Mainstream Music of Early Twentieth Century America

THE COMPOSERS, THEIR TIMES, AND THEIR WORKS

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Preface

The following pages propose to examine the most prominent American composers active in the earliest years of the twentieth century and the music they wrote: Kelley, Converse, Mason, Hill, Daniels, Hadley, Taylor, Cadman, Gilbert, Farwell, Powell, Shepherd, Joplin, Griffes, Bauer, and Carpenter. Some years ago, I set out to learn what these composers had accomplished, not what latter-day critics claim they had the obligation to have accomplished. Immediately, it became obvious that the agenda of the former was not that of the latter. Nor was I convinced that the normally temperate music of these composers was necessarily inferior because it is not infused with unfamiliar, unproven, and innovational techniques. I was also interested in finding out what was feasible for these composers to achieve, after considering their era, their place in contemporary society, and their own predilections. Lastly, I wondered how trustworthy was the prevalent notion of today that these composers were a mere footnote to our cultural history and that their works are inconsequential. Such a devastating evaluation seemed unfair to apply to honest artists who devoted so much of their creative lives to producing a body of musical literature that they hoped would represent the best in them.

The first thing that struck me was that these musicians were active during a time when tremendous changes were taking place in American society. Industrial expansion and urban growth were rapidly building up a mass of rootless wage earners. Young people were deserting the farms and villages for the cities and their promise of economic betterment. Millions of immigrants had recently arrived and continued to arrive, not from the congenial North European countries but from East-

ern Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and the Far East. The immigrants were not Protestant Christians, were usually darker complexioned, conducted their lives differently and had taste preferences that seemed strange, and—what was more dismaying—most of them were poor, uneducated, and ignorant. The longstanding American way of life, based on Protestant ethics, rural and small-town values, and the cohesive outlook of a homogeneous people, was rapidly being altered. Since almost all of these composers came from old-American stock, they presumably felt disquieted about the changes taking place. They surely noticed the deplorable aftereffects of contemporary urban living—corruption, violence, human degradation, and loss of the moral anchor that had reliably supported the America they cherished. Some felt that timetested American principles, as they understood them to be, should continue to be a force in resolving the confusions of the present. Several of them did experience the need to reassert musically what they saw as valuable in their own heritage. One or two became largely cultural conservators rather than transformers. This was particularly true of Daniel Gregory Mason and John Powell. It was also true, but to a lesser extent, of Frederick Shepherd Converse, Mabel Daniels, and Edward Burlingame Hill. I do not mean that nothing new entered their thinking and music. I do mean that whatever was new that did enter was tempered by the inheritance they held dear.

Secondly, I found the composers living in a time when the United States was changing from an insular nation to a great economic, political, and colonial power—a shift accelerated by World War I. Commerce with transoceanic countries increased dramatically. Diplomatic relations with other nations took on major importance. Our sphere of political control was extended to islands of the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, and to Central America. Our sphere of influence embraced all of the Americas. World fairs in Chicago, Philadelphia, and St. Louis celebrated our attainment of national maturity. Goods and ideas freely traveled back and forth across the Atlantic as never before. The composers took notice of the fairs and looked abroad for fresh concepts to incorporate into their works, so long as the novelties were compatible with their viewpoint. Henry Gilbert discovered the national music of Russia and other non-German countries at the Chicago Fair of 1893, and soon was stimulated to seek out America's own national music. During his creative life, Charles Tomlinson Griffes looked for guidance from the music of Germany, then of France, and lastly of Asia. The compositions of national composers, like Dvořák, Mussorgsky, and Grieg, and composers at the cutting-edge of music, like Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky, contributed to the stylistic alterations.

I found most fascinating of all the quest for an American musical identity. Was it enough just to live and work in the United States without

consciously seeking out an American identity, as Griffes did? Was an Anglo-Celtic musical direction the true expression of what America was about, as was the claim of Powell? Was it an intense identification with one region as was apparent in Edward Burlingame Hill's *Lilacs*, which delineated New England, and Arthur Shepherd's *Horizons* on the American West? Were Amerindian-inspired works representative of the best in America, as Arthur Farwell maintained? What about the African-American music favored by Gilbert, or the contemporary popular-music styles that identified important compositions of John Alden Carpenter? Was Henry Hadley right to go his own way, never debating what it meant to compose an *American* music, never doubting the tried-and-true compositional methods he employed, and writing to please himself and his audiences? The issue of cultural Americanism was predominant during the early years of the century. What is most fascinating is how each composer arrived at his own answer.

