

MODERN MUSIC

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AMERICA, NORTH AND SOUTH

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POLITICAL events rarely have a decisive effect on the creative power of a nation. Especially is this true when they are the product of brutal nationalism—as in Europe today—and not the expression of a country's inner compulsion. Of course, since all art is a social function, any crisis of sufficient force or duration will leave some traces on the source of artistic creation. But the many artistic movements which are now developing from political ideologies rather than essential causes tend by their very nature to neutralize each other. At the same time they cannot altogether stifle the fundamental artistic impulses of their countries.

On the American continent, and in the United States especially, the arbitrariness, barbarity, and artificiality of these new movements incite a reaction against them which is reflected widely even in the sphere of creative activity. That is why the European observer, who was once content to keep the American scene in the dim distance, now focusses it into the foreground of his attention. A Latin of course, especially a Spaniard, views this scene from two angles, the relation of the Americas to Europe and the interrelation of the America of the North and the America of the South.

A European's interest usually begins with some individual American composer's work. Then he observes his connection with other composers, and finally he pauses to analyze national,

continental and American traits. With Europeans, one tends to take for granted the place of the individual composer in the European complex. But where "Americanism" is concerned a huge question mark at once arises. Are we face to face with a curious third dimension?

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Nearly as many attempts are made to define "America" as to distinguish East from West. The concept, Europe, represents the West to America. But if Europe's relation to the East—the Asiatic, Buddhist, Moslem and even the Russian East—is to westernize it, then America and Europe are interchangeable concepts. If, as Leo Ferrero maintained, Paris is the chief laboratory of westernization, New York is the opposite point of the ellipse. Beyond San Francisco looms the East again.

But there are certain militant American artists who, affirming distinctive characteristics, protest their inclusion in this general concept of the West. Possession of special characteristics does not, however, entirely differentiate one member of a species from another; the American *fact* does produce a species whose definition grows clearer but it is a species inside the genus European Western culture.

Self-evident as this may appear, it is necessary to make the point, since there is in America a tendency to over-emphasize certain native or recently imported traits. Whether poured into the vital stream or merely imposed on the European culture complex, they obscure the fundamental base with a picturesque but entirely arbitrary and exotic autochthonism. Is a new language formed by the addition of a dozen foreign phrases to any speech? Can one change his race by painting or tattooing the skin? A European dressed as a Comanche or a Carib remains a European in costume.

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This phase of "Americanism" however is not the crux of the problem. What is essential is the revival here of the historical phenomenon—political or cultural segregation. We have met it before in Europe under the Hellenic, Roman, Arabic and Gothic cultures. It is the ancient experience of colonial maturity, of emancipation from the tutelage of the fatherland. After a cer-

tain period, national characteristics emerge, changes are wrought in the original cultural contribution, which can often be followed back to the source through vestigial traces. What differentiates New York from London, or Havana from Cadiz, is not the Appalachian or pre-Columbian background. It is rather that in the one case the Anglo-Saxon and in the other the Spanish cultures have acquired new directions, noteworthy, *sui-generis* accents. Though it is also true that new metals have appeared in the depth of the crust which have nothing to do with Europe and even challenge it.

From all these elements can an art be forged which is completely divorced from Europe? Here is the problem of all American artists, and of musicians in particular. At present we see a clear distinction between European and American music, but that does not mean there is no contact between them. We do not have "one-hundred per cent American" music. But does Americanism mean the elimination of every European trait? It seems to me that the chagrin felt by American writers because their audiences do not devote themselves more exclusively to native music arises from their own pre-occupation with emancipation from European culture, from their exaggerated drive for a chemically pure Americanism.

Eventually there will indeed be a one hundred per cent American art. The ellipse of Western culture will break in two, as the amoeba does when it reproduces. But the amoeba does not divide until a second germinal nucleus has matured, until the new life center has been formed. Does that germinative point already exist among the people, in the culture, in the art and in the music of America? I believe it does. I believe an American art, different from that of today, from that of Europe, will emerge. But its form will not be fully perfected until the language has also developed. This is the lesson of history. It is of course always possible that a specifically American music will begin to appear before a differentiated spoken language evolves. (As a matter of fact a not very well educated Englishman or Spaniard even now finds some difficulties in understanding the language spoken in North and South America respectively.) There are already a number of American, particularly North American, composers

who, if they should ever succeed in moving from their speculative and experimental present to a phase more assimilated, more functional, would produce music different from the European, in internal as well as external meaning.

But in the situation of American music as it is today, importation remains a decisive and extraordinary complicating factor. Music is regarded largely as commercial material, more so in the United States than in Spanish America. The former, a "self-made" nation, has developed along lines which are predominantly commercial, while Latin America has been determined, artistically at any rate, by old world cultural imperatives. Thus the overgrown advertising industry in the United States hinders the development of experimental art which has no commercial value and curiously enough, such a handicap is a desideratum under capitalism. South American and European nations which adopt North American methods seem unaware that they are trading a cultural product (their moderate customs, appreciation of quality, good materials and skilled preparation) for inferior commodities.

True, it is European music of noble lineage that is commercially promoted, but this lineage becomes the *raison d'être* for its exploitation and is used to silence unfavorable criticism rather than to induce spiritual stimulation. Musical repertory is limited to make the chase of the dollar easier for two typically North American products—the commercial pianist and the eccentric band-leader genius. Electrical and mechanical inventions conspire against the growth of a typical American culture, an inferior principle attains the aspects of a desirable activity.

