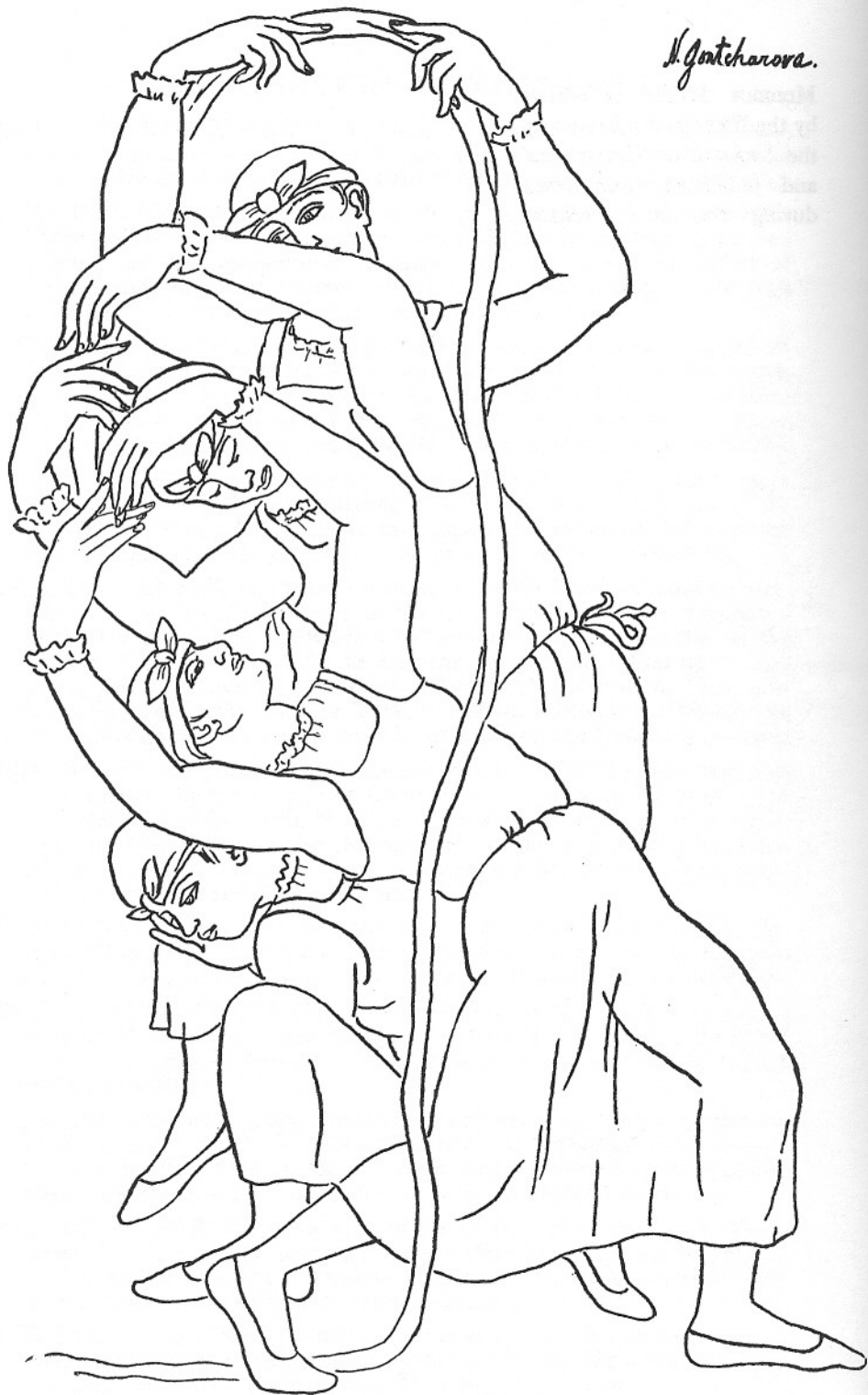


N. Gontcharova.



LES NOCES

DÉCORS BY NATALIA GONTCHAROVA

Designed for the original "Black and White" version of Stravinsky's ballet, introduced to Paris by Diaghilev in 1923, and revived with the choreography of Bronislawa Nijinska this spring by the Monte Carlo Ballet.