Lastly, I faced the question: did I as a listener honestly like the music? The answer was an emphatic yes! Not all of it, to be sure, but certainly more than just a few works. Nor was my enjoyment limited to one style. Compositions as diverse in sound and concept as Converse's *Mystic Trumpeter*, Carpenter's *Skyscrapers*, Griffes's Piano Sonata, Hadley's Second Symphony, and Deems Taylor's *Through the Looking Glass* proved soundly envisioned, skillfully crafted, and expressively meaningful. Compositions such as these are designed to stir the emotions and, at the same time, stimulate the imagination. If the listener does not reject romantic music out of hand, he will find delight in the logically articulated forms, fine invention within an assimilable idiom, and wealth of appealing melody.

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Chapter One

Themes and Viewpoints

The first prominent native-born American composers emerged during the last third of the nineteenth century. Among the most outstanding of them were John Knowles Paine, George Chadwick, Edward MacDowell, Horatio Parker, Arthur Foote, and Amy Beach—all related to New England in one way or another. Loosely, they made up what can be called a New England-oriented group. They had achieved international reputations through compositions exhibiting high craftsmanship, mastery of a classical-romantic musical idiom, and content at once substantial, convincing, and agreeable. Their contributions to American culture included songs, characteristic pieces and sonatas for piano, chamber music, symphonies, concertos, symphonic poems, sacred masses, oratorios, and operas.

Their teachers had been Germans, or Americans with a Germanic outlook. Their admiration had gone principally to German composers, at first to Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms, and later also to Liszt and Wagner. As one might expect, their own styles had grown out of a Germanic context. Nevertheless, none of their compositions slavishly followed German models and the music of at least one of them, Chadwick, breathed an American sound and spirit before Antonín Dvořák was supposed to have shown the way.[1]

Then a younger generation of American composers came along, born in the 1870s and early 1880s, whose main creative years spanned the first third of the twentieth century. A majority of them had a connection with New England, whether by birth, education, or residence. Among the most well-known in their time were Frederick Shepherd Converse, Edward Burlingame Hill, Daniel Gregory Mason, Henry Gilbert, Henry

Hadley, Arthur Farwell, John Alden Carpenter, Arthur Shepherd, Charles Wakefield Cadman, John Powell, Charles Tomlinson Griffes, and Deems Taylor. To this list one should add Edgar Stillman Kelley. Although born in 1857, Kelley lived on to 1944, composed most of his major works during the twentieth century, and figured prominently in the move away from abstract compositions and towards program music.

Most of their early works, like those of the just mentioned New England group, also rested on Germanic roots. Their styles, however, increasingly felt the influence of either Richard Strauss, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Modest Mussorgsky, contemporary French composers (d'Indy, Debussy, Ravel), or one or more American musical dialects (minstrel, British-American folk, American Indian, African-American, and contemporary rag and jazz music). Here and there a work reveals a hint of Alexander Scriabin, Igor Stravinsky, or even Arthur Schoenberg. Farwell, in 1914, saw his generation of composers working in a "transitional period," poised between emulation of older styles and probing for something new, "both in quality and application."[2] By the early 1930s, his generation would be largely supplanted by a new wave of composers who desired to go well beyond the confines of tradition. In 1933, Marion Bauer reported: "To many, the present day music seems to break completely with the past, to have no logical connection with former accepted methods. . . . It must be acknowledged that we are in a stage of transitional upheaval. . . ."[3]

As should be clear, the mainstream composers created their compositions during a period of diverse stylistic explorations. Although they continued to cultivate the genres favored by the older New England group, most of them deemphasized chamber music and concentrated more on opera, tone poems, and other types of descriptive music. Their works evidenced a passage from the Germanic-based classical-romanticism of the older New Englanders, through a couple of decades when a variety of musical styles could exist simultaneously in a state of balance, to a dominant posttriadic "modern" phase which deemphasized accepted cultural values and abandoned conventional musical standards. This last stage would be represented by composers like Carl Ruggles, Wallingford Riegger, Edgar Varèse, Roger Sessions, Henry Cowell, George Antheil, and Aaron Copland. Except for Ruggles and possibly Riegger, most of the composers intent on innovation would be younger than the mainstream composers. Charles Ives, born in 1874, was certainly an innovator. However, he would not have a forceful influence on American music until after World War II.

