

AMERICA'S MUSICAL FUTUREby **MAUD POWELL***Philadelphia Press***June 26, 1910**

Writers who attempt to glimpse the future of music in America are fond of the assertion that when our composers have achieved the characteristically American style in musical expression, the foundation thereof will be the melodies of the Southern Negro. The hypothesis is interesting, and I was among the many inclined to subscribe to it, until a certain concert tour through South Africa gave me a splendid opportunity for close study of the musical susceptibilities of the semi-savage brothers of our Southern dorky. The experience taught me that our musical theorists were right only in part.

The term Kafir is applied generally to the semi-civilized black in Africa, whether Zulu, Basuto, or Fingo. I found this people virginal in music, but on the point of being corrupted through contact with the ever encroaching horde of whites. Thus to come in contact with the primitive music of an almost primitive people was not only a delight but an inspiration. I learned from them how those who live close to Nature are conscious of the universal law of harmony and seek to bring it into expression in their own affairs by making music the most important element in the ritual of their daily lives. It meant much to me to learn that music had a far higher significance to the savage than to civilized man, who regards it as a mere diversion or accomplishment.

The savage appealed to me in a new light when I discovered that these superbly built Kafirs, with ebony skin and docile, doglike eyes, had souls attuned to something higher than mere animal appetites for eating, drinking, and fighting. Shakespeare's oft quoted line, "Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast," was revealed to me as a universal truth when, as frequently occurred during my travels, I found a half-nude native standing for hours "without my casement window" listening to the sound of my violin. His knowledge of English speech amounted doubtless to a vague understanding of a so-called Kitchen-Kafir (adapted to his limited perceptions); but the language of music spoke to him in direct and intelligible terms.

Intimate observation soon revealed that these blacks were keenly responsive not only to beauty of sound, but also to beauty of color and beauty of line. This aesthetic susceptibility to color, contour, and melody amounts, in my opinion, to a racial instinct among the blacks. These are the things in Nature that appeal most strongly to primitive peoples; but how different has been the response in the various races! Malay and Mongol, for example, are as susceptible to sound as the Ethiopian, but in neither the perception of the beautiful in sound, nor in the

refinement of their imitative expression of it, are they on the same aesthetic plane as the black man.

Nature the Great Teacher

For the color scheme of his marvelous beadwork and straw plating, the Kafir borrows inspiration from the heavens or the myriad-hewed wild flowers that deck the great treeless Karoos. And from the songbirds of the forbidding hills he steals the secret of soft, persuasive music. Nature is his only book, and to her he turns for instruments when his imitativeness prompts him to reproduce the melodies of the birds or the softer music of the whispering winds or rippling water. His musical instruments, therefore, are mellow toned and sweet, being made of wood, bamboo, gourd (especially calabash), and of soft, tinkling strips of horn; while his melodies, like those of the feathered creation, acquire compelling charm from monotonous iteration and re-iteration. Even the intervals of his barbaric scale, if scale it can be called, are of such indefinite and elusive character that they may justly be thought to have their prototype in the throat of the songbird.

So much do sounds of a gentle nature ravish the ear of the native African that he dons a dancing belt of large dried shells filled with pebbles, which he strings together like beads and winds about his waist. The lovable rickshaw boys, curiously and gaudily costumed, ox horns and feathers on their heads, imaginary stockings of amazing pattern painted on their bare legs, weave these dancing belts for anklets, and as they lope along in imitation of the native springbok, dragging their human load after them, anything more deliciously entrancing than the soft, rhythmic “chink chink” of these musical ornaments can hardly be imagined. Another Kafir ornament is a head dress, having beaded strings dangling between the eyes, on the ends of which jingle tiny bells, crudely carved from bits of horn.

These lithe limbed natives possess also a delicacy of touch which they apply as readily to the manipulation of a musical instrument as to their quaint bead stringing, plaited straw work, and the like. To hear a Kafir boy play an instrument of the white man’s fashioning, an ordinary mouth organ or the plebeian concertina, is something of a revelation. I heard once in the solitude of the hills of Swartzkop in Natal a Kafir lad softly playing a concertina as he strolled barefooted along a narrow mountain trail. One little haunting phrase he repeated over and over again, producing a tone so sweet and seductive that I stood entranced. As he passed me, some pretty instinctive courtesy, or bashfulness perhaps, prompted him to subdue his tone to a mere breath of sweet sound, producing an effect in the stillness of the late afternoon that was indescribable.

