowerby, Copland and Bernard Rogers; who can explain the contrasting aims of Emerson Whithorne, Quincy Porter and Frederick Jacobi. The American composer indeed! Truly that is attempting to cover a great deal of ground with a small canvas. And if at the present time you can show me a half dozen well equipped critics who can answer such a catechism I shall beg everyone's pardon most humbly.

The critic, if he should bother to defend himself, would have two good alibis. Supposing he has been at least partially wakeful during this period, where and how in his busy routine would he have been aware of the forms in which the American creative spirit has been growing? In the first place the average critic is allowed far too little time for study and research to enable him to become an authority on any special subject and in the second, had he the time, where would he look for the published American works to study?

The first of these considerations is so tied up with the whole conception of criticism, its economic relation to the paper for which the critic is writing and its obligations to the reader, that I cannot discuss it here except to say that much of the blame usually attached to the critic belongs at the door of the editor.

The second consideration however, that of the availability of American works, is important and relevant. The critic may

justly say "I should like to study American music—but where may I secure the scores necessary for such study. Where are they published?" This leads us to the consideration of a second need—that of adequate publication. There are very few firms who are following the excellent example set by C. Birchard and Company in Boston of publishing orchestral scores and works in the larger forms which have no commercial appeal. Orchestral scores and chamber music works are still rare flowers in the garden of the catalogues of most of our publishers. A great many of them seem more interested in the excellence of the engraving than in the excellence of the music engraved. I should be glad to see a less expensive method of publication used—lithography, or photo-engraving from manuscript scores, provided, as a result, more scores were thereby put into circulation. I dare say without hesitation that probably more than fifty per cent of the best American scores are in manuscript. The Society for the Publication of American Music is doing what it can to aid in the solution of this problem and the Eastman School of Music is venturing into the publication field but the chief burden must and should fall on the publishers.

A third need is the old one which applies only to composers of orchestral music—of bridging the gap from the student to the professional stage. Today it is still difficult for the student composer to learn the orchestral trade. He does not know where to go to "prove out" his first efforts. Naturally the regular symphony programs are not the proper places for such try-outs but if each orchestra could add only a very few more thousand dollars to its annual deficit this money might be used for rehearsal try-outs of new works by younger composers with great benefit to the musical growth of the country.

Finally there is the education of those who are interested in the development of American music who are striving in a more or less uncoordinated way to encourage it. We have spent great sums of money for the development of American music, but I seriously question that much of it is spent wisely. Let us take, for example, the "prize competitions." I have had the misfortune to be a member of a good many juries and the story has been almost invariably the same. Few prominent composers

care to enter their work in these artistic marathons, feeling an instinctive dislike to the thought of setting up radically different types of work one against the other. Then the invariable rule barring any music which has had a public performance automatically excludes most of the works of a successful composer. The field is therefore often left to a host of mediocrities and futile composers the "best" of whom wins the prize.

And, indeed, if a good, unperformed work by a competent composer should stray into a competition it is even then not sure of being awarded the prize. A good work has individuality, which may offend certain judges while it pleases others. The result is a compromise between the jurors and the prize goes to a "middle ground" work which offends no one and pleases no one!

On the other hand there is a curious lack of understanding of the immense value of such things as are offered by the American Academy in Rome or the Guggenheim traveling fellowships. These institutions carefully select men who, they feel, have promise as creative artists, relieve them from the cares of every day affairs and give them an opportunity to study and write quietly under ideal conditions. I wish that all of the money spent on competition prizes could be used to create a few more such fellowships.

An advisory body might well be formed, consisting of the heads of the large foundations, institutions and associations which are taking an active part in the development of American music, in order to make a careful survey of ways and means.

Had I been writing this article ten years ago I should have said that the most difficult national task would be the education of the general public to the importance of American creative art. I no longer feel that this is so difficult. The American public, which a few years ago had an inferiority complex on matters artistic and a self-consciousness of such magnitude as to make the development of an indigenous art almost impossible, has taken amazing strides. It is already quite willing to compare the best American architecture with the best foreign architecture and is almost willing to admit that some of the best of the new music is being written in America.