

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XXIV

### Quincy Porter

HERBERT ELWELL

**I**MAGINE music so lithe and well-tailored as to suggest a trim sloop taking the breeze and you have a hint of the clean, clear-headed sort of thing Quincy Porter has been turning out the past two decades. It has both form and expressiveness. It is forthright, vital and uninhibited, yet compact, terse and trenchant. It ranges emotionally from a sort of nervous exuberance in the fast movements to a wistful, tender serenity in the slow movements. When it is not buoyant and hopeful, it is likely to be a little nostalgic, with a touch of exotic color, unexpected in a native of New Haven, but understandable in a one-time pupil of Ernest Bloch. There is no groping, no uncertainty, even in the dreamy, evocative mystery of the adagios. It rides the sea smoothly, steadily and gracefully. Its implications are often witty, its abbreviations and understatements genial and stimulating. For all its meticulously polished workmanship, it is never laborious, but filled with the joy of unfettered motion, content within the limitations of its chosen course.

As head of one of our oldest conservatories, this gifted New Englander is in a position where the responsibility of carrying on a lofty cultural heritage might weigh heavily upon one. But it seems not to have altered the fundamental simplicity of his style. Perhaps more than most contemporaries, he continues to write from purely spontaneous and personal motives. If it were not for the esthetic idealism which seems to govern the development of his tonal thought, one might say that he indulges almost recklessly in sheer caprice.

Much of his music, notably the *Quintet* for flute and strings, discloses a playful spirit, a sportive, childlike insouciance that makes one wonder how such naïveté could have evolved in so complete and convincing a system of self-realization as is exhibited in his masterful counterpoint.

It may be assumed that composers create what they want to, because they want to, albeit not always when they want to. Yet few of them today give the impression of creating merely for the fun of it. Porter often does, though he could not be accused of superficiality.



QUINCY PORTER  
Drawing by  
WILLIAM ALDRICH

His pen has a light but firm touch. He gives you the agreeable impression of spinning an idea to its conclusion, easily and logically, in the form ideally suited to its character. The conclusion is achieved without effort, without disturbing preoccupations, pursued for the unalloyed pleasure of solving an abstract problem, and set down with a spicy objectivity rarely found in writing which springs, as his does, from intimately personal feeling.

It is music penetrating and profound enough to take itself very seriously, yet it has the grace and good sense not to do so. Concealed in this genial forbearance may be a certain amount of deliberate strategy, which is certainly anything but naive. But in Porter one finds some curiously disarming and amiable contradictions, the more surprising in so clearly pronounced an individuality.

Definitely, he has not been side-tracked by any desire to deal with extraneous material. His only excursion in the descriptive field consists of some incidental music he wrote for a performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* at Vassar. His interest appears relatively slight even in the matter of associating words with music, for his vocal output consists of only a few unpretentious songs of an early vintage.

Likewise his work reflects very little concern with currently changing fashions, experiments and theories. From the start he seems to have known instinctively what methods were good for his own growth and, finding them adequate, he has stuck to them. Evidently persuaded that music is its own justification, he has never set out to prove anything by it. He has not worried much about music's debt to society, nor has he been greatly perplexed by those problems of style over which so many Americans, in their efforts to differentiate themselves, grow grave and self-conscious.

In short, he has acquired the skill of the professional without losing the enthusiasm of the amateur, though such an expression may sound too bromidic to properly be associated with a composer whose avoidance of banality is almost fastidious. It might be more to the point to say his creative processes involved a fine blend of simplicity and sophistication.

Simplicity is shown in the choice of his subjects, the smoothness of his transitions, the brevity of his developments, the clarity of his texture and the almost ascetic reluctance to indulge in any effect that is not the natural outcome of melodic and rhythmic propulsion. Not that his harmony is lacking in interest. It is colored constantly with a mildly dissonant unrest, and parallels the movement of the other elements with a naturalness that is as sensuously attractive as it is valuable to the clarity of syntax. As in all good contrapuntal families, harmonic color never becomes an end in itself and, for all its richness, remains the servant of the melodic line as

well as the incidental result of interweaving voices. That it preserves the quality of progressiveness toward tension or relaxation is noteworthy in this era so devoted to originality in harmonic speech that it often seems willing to sacrifice meaning for newness of sound.

Sophistication enters Porter's music in his adroit management of rhythmic design. Whether using regular or irregular measures, he achieves highly variegated accentuation, which deliberately avoids the dullness of too symmetrical repetition and heightens the excitement of unimpeded motion. As a race horse develops speed by being reined in, so his rhythmic line generates momentum through concentration on the varied repetition of short segments. By overlapping, modified sequences and various permutations, he sustains interest without wasting inventive energy.

Viola Sonata



Constructive zeal is shown particularly in the careful molding of his melodic patterns, which, like his rhythmic devices, derive in part from principles of sixteenth century counterpoint. Character is never obtained at the expense of continuity. And although the line is made up to a large extent of traditional ornamentation, it is too well integrated to sound like stereotyped embroidery, and too alive to be called archaic. In general his melody is diatonic and modal. The following fragments are characteristic.

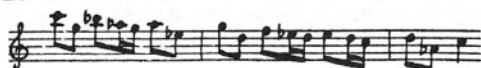
3rd Quartet



6th Quartet



\* Musical illustrations from the *Third Quartet* and the *Sixth Quartet* by permission of G. Schirmer, Inc.

Symphony No. 1Dance in 3 TimePiano Sonata

Certain tendencies toward uniformity are noticeable. Turns, and lower auxiliary notes expressed in figures of two sixteenths plus an eighth occur in descending patterns so frequently that they have almost the effect of a trademark. One could identify a Porter melody easily by this characteristic. Another persistent habit is that of ending movements on a major triad. Three movements, fast-slow-fast, are the rule with Porter. The form of each generally follows a broad dynamic curve with well-spaced successions of rising and falling intensity. The soundness of these procedures is obvious. They sometimes appear also a little arbitrary.