Identified by His Tune

I have learned since through an Englishman who knows something of the Kafir that a native man is known by the one tune he always plays. Here we have the primitive exemplification of the *leit* motif. Moreover the Kafir has a way of repeating his tune in cycles in some manner unfathomed by the white man. So my boy of the concertina probably had some large rhythmic plan, which made him loath to stop playing, lest he might thereby lose count and perforce have to go back to the very beginning.

In Bechuanaland the natives are exceedingly musical. They have fine voices and sing remarkably well in chorus. On one of those strangely clear nights, under the Southern Cross, they will congregate in scores, or even hundreds, ranging themselves in groups about an enormous bonfire. Then they will sing in unison, in chorus and antiphonally. The burden of their song may be some strange folklore or tribal history, or it may be a rehearsal of the brave deeds of the tribe or the daring or wisdom of their honored and worshipful chief. One of the groups will start off with a slow, monotonous droning, a second will presently intone a sort of melody, which will be taken up in turn by a third group, and so on and on. Each group will have its individual tune, while the various groups will answer one another or sing together in a curious primitive counterpoint. And for a grand finale all will rise and sing together in simple, impressive unison.

Unfortunately, the barrier of language prevented me from gaining the full significance of this interesting musical ceremonial; but I can testify to having heard cadences in these barbaric chants that were strangely familiar to my American years.

Corrupted by the Whites

It is sad to think that the cheap and vulgar songs the white man has brought from his music halls to the African wilderness are finding favor among the Kafirs. The day is not far off, counting time in a large sense, when they will supplant the tribal chant, romantic, fitting, and thrilling as it is. Like the clothes of civilized cut that sit in repulsive awkwardness on these splendid bronze figures, so white man's song is also a mournful misfit.

The rude music of these Kafirs, beautiful in its simplicity and quaintness, is the true, characteristic music of the Africa of yesterday; but it will not be the characteristic music of the Africa of tomorrow. Year by year the Dark Continent is becoming a white man's country. Native simplicity and originality are already beginning to disappear through contact with a superior race. Eventually all that is characteristic of the Kafir today will be eliminated in the absorption of a more complex civilization. His music will then cease to exist except in the phonographic records of ethnologists.

This transitional period on which the Kafir has entered brings home to us the circumstances of our own aborigines immediately before and after the Colonial period, and the conditions of our Southern Negroes before and after the Civil War. Time was when the weird incantations, the battle songs, and the burial chants of the Indian were the characteristic music of the people who inhabited this country. They were not of our race; but their history is part of our history and the most romantic element of it. And their folklore and their music have been diligently collected and conserved for us.

The Indian was an intensely musical being in his own uncivilized way; but the white man who displaced him was not. Our Colonial forebears were psalm singers. The pioneers who opened up the wilderness were too busy even for that pious but unmusical diversion. Years

passed before any phase of our national existence found musical expression. It was the Negro, finally, another alien to our blood, who began to express the emotions of his primitive nature in song. The simplicity and originality of his melodic inspiration, springing from his unsophisticated nature, had an irresistible appeal and charm. He brought into manifestation a new and a characteristic musical idiom. But after the Civil War the unsophisticated Negro became obsolete, and melodies like "Suwanee River" disappeared with him.

Inspiration of the Civil War

If it obliterated the melodious dandy, that same Civil War furnished the first real inspiration to our native composers. Patriotic songs, marching tunes, battle hymns, and songs of defeat and victory were turned out in endless profusion. Much of this was worthless and ephemeral; but there remains a fairly substantial residuum of crude, homely, but stirring music, hallowed by patriotic associations, and valuable not only on that account, but because it is characteristically American in its musical idiom.

Almost half a century has elapsed since the close of the Civil War, and in that period our country has undergone an expansion in the commercial arts that is without parallel in history; but we struck no new note in music until the last decade brought into vogue the reigning vulgarity of ragtime. Frown on it as we may, we must confess in the end that it has distinct individuality of rhythm. And that is a great deal; for rhythm stands at the root of all musical structure. But, above and beyond the vital importance of its structural quality, it has a soul of its own. It is a perfect expression in musical terms of our nervous vitality and of our national swagger, of the slapdash, devil may care, get there or bust method of the American.

