

MUSICAL FUTURE OF AMERICA

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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 folk-lore 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 forbears 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 "Suane River" disappeared with them.

Inspiration of Civil War

If it obliterated the melodious dargy, 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, endowed 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 own problem. Before that time what music was written in Russian 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-Korsakov, 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 folk-lore, 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. The 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 this spirit of nationalism affects the Russian composer and finds expression in his 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 folksong. This song, known as "Ai Ouchnem," [sic] has been sung from time immemorial by bargemen of the River Bolga. Its rhythmic accent is indicative of the swaying of the boatmen'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" [sic] 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 dismiss 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 Blackfoot 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 folk-lore, 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 induce 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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