It should be pointed out that many modernists would also show some allegiance to one or more traditional procedures in several of their significant works, especially those created after the early 1930s and through the 1940s. This allegiance, to be sure, would be much less than that of

the mainstream composers and would be manifested in more unique ways. Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, American composers would come along who would adhere to the principles of romanticism and the usages of the common-practice period.[4]

THE CHANGING WORLD OF MUSIC

The first real upsurge in American art music took place in the last third of the nineteenth century, and it came after decades when little of an artistic nature had been composed. Some Moravian compositions, the piano works of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the mostly church-centered music of Dudley Buck, and the tentative compositional attempts of William Fry and George Bristow constituted a large part of what had been written. After the Civil War, the production and quality of native compositions would increase. Before long, experiments with the American musical vernacular would begin to take place.

Prior to 1870, the chamber-music performance of American compositions had been rare, orchestral performance even more rare, and operatic performance almost unknown. Scarcely a wealthy individual, and certainly no governmental body, federal, state or local, was ready to encourage the creation of native string quartets, symphonies, and operas. What music was heard almost invariably came from Europe. The height of achievement in the American musical world comprised the mounting of an Italian opera, a Central European symphony, or a Handel oratorio. Moreover, thorough musical instruction at an American conservatory of music or college department of music was scarcely to be had. Nor was music a morally sanctionable or useful study. To become a professional musician was to betray a flippant attitude toward life.

Matters changed for the better after the Civil War. Many of the immigrants to America, especially those from Germany, enjoyed art music and fostered its performances. Among them were well-trained musicians, who immediately set about establishing and performing in a variety of musical groups, and who offered proficient instruction in all phases of music-making. Concert tours by highly competent European performers, like Jenny Lind and Ole Bull, romanticized the pursuit of art music. In addition, many young Americans were going to Europe to further their educations, academic and cultural. American men and women grew more sophisticated in their tastes and began to appreciate artists and artistic productions as never before.

Conservatories of music and college music departments came to exist. Capable-performing ensembles increased. Talented Americans, determined to become completely trained composers, began their studies at home, then traveled to Germany to obtain an exhaustive grounding in

their art. They returned to the United States not only to create their own works but to train a host of younger composers.

Prominent among these pioneers was John Knowles Paine. He initiated musical instruction at Harvard University and wrote several outstanding compositions, including a sacred mass, an oratorio, an opera, and two symphonies. Another pioneer, George Chadwick, headed the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and wrote highly polished symphonic and chamber compositions, cantatas, and operas. Not a little of the American vernacular found its way into his music. Edward MacDowell, a consummate pianist and composer for piano, taught at Columbia University after a Boston sojourn. His two piano concertos, four piano sonatas, numerous poetic pieces for piano, and *Indian* Suite for orchestra won him the high regard of American and European music lovers. Horatio Parker found his way from Boston to a professorship at Yale University. His specialty was vocal music; his oratorio *Hora Novissima* and opera *Mona* were peak achievements in the American culture of his time. Arthur Foote, Amy Beach, and Edgar Stillman Kelley also made estimable contributions to American musical literature.

All of this accomplishment notwithstanding, Rupert Hughes still had to observe in 1900: "Aside from occasional attentions evoked by chance performances, it may be said in general that the growth of our music has been unloved and unheeded by anybody except a few plodding composers, their wives, and a retainer or two." He explained his reason for writing *Contemporary American Composers* as follows: "The only thing that inclines me to invade the privacy of the American composer and publish his secrets is my hearty belief . . . that some of the best music in the world is being written here at home, and that it only needs the light to win its meed of praise."[5]

The possibilities for performance did increase after that. More and more capable ensembles came to exist both because their membership consisted of well-trained European musicians, who were arriving in large numbers, and because they found financial sponsors and ready audiences in the burgeoning urban centers. For example, the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, and the Chicago Symphony had commenced life in the nineteenth century; their instrumentalists were largely German-born. Now these three ensembles were followed by the establishment of symphony orchestras in Philadelphia (1900), Minneapolis (1903), Cincinnati (1909), Detroit (1914), Baltimore (1916), and Cleveland and Los Angeles (1918). A composer like Frederick Shepherd Converse or John Alden Carpenter could anticipate performances not only from his local Boston Symphony or Chicago Symphony but from orchestras scattered throughout the United States. If fortunate, a European orchestra or two might give him a hearing.