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OUR YOUNGER GENERATION

Ten Years Later

AARON COPLAND

“**A**MERICA’s Young Men of Promise” was the title of an article that may be remembered as having appeared in these pages* just ten years ago. Hopefully, it began in this way: “To discover the important composers of tomorrow among the young men of today has always proved a fascinating diversion.” Seventeen composers were boldly chosen—all of them born here, ranging in age from twenty-three to thirty-three—as most likely to accomplish important things in American music. With bated breath let me re-list the composers I named, leaving it to the reader to decide whether they were wisely chosen. Among those present were George Antheil, Avery Claflin, Henry Cowell, Herbert Elwell, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, Richard Hammond, Quinto Maganini, Douglas Moore, Edmund Pendleton, Quincy Porter, Bernard Rogers, Roger Sessions, Alexander Steinert, Leo Sowerby, Randall Thompson and Virgil Thomson.

My purpose in bringing out this list again is two-fold: first, to reconsider these composers in the light of a decade of activity on their part, and, second, to juxtapose a new list of “America’s Young Men of Promise,” since discovering the “important composers of to-morrow among the young men of today” is still as fascinating a diversion as it was in 1926.

The first question that suggests itself is whether that original band of seventeen did represent a real generation of American composers. I think that it did. Perhaps it is not too much to say

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that they represented the most important generation of composers America had yet produced. Originating in all parts of the country, they nevertheless shared many experiences in common: student days before and during the war years, European contacts made soon after 1919, followed by a busy period of creative activity during the healthy, hectic years of the '20's. By 1926 their main characteristics as composers were already discernible.

In general they were technically better equipped and more aware of the idiom of their contemporaries than any preceding generation of Americans. None of them suffered from the folkloristic preoccupation of their elders with Indian and Negro thematic material. Still, the idea of expressing America in tone was uppermost. Yet they seemed no more able than their predecessors to forge a typically indigenous American style in music.

For purposes of identification these seventeen men can now be described as roughly falling into four different categories: those who have made a more or less sudden rise to prominence since 1926; those who have continued to compose along the same lines in a steady, unwavering fashion; those who have remained in comparative obscurity; and those who have abandoned composing altogether.

I make no claim to being familiar with every piece of music written by each of these men since 1926. Nor is it my purpose to criticize the single work of any individual composer. (This is adequately covered in the pages of *Modern Music* as each new piece is performed.) What appears interesting is to examine their present status in the light of a decade of experience and activity, to check up, as it were, on their progress during the past ten years.

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In the first category mentioned above belong Roy Harris, Virgil Thomson and, in a lesser degree, Roger Sessions. The case of Roy Harris is probably most striking. His admirers and detractors are already legion. I do not belong among those who seem satisfied with continually pointing out his weaknesses. Without in any way wishing to condone them, I believe that the work he has already done, stamped as it is with the mark of a big personality, is something to build on, something we can ill afford

to treat slightly. Harris' music shows promise of being able to reach a very wide audience, wider probably than that of any other American. His name is already almost analogous with "Americanism" in music. This is a rather remarkable record for one who was not only completely unknown ten years ago, but who was, musically speaking, practically inarticulate. For Harris, the problem of being fully articulate still remains. When he solves that, all barriers will be down between himself and his audience.

Virgil Thomson needs no introduction to the readers of Modern Music. The success of *Four Saints* came as a surprise certainly but on second thought seems quite natural. For Thomson is a composer who knows exactly what he wants. *Four Saints* is thoroughly characteristic of his work as a whole. In it he proves himself to be essentially a vocal composer. As I have pointed out on other occasions, Thomson is the first American whose sense of the English language seems really acute. His vocal line is based on the rhythmic flexibility and natural inflection of human speech, and may well serve as a model for future composers.

In contrast with Harris and Thomson, Roger Sessions has achieved slowly but surely a wide reputation both as a composer of serious works and as a musician of solid culture. In 1926 we took it on the word of Bloch and Paul Rosenfeld that Sessions was a musical radical. But now it is clear that Sessions is really the classicist par excellence. The small number of his works make up in quality what they lack in quantity. Sessions' music cannot be expected to appeal to large audiences—in a certain sense he writes a musician's music, intent as he is upon achieving a plastic and formal perfection, with little regard for audience-psychology. His influence as composer and pedagogue will surely be felt increasingly.

Randall Thompson and Bernard Rogers have both gradually been making their mark on American music. Thompson, particularly, enjoys a well-deserved reputation as an expert craftsman. It is curious to observe how a man of Thompson's scholarly interest and academic background has come to make a definite bid for popular appeal, as in his *Second Symphony*. Thompson

has the audience very much in mind when he composes. This attitude is not without its dangers, particularly when the composer gives us the impression, as Thompson sometimes does, that he has been concentrating on the sonorous effect rather than the musical thought behind it.

Bernard Rogers has composed much in the past few years. But since none of his major works have been performed outside of Rochester, where he makes his home, it is impossible to speak authoritatively about them.

