



Project for MARC BLITZSTEIN's Opera

NO FOR AN ANSWER

By HOWARD BAY

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

---

## ENGLAND AND THE FOLK-ART PROBLEM

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

THERE have been so few outstanding composers in England since the turn of the century, it is hardly surprising that America knows little of that country's musical fashions; for it is the minor composers who most clearly indicate the trend of the age. Roughly speaking there have been two major schools, and the conflict between the two has influenced everybody. The outstanding figures whose personalities may be said to have given each school its particular character were Elgar and Parry.

Elgar represents the professional point of view, which emphasizes the importance of technical efficiency and welcomes any foreign influences that can be profitably assimilated. Parry and his followers, with the Royal College of Music as their center, have stressed the amateur idea and they have encouraged folk-art, its collecting and teaching. They are inclined to suspect technical brilliance of being superficial and insincere. This difference may not be unconnected with the fact that Elgar was compelled to earn his living by music, whereas Parry was not. Parry's national ideal was, in fact, the English Gentleman (who generally thinks it rather vulgar to take too much trouble). From Parry and his associates there arose a school of composers directly influenced by folksong, to which belonged virtually every composer known here until recently, except of course, Elgar and Frank Bridge. This may seem surprising to many Americans who have come to regard Elgar as synonymous with England. But he is, in fact, a most eclectic composer, his most obvious influences being Wagner, Tchaikovsky, and Franck.

But since 1930 the influence of Parry has largely disappeared. Now the Elgarian approach, with its direct admission of continental contemporary influence, has asserted itself. The great success of Walton's *Façade* and Lambert's *Rio Grande*, both with the public and the intellectuals, left no doubt in the minds of the younger composers as to which was the more profitable path to follow. Elizabeth Maconchy owes much to the strong rhythms and acidulous harmonies of Bartok; Lennox Berkeley to the later works of Stravinsky and the younger French school; Christian Darnton and Elizabeth Lutyens have adopted a modified version of the twelve-tone system, as used by Webern and Berg; Alan Rawsthorne's general intellectual approach and his avoidance of tonal centers remind one of Hindemith; Howard Ferguson and Edmund Rubbra derive largely from those heavy-handed late-romantics, Brahms and Sibelius (which, I admit, is a criticism).

The failure of folksong to provide contemporary England with an adequate basis for organized music is due to many factors, some general, some local. The chief attractions of English folksongs are the sweetness of the melodies, the close connection between words and music, and the quiet, uneventful charm of the atmosphere. This uneventfulness however is part of the weakness of the tunes, which seldom have any striking rhythms or memorable melodic features. Like much of the English countryside, they creep into the affections rather than take them by storm. This amiable feature of the English landscape has had also a practical effect on folksong. For a very long time communication over the island has been easy, and so access to more organized music has also been easy. Most people will admit that the more highly organized, the more interesting the music. Folksong in England had practically disappeared, and only fairly recently has it been brought to light by the energies of collectors. These worthy people have made strenuous efforts to re-establish it, but their efforts were doomed to failure, since folksong is no longer part of the social life of the people.

### III

English folk-art as we know it has probably been static for about three hundred years. It has not continued to evolve like that of many Central European countries, or the songs of the Appalachians, or of Scotland almost up to the present day – at any rate until the advent of radio. Incidentally even I can remember Scottish fisher-girls who visited my home town of Lowestoft to gut the herrings every fall, singing their lovely, lilting Highland tunes. Nowadays they sing the latest song from the weekly hit-parade.

This decline raises the whole general problem of the nature and origin

of folk-art. The nearest approach to folk-music today is swing and the Negro spiritual. People have different opinions on the origins of the former, but to me the line seems clearly to proceed through jazz, rag-time, Victorian popular song back to the lighter Italian operas (Rossini, Donizetti, and early Verdi, with their frequent dotted rhythms) and Johann Strauss, to be colored by the luscious harmony of Debussy, Franck and Delius. The Negro spiritual has some of its roots obviously in Methodist hymns. It is important to realize that what we call folk-music is no product of primitive society, in the sense that a homogeneous and segregated tribe is primitive. Since the Roman Empire, all culture, folk or sophisticated, has been under international influence. Indeed the whole conception of folk-song as a germ from which organized music grew may prove to be a false one. Literary research into the origins of the folk-ballad shows that it is an end-product of an aristocratic art form, the epic. (There is a Yorkshire version of the Mummers' play which has incorporated a whole scene from an eighteenth century opera.) Folk-music most probably has likewise been evolved from conscious art-forms, such as church music or the art of the Minne-singers. And to come to the present time, compare the wholesale borrowing from the popular classics by swing musicians. Creation is always the work of an individual although works may be modified by the performers to suit their own skill or the audience's preferences.

