

AMERICA'S YOUNG MEN OF PROMISE

BY AARON COPLAND

TO discover the important composers of tomorrow among the young men of today has always proved a fascinating diversion. Franz Liszt, in his time, concerned himself with every rising young talent in Europe who happened to cross the path of his meteoric career. More recently, Erik Satie played godfather to a whole brood of young Frenchmen. Braving ridicule, he even sought among the high school boys for young genius. Others beside Satie have gathered about them the significant young men,—Busoni and Schoenberg in Central Europe, Casella in Italy.

In America, our new composers have been left to shift for themselves. When, as occasionally happens, a young talent does emerge from obscurity, this can almost always be attributed to the sensational element in his work, never to its purely musical merits. The public wants only a name. But there are other composers, less fortunate, who must be content to add opus to opus with little or no hope of being performed. If these cannot be heard, they can at least be heard about. Perhaps hearing about them may induce someone to let us really hear them.

This is not intended to be a complete presentation of the youngest generation of composers in America. I have simply chosen seventeen names among those men, born here, whose age lies between twenty-three and thirty-three, whose music has seemed to me to be worthy of special note. Not that this is, in any sense, a critical estimate of their work. It is too soon for that. But it does indicate a promising group of young men whose compositions deserve consideration. For convenience, these seventeen names might be grouped as follows:

Four Prix de Rome men: Leo Sowerby, Howard Hanson, Randall Thompson, G. Herbert Elwell.

Three revolutionaries: George Antheil, Henry Cowell, Roger H. Sessions.

Five free-lances: Roy Harris, Avery Claflin, Edmund Pendleton, Richard Hammond, Alexander Steinert.

Three pupils of Ernest Bloch: Bernard Rogers, W. Quincy Porter, Douglas Moore.

Two pupils of Nadia Boulanger: Virgil Thomson, Quinto Maganini.

Of the first four, recipients of the American Prix de Rome, at least two, Leo Sowerby and Howard Hanson, are too well known to need introduction. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, of either Randall Thompson or G. Herbert Elwell.

Randall Thompson (1899), after three full years in Rome, has but recently returned to this country. His preliminary training at Harvard and a year under Bloch have given him a firm grasp of the materials of composition. He writes with ease in all forms. His most mature works, written in Rome, include choral settings for *Seven Odes of Horace*, (three with orchestral accompaniment); *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* for orchestra; a piano sonata and suite, and a string quartet.

Each one of Thompson's compositions is finished with a most meticulous pen—not an eighth note which does not receive full consideration before it is put on paper. For the moment this very excellence of workmanship seems to be offered in lieu of a more personal style. While Thompson never borrows outright from any one composer, it is not difficult to detect the influence of certain Europeans, Pizzetti, Bloch, Strawinsky, in the several movements of a single work. Thus far, Thompson's *Ode to Venice* for chorus and orchestra, and especially his string quartet are the works in which he seems nearest to the achievement of a personal idiom.

In G. Herbert Elwell, now residing at the Academy in Rome, we have a young composer who will not long remain the unknown quantity he is in American music. Elwell is no conventional winner of prizes. He has spent the last five years in Europe—London, Paris, Rome—living life his own way. In 1919 he came to New York from Minneapolis to study composition with Ernest Bloch and continued later in Paris under Nadia Boulanger during the years 1922-1924.

Even Elwell's earliest student work had stamped upon it the distinct mark of his own individuality. That individuality is most easily recognized in his scherzo movements, an elf-like quality, not of delicacy and charm, but of sharp quips and puckish fancies. His music is dynamic, muscular, alive—weakest, perhaps, in its lyrical moments. There have been passing influences of Rimsky-Korsakow, Dukas, Bloch, but these need cause us no great concern. With every new work his art becomes more ripe.

Elwell has written much for the piano, a sonatina, a sonata, nine short pieces. His *Quintet* for piano and strings is being presented in Paris this spring. The *Centaur* for orchestra (1924), and his most recent work, a ballet based on Max Beerbohm's *Happy Hypocrite*, complete the list of his compositions.

It is a sign of health that we in America also have our radicals in the persons of George Antheil, Roger Sessions, Henry Cowell. For one reason or another, their names have been bruited about, though their music has remained more or less inaccessible here.

George Antheil, the most notorious of the trio, must by now be weary of hearing himself called the *enfant terrible* of American music. Antheil's fame first spread among his literary fellow-countrymen in Berlin and Paris. These expatriates were none too careful of their superlatives. Potentially speaking, Antheil is all they claim and more; one needn't be particularly astute to realize that he possesses the greatest gifts of any young American now writing. No one can venture to dictate just how he may make the best use of his great talents; one can simply remark that so far, the very violence of his own sincere desire to write original music has hindered rather than helped the attainment of his own ends.