As for the American publisher, what responsibility for fostering national culture does he feel? In Europe, even in small countries like Spain, there was an unwritten law that best-sellers of mediocre quality should help books of small sales but high literary value, which do credit to their author, their publisher and their country. Conversely there are nations where phonograph records have become agents of artistic destruction and barbarism, controlled by capitalist madness which subverts the democratic principle: "demos" is taken to mean the consumer, and

the spread of culture interpreted in terms of sales value. The majority, in need of being cultivated, extorts instead unbridled adulation by threatening to withdraw its patronage.

These typical characteristics of American life are the most serious handicap to the Americanization of culture in the new world. The artist who wishes no longer to be Europe's spiritual slave, finds himself enmeshed and must fight against the special obstacles of his own environment.

In my opinion progress toward an indigenous American culture will not be advanced by efforts to establish an exclusive technical system, that is, a technic completely divorced from those universal conventions on which any language, culture or art are based. Some composers over-stress their technical language. They make their work difficult to understand, hard and severe. It suffers from the influence of "shop talk" in the confining atmosphere of artistic gatherings. Such men may be pioneers but after all the chief characteristic of artistic or cultural pioneers is to work from previously accepted theories. The construction of skyscrapers implies the existence of a normal architectural science. But North and South American musicians as well, frequently set off from arbitrary concepts, particularist conventions and exceptions which they hope to transmute into a universal language. Something—who can tell what—may come of all this. For my part, I fail to see how a new American music can be based on such shaky foundations.

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To consider the problems of Latin and Anglo-Saxon composers in America, one must first note the essential difference between North American composers and those of the great Spanish-speaking nations. The Anglo-Saxon musical contribution to North America has been less characteristic than that of Spain to Central and South America. What distinguishes the music of New York, for example, from that of Europe is not due to Anglo-Saxon influence. The musicians of the great metropolis, it seems to me scarcely reflect it. In the interior of the United States it is more discernible, though still slight.

But in the southern countries, Spanish music has left a fundamental imprint and, in its turn, South American music has

affected Europe's. The music of many South American nations does have distinctive characteristics. Aboriginal relics may be traced, in some communities they even predominate, though their effect on art music has been negligible.

In practically every country where Negroes have been introduced as slaves, they thrive, but only in the United States, Brazil and Cuba is Negro music vital. European influence however, has been an ingredient in the development of this music—the colonial in Cuba and Brazil, the Protestant choir in Virginia, the spiritual in New Orleans. The colonial heritage is still strong in some regions, old French influences still persist in Haiti and in the Lesser Antilles. But the Negro has not forgotten the rites of African religions. Songs and magic or dance rhythms are played on instruments whose African origin has been clearly established.

North American commercialism, spurred by the demand for attractive and picturesque novelties, discovered an easily exploited mine in Negro music. Played in every town and country it was even brought to London by grotesque minstrels and, by way of Cuba (Santiago rather than Havana, I imagine) to Cadiz also, where it formed the *murga gaditana*. In the United States, Negro music acquired commercial value under the name of jazz. In Europe, jazz became the vogue during the post-war period when any novelty that amused or made people gay was welcomed. It also awakened interest in other Negro music. Some composers used jazz elements for original compositions. Earlier, Dvorak had completely Europeanized Negro songs and rhythms in his famous symphony and quartet. Delius did the same in a more individual and original, though not less European, manner. Stravinsky's works of Negro inspiration are studies which he soon abandoned though they have left traces on his art. Other composers, like Ravel, simply paid a tribute to fashion.

It would be a mistake, I think, for Americans to regard Negro music as their salvation from stifling Europeanism although it is true that what they seek in this type of music is superior to Indian, folk-lore and other contributions, and even to their attempts to achieve Americanism through abstract experiments.

The danger in utilizing Negro music is that the picturesque tends to predominate over the organic. The attractive elements are greater than the tectonic. The composer risks a surrender to easy effects, he tends to grow careless of the inner structure which, as in physiology, assures the ruggedness and vitality of the organism. The musician faces the dilemma of falling, because of America's commercialism, into the trap which has caught the Negro music of New York, the all consuming night-club. Or he must constantly force himself to find structural methods and technical means of treating this material. He must develop the power to see things on a large scale, so that he may raise the level of a music which tends to decline, rather than to soar.

The problem that North American composers face may be thus defined: either they must attempt to fit America's contribution, everything pertaining to the new culture, into the grammatical, technical and structural frame of European art (which is paradoxical in principle); or they must invent an entirely new musical structure, a completely new melodic, rhythmic and harmonic world. Those of serene mind lean to the first course, the more enthusiastic are intrigued by the second. But can history be refashioned in a moment? The history of European art stretches through centuries. Young America answers "Yes, but we made New York in a few decades." New York, yes. Skyscrapers, elevated and subway trains, automobiles, soda fountains—yes. The entire comfortable, easy, mechanical aspect of American life—yes. But not art. Art is neither mechanical, easy or comfortable. The best American critics know this, although they prefer to sidestep the difficulty. But after all, to learn by doing instead of by theory is a thoroughly American virtue—to learn to live by living. Every experiment made by the American musicians should be carefully observed. Their efforts will find fulfillment—sooner or later.