Quality is discernible in everything Porter does, but in chamber music he has earned special distinction, his output in this field having reached noteworthy proportions with his *Seventh String Quartet*, which captured the Coolidge medal in 1943. Whatever else may be said of him, it is evident that his special fondness for the string quartet, combined possibly with the fact that he is an accomplished violist, has led him with conspicuous success toward complete mastery of the elusive string medium. He has learned to speak this aristocratic language in all its richness, power and diversity. He has that feeling for autonomous melody so essential to the delicate polyphonic fabric of good chamber music. An interesting example of how he met and mastered monodic style is to be found in his *Sonata* for viola alone, and the discipline he imposed on himself in this work undoubtedly bore fruit in subsequent compositions of greater scope.

Porter's orchestral writing has the same highly personalized features, the same vivacity, pertinence and charm which characterize his chamber music. It would be surprising indeed if a person of his imaginative fecundity were not to make good use of the wider color resources of the orchestra. He obviously revels in them and communicates his delight in many a sparkling page of accomplished scoring, particularly in his *Poem and Dance*, *Two Dances for Radio*, and *Dance in Three Time*.

In his *First Symphony* there is splendid nobility of impulse, great freshness and verve, and the promise of far reaching development in his style. One may question whether he has gone quite far enough in building those broad and violent dramatic contrasts which make the total impact of the piece strong enough for its size. Eloquence there is, and authority. Yet the multiplication of details, the refinements of chamber music technique somehow get in the way of achieving quite as imposing a result as the large proportions lead one to expect.

And this is undoubtedly because of the purity of Porter's musical outlook. He has so little countenance for anything crass, he is such a perfect gentleman about avoiding the unpleasantly aggressive, that he is inclined to underestimate the advantages of showmanship. Obviously this is why he is so completely at home in chamber music where his furtive nuances, his almost embarrassed asides, can register their delicate effects without loss of meaning.

And yet Porter is far from being a miniaturist, or a confirmed dispenser of whimsy. In many of his works, in the *Second Violin Sonata*, in the early *Piano Quintet*, in some of the string quartets, particularly the first movement of the sixth, one finds pages of great amplitude and intensity. Some of his finales, boisterous tarantelles, have an almost flamboyant brilliance, and his *Piano Sonata* dynamically is on a really grandiose scale. So there is plenty of red-blooded, two-fisted expressiveness here to suggest an even broader exploitation of orchestral potentialities than he has realized so far.

A sane, vigorous middle-of-the-road policy, both as educator and creative artist, has won Porter an important place in the American scene. His music forges ahead with fine, fresh independence, yet it remains in unbroken continuity with the past. He achieves orientation and progressiveness, not by scuttling tradition, but by conserving those things which, because of their power to bring people together in agreement, are perhaps the most valuable things that could be nurtured in a world torn apart by uncertainty and confusion.

In his uncompromising adherence to abstract instrumental forms, his stylistic subtleties, his devotion to the eloquent line and neatly turned phrase, there is no timid aloofness, but only the sound artistic judgment of rejecting what cannot be properly assimilated. Nor does the ability to sing with his whole-hearted optimism denote any desire to escape the oppressive realities of our time. It suggests, rather, a typical American point of view, a doctrine cherished by our pioneering forbears, a vigorous, fearless and unquestioning faith in man's ability to shape his own destiny.



# THE MUSIC OF QUINCY PORTER

DATE

PUBLISHER

## ORCHESTRAL WORKS

1925	Ukrainian Suite (string orchestra)	- - - - -	C. C. Birchard*
1926	Suite in C Minor	- - - - -	Manuscript
1932	Poem and Dance	- - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Symphony No. I	- - - - -	Manuscript
1937	Dance in Three Time (chamber orchestra)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1937	Music for Antony and Cleopatra (chamber orchestra)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1938	Two Dances for Radio	- - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Music for Strings	- - - - -	Music Press
1944	The Moving Tide	- - - - -	Manuscript

## CHAMBER WORKS

1923	String Quartet No. I	- - - - -	Manuscript
1925	String Quartet No. II	- - - - -	Manuscript
1926	Sonata for Violin and Piano No. I	- - - - -	Manuscript
1927	In Monasterio (string quartet)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Quintet for Piano and Strings	- - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Little Trio for Flute, Violin and Viola	- - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Blues Lointains (flute or viola and piano)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Sonata for Violin and Piano No. II	- - - - -	G. Schirmer**
1929	Quintet for Clarinet and Strings	- - - - -	Manuscript
1930	String Quartet No. III	- - - - -	G. Schirmer**
1931	String Quartet No. IV	- - - - -	Arrow Press
1934	String Quartet No. V	- - - - -	Manuscript
1937	String Quartet No. VI	- - - - -	G. Schirmer**
1937	Quintet in One Movement on a Childhood Theme (flute and strings)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1938	This is the House that Jack Built (soprano and piano or chamber orchestra)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Fugue for String Quartet	- - - - -	Manuscript
1943	String Quartet No. VII	- - - - -	Manuscript
1945	Sonata for French Horn and Piano	- - - - -	Manuscript

## WORKS FOR SOLO INSTRUMENTS

1930	Piano Sonata	- - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Toccata, Andante and Finale (organ)	- - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Sonata for Viola Alone	- - - - -	Boletín Latino-Americano de Música 5
1940	Lonesome (piano)	- - - - -	Carl Fischer
1943	Six Miniatures (piano)	- - - - -	Boston Music Co.

## Miscellaneous Songs

\* Eastman publication.

\*\*Printed for the Society for the Publication of American Music.