

COMPOSERS ABOUT COMPOSERS

THE notion that composers are better qualified to discuss the works of their contemporaries than a non-practitioner is one that, examined in a historical light, has proven to be true and untrue in about an equal proportion of instances. One is prepared to recognize that Berlioz, Wagner, Schumann and Wolf wrote musical criticism that has yet to be approached for both understanding and clarity of expression; but the musical commentaries of a Tchaikovsky, a Debussy or a Gounod are quite another thing. Thus the volume that Harry Cowell has compiled recently, *American Composers on American Music*: (Stanford University Press, 1933) requires examination with a skeptical eye, not to its purpose, which is indisputably laudatory, but to the manner in which that purpose is achieved by the particular hands that have collaborated with the editor.

Therefore, one will accept the premise upon which Mr. Cowell has based his volume, "of obtaining critical estimates from composers . . . who know their subject, instead of from reviewers who are clever with words but do not know the principles of composition" and proceed to an appraisal of its accomplishment, which, again quoting Mr. Cowell's preface, was to be undertaken "seriously, fearlessly and in detail." Initially, there are some amusing discrepancies in the proportion of the various studies. Ruth Crawford is considered at nine pages length (by Charles Seeger) while Walter Piston is awarded only two and a fraction (in a consideration by Nicholas Slonimsky.) Twenty-two pages are required for Mr. Seeger to present adequately the Case of Carl Ruggles, alternately by anecdote, quotation and musical example, while a mere page and a quarter must suffice for the whole subject of American Tonal Speech, as discussed by Lazare Saminsky.

Yet, of the "fearless, serious" examination that Mr. Cowell has promised there is scarcely a trace. In the Ruggles article, for example, there is elucidation, and special pleading, but nowhere an intimation that the man's technic is less than divinely inspired. He is, says Mr. Seeger, "a perfectly good genius." Further, "to achieve the suitable state of mind (for work) he

requires an uproarious breakfast." . . . "of course, no orchestra is big enough; parts just naturally clamor unceasingly for extra horns and clarinets."

Or turn to an essay on Howard Hanson by Edward Royce. He quotes Mr. Morris Class as saying of American composers: "Say what you will, not one of us has yet struck instantaneously the note of beauty as Tchaikovsky did at the opening of the B \flat (sic) concerto." To which Mr. Royce appends, "But Mr. Class said that ten years ago, and is now answered by Hanson's *Romantic Symphony*." Say what *you* will, Mr. Cowell, not even the reviewers could parallel that. . . . and their opportunity is not long since past. It might be added that Mr. Hanson does almost as nobly for Mr. Royce in his own essay on the "Rochester Group."

Even in those papers which are valuable as an exposition of an individual (as Cowell on Henry Brant, Chanler on Copland, Slonimsky on Cowell, Cowell on Slonimsky) there seems no disposition to question the current activities of the personality involved. In each case, that which has gone before is subjected to examination, discounted or condemned, that which is *now* uniformly approved. How will these judgments stand up in five years, when the creations of 1933 are simply another "period?" Throughout, the tone is much too sober and pontifical. Were all these men what their commentators assess them to be, the plethora of genius in New York alone would shame even Austria in 1820 when Beethoven, Schubert and Weber were working simultaneously.

In the realm of sheer musical analysis, the remarks on Weiss and McPhee by Riegger, on Chavez by Copland, on Varese by Cowell actually fulfill the intent that, presumably, motivated the volume. And an essay on general problems of the American composer by Roy Harris (reprinted from *Scribner's*) has considerable merit. Yet the body of the volume contains too little that is actually judicious, too little that indicates considered standards of excellence for one not to feel that Mr. Cowell has, rather than clarified the problems, contributed a great deal that is vaporous to the already befogged atmosphere.

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