Nevertheless, the native composers found that after an initial perfor-

mance or within a few years of a premiere, the composition was set aside and forgotten. Composers had to contend with first, foreign-born conductors and musicians who favored the music of their countrymen; second, with impresarios and managers who discovered greater profit in scheduling European works; and third, with Europophilic boards of trustees, patrons, and writers on music for whom most things American were by definition second rate and unprestigious.

To give an instance, *Musical America* writer "E. C. S.," in January 1914, reported on a lecture sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh that Thomas Whitney Surette had delivered. Surette had declared that there was "no purely American music and no real American composers." The condition of music was similar to that of literature in the time of Washington Irving. Americans were copying "from the German and French schools." Nothing they wrote expressed their own country. Surette had contended "that America is still too young and too cosmopolitan, too full of clash and barbarism to produce great music. There are too many kinds of Americans. The exploitation of Indian tunes is not . . . likely to have lasting influence." John C. Freund, editor of *Musical America,* became incensed, later that year, with critics like Surette, "who have squarely set their faces against everything American in music. To them the very idea that there was such a thing as an American composer was cause for hilarity." He cited Henry E. Krehbiel of the *New York Tribune* as an influential critic contemptuous of all American musicians and composers and preferring all foreigners, even those not first-rate.[6]

In addition, although one or two or their works might have some success abroad, these native composers saw none of their music become a lasting addition to the international repertoire. Yet, they were aware that solid acceptance in the United States would only take place after Europeans regarded their creative efforts as distinctive and worth producing. Mabel Daniels testified in 1905 to the disturbing ignorance of and incuriosity about American music that she discovered in Germany, stating: "It is a sad but true fact that American music has, as yet, won no footing in Germany." Carl Engel speaks of Alfredo Casella writing about American musical life in *La Critica Musicale* and praising only jazz; Engel then observes: "In regrettable, though characteristic, silence he passes over our serious composers, and not with a syllable does he betray whether or not he ever heard of Messrs. Chadwick, Loeffler or Gilbert." Aaron Copland mentioned that all sorts of excellent composers had been active in America but were ignored in Europe; he said: "I myself lose patience with the European music lover who wants our music to be all new, brand-new, absolutely different."[7]

Assuredly, the majority of the mainstream composers put great value on the past and allowed it to guide their present. Nevertheless, when thinking about any musician's past, we must keep in mind that the

grasp of it differs significantly from person to person. One musician may be shaky about even recent developments and muddle the connection between the tiny fractions of memory that remain with him. His writing, whether good or bad, rests on misinterpretation. It may embrace epochs for another composer, whose mind wanders back to the Middle Ages and who remembers the centuries as logically consistent and ordered. He anticipates a gradual evolution from one state of the art to another, consonant with the past but looking forward to the future. (Almost all composers in this study believed in this gradual evolution.) Still another composer cherishes everything from yesteryear, lingering on former times to the exclusion of everything taking place around him. He is the true reactionary, rejecting even the most deliberate evolvement of musical speech. None of the composers studied here fit into this last category.

Taken as a group, the artists with whom we are concerned had a special sensitivity to the past. They relied upon it to steady them when confronted by the accelerated social, scientific, and cultural transformations going on in their own time. They evinced an acute appreciation of what was handed down to them, letting it supply them with a semblance of personal unity in a disorderly and worldly era and probed it for possible artistic refurbishing, each in his own way.

Because the mainstream composers were likely to build on, rather than repudiate, their inheritance (and this includes even dedicated nationalists like Henry Gilbert and Arthur Farwell), they were beset by a further problem: the hostility of various modernists inclined to reject most works that drew from the musical common practices and tonal-triadic conventions of the time. Bitter over the reception of his and like-minded composers' music, a disturbed Farwell complained:

> The attitude of the world of musical "culture" in America is still cold toward the native producer; this narrow-American "culture" world pays for the maintenance of fashionable foreign standards and resents any interference with this course. Concert singers are seldom heard in American songs worthy of their artistry, and orchestral conductors seldom give, on their own initiative, successful native orchestral works, an isolated performance of which has been arduously procured elsewhere. . . . The pathway of true creativity, of healthy growth and achievement for the composer in America to-day, lies in abandoning the competition with European sensationalists and ultra-modernists in the narrow arena of the concert halls of 'culture' and turning to the fulfillment of national needs in the broadest and deepest sense.[8]