Antheil's latest work, with its use of numerous mechanical pianos and electrical appliances, takes on the aspect of visionary experiment. This is probably a passing phase. He is still under twenty-five; the next few years will give the true measure of his importance.

Of Roger Huntington Sessions, I can only speak from hearsay. No example of his work has been given publicly in the larger music centers, yet the high opinion of his music held by Ernest Bloch and Paul Rosenfeld commands respect. Up to the spring

of 1925 he acted as Bloch's assistant in Cleveland, which in part explains his very small output. A work that has aroused much comment is his incidental music to Andreyev's play, *The Black Maskers*. He is at present in Florence, devoting his entire time to composition.

Henry Cowell has hardly suffered from lack of publicity. He has presented programs of his music from coast to coast and throughout the Continent, even in districts as remote as Poland. He has written much for the piano and for small groups of instruments. Like Schoenberg, Cowell is a self-taught musician, with the auto-didact's keen mind and all-inclusive knowledge.

But Cowell is essentially an inventor, not a composer. He has discovered "tone clusters", playing piano with the fore-arm, and the string piano. Yet from a purely musical standpoint his melodies are banal, his dissonances do not "sound", his rhythms are uninteresting. Cowell must steel himself for the fate of the pioneer, opposition and ridicule on the one hand, exploitation and ingratitude on the other. His most interesting experiments have been those utilizing the strings of the piano. The *Banshee*, when performed in a small room, is musical noise of a most fascinating kind. Perhaps if Cowell develops along these lines he may even make a distinctive path for himself as composer.

Something of the variety of American life and its effect upon musicians as compared with the usual conservatory product of Europe can be seen in the destinies of three young men of twenty-seven—Avery Claflin, Roy Harris and Edmund Pendleton. They have but little music to their credit yet each one writes from an absolute inner necessity which forces its way out in spite of material obstacles.

Avery Claflin, a New Englander by birth, had most of his musical training in Boston and at Harvard. The War brought him to France, where he remained for a year after the armistice, during which time he had contact with the Cocteau-Satie Group. He is at present connected with a bank, so that his time for composition is strictly limited. His works are quickly listed: a one-act opera on an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*, a trio, a chorus for male voices and several songs. Claflin does not write with great freedom, he seems somewhat hampered by a

lack of facility in composing. This does not detract, however, from the simple charm of certain episodes and the inherent musical quality in all his work.

Roy Harris, a Californian, possesses a talent which should be carefully nurtured. Until a few years ago he was engaged in one form or another of manual labor so that he is seriously handicapped by his late start in music. But on the other hand, he was born with a full-fledged style of his own. Harris is a child of nature with a child's love for his native hills and a child-like belief in the moral purpose of music. His music reflects these things faithfully—it owes nothing to city influences, but seems always full-blooded and spiritually pure. His melodies, and even more particularly, his harmonies, are in no way revolutionary, yet they have a strangely personal flavor. Harris has written very little, his most ambitious undertaking being six movements for string quartet and two movements of an incomplete *Symphony* for large orchestra.

It is difficult to supply much information concerning Edmund Pendleton. In the spring of 1924 I heard an orchestral work by this young composer at the Salle Gaveau in Paris. In spite of the apparent influence of Stravinsky this one work placed Pendleton among the promising young men of today. He has lived abroad for more than five years now, studying at one time under Eugene Cools, the French composer. A more recent orchestral composition, *When the Circus Comes to Town*, had its premiere in Paris in the fall of 1925.

Richard Hammond is a composer who cannot be easily classified. Except for short pieces, his works are rarely performed in public. He studied for several years with Mortimer Wilson and his major compositions comprise a *Suite of Six Chinese Fairy Tales* for orchestra, a sonata for oboe and piano, several song cycles with the accompaniment of orchestra or piano, and numerous piano pieces.

Due to insufficient information about the work of Alexander Steinert, a talented young composer of Boston, I have been unable to do more than include his name here.