Whatever its origins, there are, moreover, serious difficulties in the way of making folksong the basis of contemporary art-forms. Since the form of a work is dictated by the material, the characteristics of English folksong mentioned above are bound to have a weakening effect on the structure of music founded directly upon it. Folksongs are concise and finished little works of art. When used as raw material they tend to obstruct thinking in the extended musical forms. Works founded on them are usually little more than variations or potpourris. Again, each folksong has a completely suggested harmonic scheme – so that it should sound satisfactory when sung unaccompanied – and much deviation therefore tends to produce a feeling of irritation. A work like the *Sacre du Printemps* of Stravinsky is unsatisfactory because it disregards this fact and suggests in some places a row-boat rocking uneasily on oblivious waves of extravagant harmonies. Later, in *Les Noces*, Stravinsky is far more controlled and the harmonies are closely related to the tunes. In this fine work he breaks up his folk-themes into small phrases, and is consequently freer to develop the form.

All these characteristics tend to make folksong a most restricting influence, which, as a matter of fact, is no doubt what many composers have wanted. Lacking the necessary discipline they forget that discipline must come from within. No one would dream, for instance, of founding a school upon the music of a composer like Donizetti; whereas folk-art is infinitely narrower than that delightful but limited master.

### III

Those circumstances which prompted the whole movement of Nationalism in England have been not above suspicion. Any cultural "movement" (especially if it ends in "ism") is more often than not a cover for inefficiency or lack of artistic direction. If one is unsatisfied with a piece of work it is useful to have some theory to shield it, and Nationalism is as good as any other — especially when one is dealing with foreigners! But there is another more sympathetic aspect of the picture. For nearly two centuries English music had been second-rate, with no more than local importance. The composers had been too ready simply to imitate their European (and especially Viennese and Italian) colleagues. The fault lay not in the influences but in the lack of talent and inability to assimilate them. It should be obvious that the national character of a composer will appear in his music, whatever technic he has chosen or wherever his influences lie, in the same way that his personal idiosyncrasies cannot be hidden. The case of Elgar we have mentioned above. Perhaps the piece of music that brings tears most easily to the eyes of an expatriate Englishman is Delius' *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, which is founded on a Norwegian tune and written by a man who spent most of his life out of England, who responded most to the influences of Grieg and Liszt, and whose publishers were Viennese. To push the argument further, would anyone really mistake the Italian or Spanish *Capriccios* for anything but Russian, or *Iberia* and *Carmen* for anything but French? People often cite the Russian school in defense of Nationalism, but it is worth noting that the composer who immediately strikes one as the most Russian of Russians is Tchaikovsky who all his life was berated for being too occidental. And it was the influence of Mozart on Tchaikovsky which helped to make the texture of his music so marvelously clear and his form so much more satisfactory than that of his Nationalistic compatriots.

The attempt to create a national music is only one symptom of a serious and universal malaise of our time — the refusal to accept the destruction of "community" by the machine.

However we decide to Act  
 Decision to accept the fact  
 That machine has now destroyed  
 The local customs we enjoyed,  
 . . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 And publicized among the crowd  
 The secret that was always true  
 But known once only to the few,  
 Compelling all to the admission  
 Aloneness is man's real condition,  
 That each must travel forth alone  
 In search of the Essential Stone,  
 "The Nowhere-without-No" that is  
 The justice of Societies.\*

The English composers of today have consciously or unconsciously seen the danger-signals ahead. They are avoiding the pitfalls that some of their musical fathers and uncles have dug for them. It is only those who accept their loneliness and refuse all the refuges, whether of tribal nationalism or airtight intellectual systems, who will carry on the human heritage.

---

\*From *A Letter to Elizabeth Mayer*, by W. H. Auden, to be published in March by Random House.