Recently Quincy Porter's name has come to the fore through his string quartets and his sonata for viola alone. Porter has turned out a considerable number of works, especially for stringed instruments, since my first article appeared. These are so gratefully written for the strings that it would be strange if they did not become better known. But Porter's essential problem still remains—to create a music entirely his own.

In speaking of the second category—composers who have continued more or less along the same lines that they had adopted before 1926—I had in mind such varied personalities as Hanson, Sowerby, Cowell and Moore.

Hanson and Sowerby were well launched even ten years ago. Their sympathies and natural proclivities make them the heirs of older men such as Hadley and Shepherd. Their facility in writing and their eclectic style produce a kind of palatable music, which cannot be expected to arouse the enthusiasm of the "élite," but does serve to fill the role of "American Music" for broad masses of people.

Cowell remains the incorrigible "experimenter" of the 20's. In 1926 I wrote: "Cowell is essentially an inventor, not a composer." I must regretfully still subscribe to that opinion, despite the ingenuity of such inventions as his *Synchrony* for orchestra.

Douglas Moore early showed a predilection for making use of an American subject-matter as a basis for his work. After *P. T. Barnum* we got *Moby Dick* and *Babbitt*. Unfortunately these works have been too infrequently played for us to know whether the music is as American as the titles.

Four of the original seventeen composers—Hammond, Claflin, Maganini and Steinert—have receded into comparative ob-

scurity. This is possibly less true of Steinert, whose works are performed from time to time. He has with difficulty extricated himself from a definitely impressionistic bias. Hammond, Claf-lin and Maganini have written much music during the past ten years but very little of it has been played. Can this be simply a matter of neglect or is it the fault of the music itself?

Two composers have apparently stopped composing altogether: Herbert Elwell and Edmund Pendleton. Both, however, lead active lives as musicians and writers on music: Pendleton in Paris, and Elwell in Cleveland as critic of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

George Antheil, as always, belongs in a category of his own. In 1926 Antheil seemed to have "the greatest gifts of any young American." But something always seems to prevent their full fruition. Whether this is due to a lack of artistic integrity, or an unusual susceptibility to influences, or a lack of any conscious direction, is not clear. All we know is that Antheil is now thirty-five, and we have a right to expect definitive works from him by this time.

Two or three composers should be mentioned who, because of their age, rightfully belong with the original group, but were omitted because they were unperformed before 1926.

First of these, and most important, is Walter Piston. His preparation for composing was obviously an arduous one. His earliest listed music, a *Piano Sonata*, is dated 1926, when Piston was thirty-two. Since then a steadily mounting number of works has been matched by a steadily increasing and well merited reputation. Piston belongs with Sessions as one of the most expert craftsmen American music can boast.

A second and almost parallel case as far as dates are concerned is that of Robert Russell Bennett. His "first" work, written at the same date and age as Piston's, is a *Charleston Rhapsody* for orchestra. He is well known now as the composer of music which is light in touch and deftly made, with a particular eye on orchestral timbre, of which he is a past master.

William Grant Still began about twelve years ago as the composer of a somewhat esoteric music for voice and a few instruments. Since that time he has completely changed his musical

speech, which has become almost popular in tone. He has a certain natural musicality and charm, but there is a marked leaning toward the sweetly saccharine that one should like to see eliminated.

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Turning to the youngest composers of today one is immediately conscious that they find themselves in a quite different situation from that of the preceding generation. In a sense they form a Depression Generation, for they live in a moral climate that is none too good for the nurturing of new talent. While opportunities for getting their work before the public have definitely increased, the public itself is apathetic to new music as a whole, showing a lack of interest towards the new men.

There seems to be no other explanation for the general impression that no especially outstanding personalities are to be found among the new men who are comparable in stature to the outstanding members of the preceding generation.

They can be conveniently divided according to age: Those who are just about twenty-five, and those who are either older or younger than twenty-five. The first group, which includes some of the most gifted men, is made up of Robert McBride, Jerome Moross, Paul Bowles, Hunter Johnson and Samuel Barber.

The older men, including some of the more mature talents, are Marc Blitzstein, Israel Citkowitz, Gerald Strang, Ross Lee Finney, Elie Siegmeister, Irwin Heilner, Lehman Engel, Paul Creston and Edwin Gershefski.

The youngest are: Henry Brant, David Diamond and Norman Cazden.

A larger number of names will be familiar to readers of Modern Music than would have been true ten years ago. Marc Blitzstein's is probably best known. Blitzstein shows a definite "flair" for composition, although his early works were largely derivative (Stravinsky was the all-absorbing influence). Later, when he managed to throw off these influences, his music took on an exaggeratedly laconic and abstract quality, which militated against its even achieving performance. Recently, however, he has returned to a simpler style more nearly approaching the best parts of his early ballet *Cain*, or some of his film music

for *Surf and Seaweed*. This new simplicity may be attributed to Blitzstein's sympathy for Leftist ideology, with its emphasis on music for the masses.