The competition from American "ultra-modernists" for a place in the sun intensified as the years rolled by. Too many composers, however they defined themselves, were chasing too few opportunities for performance, for funds to subsidize their activities, and for teaching posi-

tions to provide a livelihood. And modernism was very much in the air after 1900. Strong reactions to the clashing, dehumanizing aspects of the emerging industrial society helped give it birth. Its adherents multiplied after World War I, whose attendant horrors and accelerated dissolution of long-standing societal bonds had a lasting effect. It represented an international trend in literature, painting, architecture, and music. It took hold in an America where the customary restraints of church and class had weakened and individuality had strengthened; where cultural Teutonisms met with growing disfavor; where things French were gaining favor; where art music still had a shallow hold on the populace; where the cultural focus was shifting away from New England to New York and other parts of the country; and where composers were no longer inescapably Yankee or Christian.

Modernism's impact on the mainstream composers was twofold. First, while none succumbed completely to any of its manifestations, all were influenced by the fresh modes of expression it made available, some slightly, others to a greater extent. Second, because these musicians refused to embrace fully its artistic precepts, they underwent sustained attack from critics in the several up-to-date camps. The result would be the eventual elimination of their works from serious consideration as musical literature worthy of interest. The avant-gardists would consider them irrelevant to the new American society, that is to say, their subject matter, structures, and substance were deemed to falsify the contemporary world they were expected to represent.[9] Gertrude Stein, around whom several of the young future-looking American musicians clustered in Paris, insisted that tremendous events like World War I served to speed up change in artistic experiences. Frederick Hoffman says that, to her: "The 'pastness' of people and events was not so important as their relevance, and this relevance was tested in the light of its applicability to the present." He continues:

> It led to the *isolation* of historical figures and happenings from their original context and to the evaluation of each in terms of contemporary relevance. The *nature* of that relevance was, of course, individualized with each writer who surveyed or selected from the past.[10]

From this perspective, we can understand Carl Van Vechten's attack on all American composers from or loyal to the past, beginning with Paine and including Gilbert, Farwell, Carpenter, and John Powell. He asserted that every one of them lacked inspiration. They represented the genteel bourgeoisie—the affluent upper class and high-ranking clergy—for whom they composed music that was well-bred, maudlin, and disappointingly facile and effortless to fathom. Their music lacked the vitality of popular music, ragtime, and jazz. For these reasons, Van

Vechten had "no warm regard" for Gilbert's *Dance in Place Congo*, *Negro Rhapsody*, and *Comedy Overture*. Powell's *Rhapsodie Négre* and Carpenter's *Krazy Kat* were not as good as Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. He confessed that Henry Mencken had "pointed out to" him that it was his

> duty to write a book about the American composers, exposing their flaccid opera bar by bar. It was in vain that I urged that this would be but a sleeveless errand, arguing that I could not fight men of straw, that these our composers had no real standing in the concert halls and that pushing them over would be an easy exercise for a child of ten. On the contrary, he retorted, they belonged to the academies; a great many persons believed they were important; it was necessary to dislodge this belief [!].[11]

Van Vechten was indifferent to the premises on which these composers based the legitimacy of their works. Artistic validity was as he and Henry Mencken, not they, defined it.

Again and again the mainstream composers and later traditional composers like Samuel Barber were dismissed because their works were said to lack contemporaneity. Unfortunately for them, the validity of an artistic work, whether in literature, painting, or music, was verified by relevance to if not the mirroring of a "real" contemporary world. It was a concept that took hold at the beginning of the twentieth century and persisted in the decades that followed. Nonetheless, the concept has continuously come under fire. Looking back to the early 1900s, the novelist Ellen Glasgow said:

> The modern adventurers who imagine they know love because they have known sex may be wiser than our less enlightened generation. But I am not of their period. I should have found wholly inadequate the mere physical sensation, which the youth of today seek so blithely. . . . I am so constituted that the life of the mind is reality, and love without romantic illumination is a spiritless matter.[12]

John Livingston Lowes, writing about poetry at the end of the second decade, insisted that art interpreted and did not reproduce reality, that instead it admitted a person to "an enchanted ground" beyond mere reality.[13] Etienne Gilson, talking about painting, declared in 1959 that the artist tried to create things that did not exist "ready-made" in reality and that gave him pleasure.[14] Roy McMullen, in 1968, went even further in distinguishing art from reality, saying that a work of art had validity simply because it was not a slice of reality but something willed and given shape by the artist.[15] Finally, toward the end of the century, Charles Newman surveyed the modern scene turning into post-modern and wrote that "first-order" art was not a byproduct or reflection of