

TWENTY YEARS' GROWTH IN AMERICA

HOWARD HANSON

TWENTY years have passed since The League of Composers began its important work in contemporary music. Through eighteen of these twenty years the work of the Eastman School of Music has been in a very real sense complementary. The League has brought to American audiences performances of new works by important contemporary composers which might not otherwise have been heard. The American Composers' Concerts of the Eastman School, on the other hand, have served as a laboratory for young Americans, many of whom were unknown and most of whom needed the opportunity of an orchestral laboratory.

These twenty years have brought many changes in contemporary music and have witnessed important developments in American music. These developments concern both the music itself and attitudes toward that music.

First, there has been a noticeable, perhaps one may say remarkable, rise in technical standards. In the early years of the American Composers' Concerts it was frequently necessary to "edit" scores of young composers in order to make them technically playable. Today a mastery of orchestration is so much a part of the young composer's equipment that it is taken for granted.

Second, there has been a growing realization of the importance of a benevolent nationalism in the creative arts, a consciousness of the fact that each country must discharge its obligation to its own sons by seeing to it that they have opportunity for training and self-realization.

Third, there is today a wealth of creative talent and adequate facilities for its training.

Fourth, there has been a certain *rapprochement* between popular and "serious" music with the result that the American symphonist has frequently profited from the vitality of his popular colleague, and popular music has in some instances emerged from the dance-hall to take its place successfully on concert programs.

Fifth, there is a growing maturity in the attitude of the casual listener toward American music. This is indicated by the fact that the sophomore search for the "American art-form" has given way to a realization of the complexity of the American scene and an understanding that its artistic expression will be as varied in form as are the components of the country from which it springs. With this understanding has come a tolerance which finds both in the works of Chadwick and of Gershwin manifestations of the American mind, and a maturity which does not demand the exclusion of the one because it is not like the other.

And yet, if I have any quarrel with the present-day attitude toward American music it is because I feel that this maturity of viewpoint has been only partially achieved. This is due in part to the fact that critical writing on music is at a low ebb. In spite of many instances of individual excellence, it is evident that the scholarship of a Philip Hale, the sensitivity of a Lawrence Gilman, the judicial qualities of a Richard Aldrich have not been replaced, to the great loss of an American renaissance which deserves a group of essayists comparable in vitality to the new music whose interpreter it should be.

As a result of this lack of adequate and interested critical interpretation the layman receives little help in his effort to understand what is going on about him in the field of American musical creation. The listener at his radio who one moment hears a concert of "modern American music" under the direction of its "Dean," Paul Whiteman, and then, fifteen minutes later hears a broadcast of "modern American music" presented by The League of Composers is hardly to be blamed if he is confused at the uniformity of labels on such highly different packages.

I have always objected to the too facile classification of composers into groups, but perhaps some classification is needed at the present time. I reach this conclusion because of the many puzzled letters which come to my desk asking for definitions of "modern American music," questions not only from laymen but from musicians as well. For this reason I am laying aside my scruples and attempting, however superficially, to sketch the American scene as I see it.

It should be apparent that there can be no uniform "American music" short of *Gestapo* control. I very much question whether there is in fact a "German music" or a "French music" as such. In any case standardization in this country would be disastrous and contrary to the most fundamental doctrines of American social and political philosophy. The American com-

poser must be influenced by his background, ethnic and economic, as well as musical, and by his environment and training. He will be influenced by his teachers, by his associations, perhaps by the very geography of the place in which he lives. Any uniformity of output under these conditions would be forced and unnatural.

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Let us first ask ourselves, "What is American music?" The answer, at least so far as the American public is concerned, is simple. American music is the music by American composers which Americans hear and know. It is first of all the music of Stephen Foster, of George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and hundreds of others, which forms a part of their every-day lives. This is, from the sociological view-point, our most important music. Second, it is the music in the smaller forms of MacDowell, Nevin, Cadman and a host of others whose songs and piano pieces are a part of the musical experience of most Americans. Third, and least impressive in quantity but of primary artistic importance it is the "serious" music of American composers which has been heard with sufficient frequency to make some impression upon the life of the nation.