The identification of one's musical aims with the needs of the working class is a brand new phenomenon in American music. Young men like Siegmeister, Heilner, Moross and Cazden have felt irresistibly drawn towards that movement to the Left which has influenced all the arts before reaching music. Unfortunately it cannot be said that their works show the salutary influence of a collectivist ideal. (This is not so strange when we consider that to compose a music of "socialist realism" has stumped even so naturally gifted a man as Shostakovitch.)

Siegmeister, who is far better known in the environs of Union Square than he is up town, has had difficulty in adopting a real simplicity in his more serious works. Too often, as in his *Strange Funeral at Braddock*, we get a kind of crude effectiveness, quite undistinguished in style. What is needed here is more honest self-criticism. Heilner is a naturally gifted composer, though he is given to extremes. He recently abandoned a highly complex tonal fabric, inspired no doubt by the example of Ives, in order to consciously embrace Banality. That idea for reaching the masses is literary and certainly will not satisfy a musician like Heilner for long.

Moross is probably the most talented of these men. He writes music that has a quality of sheer physicalness, music "without a mind," as it were. It is regrettable that we cannot yet point to any finished, extended work. What he seems to lack is a sense of artistic discipline and integrity, which his talent needs for development.

Norman Cazden, an excellent pianist, has recently been brought to our attention as the composer of a *Piano Sonatina* and a *String Quartet* that augur well for his future as a creative artist.

Of a completely different inspiration is the music of Citkowitz and Bowles. Both these men are lyricists and write an unmistakably personal music. Citkowitz, who is certainly one of the most sensitive and cultured musicians we have, has produced but little in the past few years. It is to be fervently hoped that the

composer of such delicate and admirable pieces as the *Joyce Songs* and the *Movements for String Quartet* will soon get his second wind, and present us with works that we have a right to expect from him.

Paul Bowles is the exceptional case among our young composers. There are those who refuse to see in Bowles any thing more than a dilettante. Bowles himself persists in adopting a militantly non-professional air in relation to all music, including his own. If you take this attitude at its face value, you will lose sight of the considerable merit of a large amount of music Bowles has already written. It is music that comes from a fresh personality, music full of charm and melodic invention, at times surprisingly well made in an instinctive and non-academic fashion. Personally I much prefer an "amateur" like Bowles to your "well-trained" conservatory product.

If it is careful workmanship that is desired, turn to the music of Ross Lee Finney and Samuel Barber. Finney's music becomes more interesting with each new work. He composes largely in the neo-classic model, which produces a certain sameness that should be avoided in the future. Barber writes in a somewhat out-moded fashion, making up in technical finish what he lacks in musical substance. So excellent a craftsman should not content himself forever with the emotionally conventional context of his present manner.

Three composers—Engel, Brant and Diamond—are extremely prolific and facile. Facility brings its own pitfalls of course. To compose easily is admirable, but the music must always spring from a deep need. Neither Engel nor Brant, despite self-evident musicality, have yet completely convinced us that they are "hopelessly" composers. David Diamond is a new name on the roster of young composers. It is a name to remember. Not yet twenty-one, Diamond has a musical speech which is, of course, only in the process of formation. But already one can recognize an individual note in his last movement rondos with their perky, nervous themes and quick, impulsive motion.

Robert McBride has also but recently made his metropolitan bow. Those who heard his *Prelude to a Tragedy*, performed by Hans Lange and the Philharmonic, were greatly impressed.

McBride's orchestral sense is both keen and original. Being himself a performer on several orchestral instruments he approaches the whole problem of composing from a more practical standpoint than is general among our young men, who too often find themselves divorced from direct contact with the *materia musica*. McBride has yet to learn how to purify his style of extraneous elements, and how to create a feeling of inevitability in the musical thought. Still, no composer during the past few years has made so fresh an impression on first acquaintance.

Finally there are the young men whose names are little known: Strang of California, Johnson of the Middle West, Gershefski of Connecticut, and Creston, a native New Yorker. It is a characteristic sign that they are all composers of excellent training. In general, however, their work has a disturbing tendency toward over-complexity of texture and a somewhat abstract musical thought. There is a certain unreality about their music, which probably comes from their lack of contact with a real audience. Perhaps it is wrong to generalize about four such different personalities. Strang's music has been little played outside his native state. All the others have recently had evenings of their work at the WPA Forum Laboratory Concerts and will undoubtedly profit by their experiences there.

In 1946 we shall know more about all these men.