I hope I have made clear the existence of four periods in our history, which have their own individual and characteristic musical idiom, an idiom so intimately a part of the warp and woof of certain phases of our national life, that it not only serves to recall them to memory but to express the national mood of its time.

Remarkably vivid and instructive has been the evolution within the last half century of a national music in Russia. We may well turn to it as an object lesson to help solve our problem. Before that time what music was written in Russia was a weak imitation of the Italian, French, and German composers. Then Mikhail Glinka, who had been educated musically in Italy and Germany, determined to write music that was of and for the Russian people. His opera, "Life for the Czar," was the epoch making outcome. The libretto reeked with patriotism, and his score was built on the popular songs of the Russian people. The success of this work, and others of like sort from his pen, prompted four enthusiastic young composers, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Balakirief, and Rimsky-Korsakoff, to band together to make propaganda for a distinctly national music.

They sought inspiration or themes for musical treatment only in Russian history, poetry, romance, fairytale, or folklore, and as the groundwork of their symphonic utterance they took the

songs of the fields and the steppes and the cities, of the laborers at their toil, of the serf in his alternating moods of gaiety and despair, of the Cossack riding to battle. They voiced the tragedy and the pathos, the gaiety and the glory, of Russian life, in a language that spoke directly to the hearts of the Russian people. Within an incredibly short time they achieved a distinctly national expression in their music and established firmly a Russian school of composition. Their music was individual and it was national. And to their greater glory, they infused, by their success, a new and intense note of nationalism into all Russian art.

When Russians Were Aroused

The inspiration of this movement is still active. I recall a recent striking instance to illustrate how the spirit of nationalism affects the Russian composer and finds expression in this work. The “Red Sunday” in St. Petersburg, with its ensuing wave of assassination and repression, had plunged the Russian nation into deepest gloom. Glazunoff, the great composer, head of the Imperial Conservatory, came forward at a popular Sunday concert of the St. Petersburg Symphony Society to conduct his own orchestral setting of a popular folk song. This song, known as “Ai Ouchnem” has been sung from time immemorial by bargemen of the River Volga. Its rhythmic accent is indicative of the swaying of the boatman’s body as he plies the oars.

On this night the violins began it slowly and solemnly and in a minor key. The cellos moaned it in repetition, and through the melody was heard at intervals the crash of muted brass. Then over the insistent beat of muffled drums the melody rose and fell in accents of poignant sorrow. The audience listened in amazement to the reckless song of the sturdy rivermen turned into a funeral dirge. Then suddenly it understood. The “Ai Ouchnem” had been transformed into the lament of maimed and bleeding Russia for her dead! The music died away to a prolonged moan and ended suddenly with a shivering crash. What did that mean – the chaos of revolution?

For a moment the audience sat stupefied; then jumped to its feet and yelled. Twelve times the number was repeated amid scenes of indescribable excitement. Then a cautious police agent notified the conductor to stop and dismissed the hysterical audience.

Could It Happen Here

Could such a scene transpire in an American concert hall? Well, most of us may remember the scenes of wild enthusiasm evoked by the playing of “The Star-Spangled Banner” during the early days of the Spanish-American War. The broad hint therein conveyed was entirely lost on our native composers.

Events are impending which may open their eyes. Puccini, greatest of living Italian operatic composers, has turned to the romantic history of California Argonauts for the theme of his newest work. And it is good to hear that the beautiful “Poia” legend of the Blackfeet Indians has furnished material for an American grand opera – though, sad to relate, the composer was obliged to go to Germany to find recognition for his work.

It is only in this country we hear the assertion that there is no such thing and never can be any such thing as characteristically American music. Europeans enjoy our ragtime and Sousa marches more than most of us would believe. And they are no more at a loss to classify them than we are to detect a Scottish ballad.

But we have in view a higher achievement in American music than this. It will be attained only when our composers realize the value of the material afforded by the history, the literature, the folklore, and the wonderful natural beauties of their own country. Of such material there is an abundance and a variety to create the poetic mood, which will introduce the vitalizing and transforming touch of artistic inspiration. Music thus created will be characteristically American in content as well as expression. It will be genuine American music.

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