In considering this third group of composers and their music we are impressed, first of all, with the enormous debt which American music owes to Boston and the New England group. Beginning with John Knowles Paine this group completely dominated American symphonic music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these men were teachers as well as composers who perpetuated their technical and esthetic points of view through their students. Paine was the teacher of George W. Chadwick, of Arthur Foote, Frederick S. Converse, Daniel Gregory Mason, Edward Burlingame Hill, and many others. Chadwick, himself a great teacher and an inspiring personality, taught Horatio Parker, Mason and Henry Hadley, to name but a very few. Parker passed on the tradition to David Stanley Smith, Quincy Porter and Douglas Moore. Randall Thompson is likewise a distinguished member of the "Harvard" group. These men are themselves all able teachers so that the traditions of the group continue to spread as one composer-teacher teaches his younger colleagues.

It may seem a long way from the *Tam O'Shanter* of Chadwick to the *Pageant of P. T. Barnum* by Douglas Moore and a still longer distance from the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Paine to the string quartets of Quincy Porter but the tradition is there.

It is first of all an Anglo-Saxon tradition which appears in the works of Chadwick. It is furthermore a scholarly tradition evidenced by high technical standards which at their worst may become academic and at their best give to the music an impression of well-knit form, skilfully planned architecture, and good workmanship. The tradition of this group is for the most part one of controlled and restrained expression, at times urbane, frequently full of robust good humor, direct and honest without circumlocution. Though the sources of Paine's music lie in nineteenth century German classic-romanticism the tradition of the group seems to owe more to the British Isles than to Germany. John Tasker Howard, to whom American music owes a great debt for his sympathetic and understanding evaluation, has remarked with justice that Horatio Parker is better known and appreciated in England than in his native United States.

The MacDowell tradition has exerted a tremendous influence but through example rather than through teaching. Hardly any young composer of the early twentieth century escaped his "MacDowell period." The technical influence of MacDowell has largely disappeared but the impression which he made upon American music remains. This influence is primarily Celtic – or perhaps one should say *North Sea-ward* including English, Scottish, Irish and Scandinavian influences. It is in a sense the combined influence of those artistic brothers Grieg and Delius.

The sensitiveness, poetry and mysticism of this school are strongly reflected in the work of Charles Tomlinson Griffes, the leader of the earlier impressionist group in America. Among living composers this spirit is found in some of the works of John Alden Carpenter. In this group I would also place Leo Sowerby whose earlier compositions show a kinship to the works of Delius and whose later works frequently are marked by a mysticism and a poetic sensitiveness only partially obscured by his highly intellectual gifts. Younger composers of this group are represented by such gifted young men as Samuel Barber, Kent Kennan and Frederick Woltmann.

In sharp contrast to both of these groups is the urban group centering around New York City. The most famous of this group was George Gershwin who bridged the gap between "popular" and "serious" music more effectively than any other composer. During his lifetime, when the use of the technical devices of popular music in symphonic composition was frowned upon, his very real gifts as a creative artist were not fully recognized or understood. Since his untimely death the pendulum has swung far

in the other direction – whether too far, only time can tell.

The outstanding composer of the urban group today in my opinion is Aaron Copland who uses what we once called “jazz-rhythms” most effectively in symphonic composition. Since his music is most closely allied to the popular music which Americans know best, it makes a strong bid for the designation “American” though it represents only one phase of American thought.

Other important members of this group are Morton Gould and Robert Russell Bennett, though the earlier works of the latter belie this classification. Much of the music of this group as a whole is brilliant, dynamic, and highly rhythmic. It is for the most part definitely urban music, sophisticated and sometimes a little “slick” in its polish.

Deems Taylor from some aspects of his work would seem to belong to the urban group. He is, however, so cosmopolitan in his outlook that his music contradicts any too-definite classification.