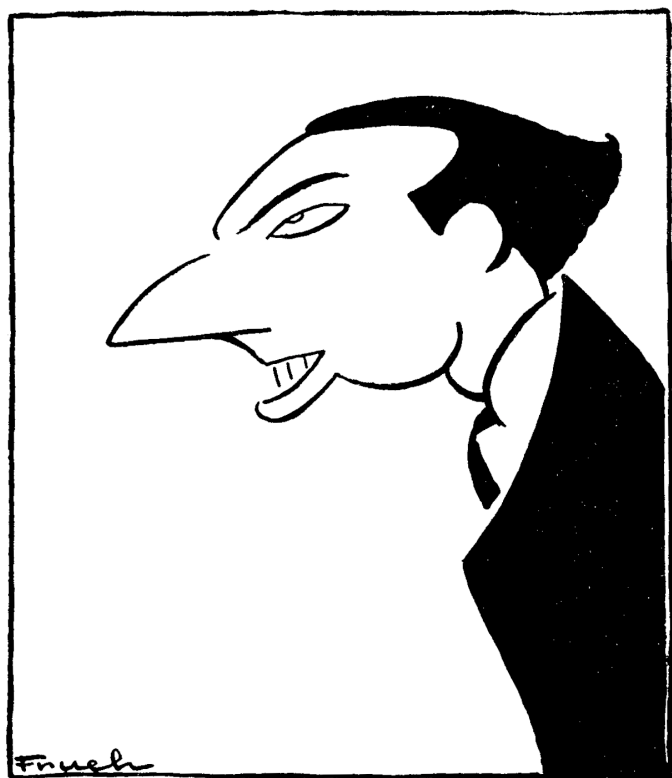
It is surprising, to say the least, to note the number of these young men who have profited by the teachings of Ernest Bloch or

Nadia Boulanger or both. Bernard Rogers has the distinction of being Bloch's first pupil in America. He is not unknown in these parts, several of his compositions, *To the Fallen*, a *Prelude to The Faithful*, *Soliloquy* for flute and string orchestra, have been presented by major organizations. America possesses few composers with Rogers' seriousness of purpose. He is an idealist, a dreamer,—New York, his native city, repels him with its crass materialism. His music is sensitive, poetic, carefully made, even though for the present it lacks the imprint of a pointedly individual style. He has recently completed a new score, *Japanese Impressions*, and is now at work on a symphony.

Both Douglas Moore and W. Quincey Porter have emerged from the same background, the Yale Music School and later, Bloch. At present Moore is in Paris on a Pulitzer scholarship. I can speak of his work only from hearsay. His two suites for orchestra, *Museum Pieces* and *P. T. Barnum*, are said to contain pages of rare humor.

Since 1922, W. Quincey Porter has been teacher of theory at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Like Hindemith, Porter is a first class viola player and has accordingly written much for strings. A *Ukrainian Suite* for string orchestra, and two string quartets comprise his major works. All these are characterized by an especially fine mastery of contrapuntal technique and an easy handling of the problems of form. But unfortunately, they are largely derivative in inspiration—Strawinsky and Bloch in the quartets; Russian masters in the *Suite*. Porter is not yet thirty, he has chosen fine models, we can confidently await his more mature development.

Of Nadia Boulanger's pupils, two should be singled out for special mention—Virgil Thomson and Quinto Maganini. Virgil Thomson, besides composing, writes uncommonly well about music. His academic training was at the Harvard School of Music from which he was graduated in 1922. There is much that is paradoxical in his music. It is generally of two kinds, diametrically opposed to each other: sacred vocal music like the *Mass* for men's voices, *Three Antiphonal Psalms* for women's voices, songs for voices and piano on biblical texts, and on the other hand, tangos for orchestra and light pieces for piano. At



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As seen by Alfred Frueh

its best, his work displays a melodic invention of no mean order and a most subtle rhythmic sense growing out of a fine feeling for prosody. Certainly Thomson has not entirely found himself as yet. One waits with more than usual curiosity to see what he will do in the future.

Quinto Maganini, despite the Italianate sound of his name, is a native American, brought up in California. A large part of his knowledge of composition has been gained in a practical way as flautist in symphonic orchestras. Though not yet thirty, Maganini has a considerable list of works to his credit. He has traveled extensively and is strongly attracted by local color so that one finds him writing a *Fantasy Japonaise*; *La Rumba de Montegudo*, based on Cuban popular music; *Tuolumna*, for orchestra, with a suggestion of Indian themes. A symphonic nocturne, *Night on an Island of Fantasy*, is perhaps his most successful effort in the larger forms. With a more critical pen, Maganini should make one of our promising composers.

The day of the neglected American composer is over. That is to say he is neglected only if he remains unknown. These seventeen young men are presented as proof of the fact that there is a new generation of composers whose efforts are worthy of encouragement.