Other distinguished composers and teachers who have contributed much to American development in composition are Edgar Stillman-Kelley, Percy Goetschius, Nadia Boulanger, Rubin Goldmark and Ernest Bloch. Kelly has been for over sixty years an important influence both as composer and teacher. Goetschius, a distinguished theorist and a great teacher, impressed upon his many students high standards of craftsmanship but did not attempt to influence their personal manner of writing. Boulanger, like Goetschius, is primarily a theorist, but as a teacher she has also exerted great influence upon the molding of her students' esthetic principles and has played an important part in guiding the trend of musical composition among a group of American composers. Goldmark taught many of the members of the urban group but I can find little evidence of his own musical style in the works of his students. Bloch, on the other hand, has exerted great influence upon the many gifted young Americans who came to him for study and criticism. Frederick Jacobi is an able member of this group, but Bernard Rogers, in his mystical setting of the *Passion*, carries forward most completely the Bloch tradition.

In the case of the “cerebralist” group it is difficult to pass judgment. In one sense they never bring their music to the market-place for the approval of the common man. Their music is played too infrequently to become familiar and its acceptance by musicians is apt to be like the polite applause which we give to an erudite speaker who, we are sure, would be very interesting if we could only understand what he was saying.

And yet, in spite of the prestige of the atonal school and its entrance in the flesh into American life through the presence of the Viennese master, Arnold Schönberg, there are comparatively few American composers of note who are followers of this school. The few who have consistently trodden this path we may consider, if we wish, the lonely great whose music we sometimes respect but seldom love.

Roger Sessions is sometimes considered to be primarily a cerebral composer but in certain works, such as the *Suite* from *The Black Maskers*, he exhibits a dynamic directness coupled with qualities of dramatic power and sensitivity which are certainly by no means wholly cerebral.

Walter Piston also definitely does *not* fall in this category for in spite of his concern with classic forms and his preoccupation with contrapuntal invention his music has charm, vitality and humor. He, with Leo Sowerby, is in my opinion one of the best equipped composers of our time and yet can unbend to write in *The Incredible Flutist* some of the most delightful music written by a contemporary composer.

Roy Harris, also like Sowerby a member of the western group, is at times uncompromising with himself and with his listeners to a degree which seems to interfere with his naturalness of expression and with the vital force which is apparent in his best music. Yet through his music can be felt a warm and dynamic creative spirit.

Again in sharp contrast to the atonalists, neo-classicists and their colleagues is the group of composers who receive much of their inspiration from the folkways of American life – but who do not belong to the folklorists. Burrill Phillips typifies this group. In such works as *Selections from McGuffey's Readers* and *Courthouse Square* he writes vividly of homely American scenes which he knows. Robert Sanders follows the same path in *Saturday Night*. Harl MacDonald in a more epic vein pursues a similar course in certain of his symphonic works. Paul White explores both the epic and the humorous, the former in *The Voyage of the Mayflower* and the latter in the *Five Miniatures* made famous by the tragic demise of the too-ambitious mosquito.

It is impossible in a short space even to mention other groups of composers who are making important contributions in specific fields. Mention should be made, however, of the gradually growing influence of the American folksong since its early use by Henry F. Gilbert and later by John Powell. Mention should also be made of distinguished Negro composers such as William Grant Still and William Dawson in the symphonic field,

and R. Nathaniel Dett in the choral field.

A separate chapter should be devoted to such gifted experimentalists as Charles Ives, Henry Cowell and Virgil Thomson. All three have made their earlier experiments bear fruit in compositions of individuality and frequently of distinction, the latter in particular having through his *Four Saints in Three Acts* raised a new standard for the skilful and effective setting of the English language.

In the foregoing paragraphs I have mentioned names only as examples and not with the intention of giving what would even approximate a complete list. In addition to these names there is a host of younger men who have already shown outstanding creative gifts – William Schuman, Bernard Hermann, David Diamond, Wayne Barlow, Gail Kubik, Robert Palmer, Homer Keller, William Bergsma, to name a few. Some of these men like Schuman and Diamond have already developed a personal speech while others are still in the process of finding their own language. It is my hope, however, that this sketch, incomplete as it is, may give some idea of the variety and complexity of American music and that it may also be considered as a plea for a tolerant and understanding hearing of the many kinds of music which go together to make up our American contribution to contemporary musical creation.