

now-a-days; it was the searching of a mature and serious-minded human being, fully aware of what has been done in the past, eager to enlarge his means of expression and ours, by the conscious and legitimate development of his own individuality and genius. Through the course of the years Griffes' harmonic sense grew increasingly original and bold, his melodic line became increasingly his own. One sees him, discontented with the established conventions, tentatively feeling his way. There is about his work an atmosphere of flexibility and open-mindedness. All this had happened in Europe often before; but with Griffes the experimental frame of mind makes its first musical appearance in our country. This is his unique importance—the more singular because of the fact that his talent was limited perhaps and his achievement incomplete.

Griffes wore no mantle of self-imposed responsibility; he did not look on himself as the apostle of any creed. He was, for a number of years, music-instructor at a boys' school on the banks of the Hudson, near New York. His room, on the ground floor of one of the buildings overlooking a wide lawn, was cold, perhaps, but not lacking in a fastidious and individual charm. Here he worked, quietly, unassumingly and un-self-consciously. His tender and charming flute-poem, his stern and uncompromising piano sonata, the fragments to *Salut au Monde*, unsatisfying but evocative—these were but milestones along a path he was blazing, at that time alone, through the new and unexplored musical forest. How tragic that his progress was so cut short!

*Frederick Jacobi*

### "FOR THE PEOPLE"

**A**N essential part of the American democratic credo is the belief in the possibility of completely educating the masses. That men die unequal is often attributed to the differences in their training and opportunity. In music the dogma takes the form of a faith that all our citizens are potentially lovers of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.

In the United States today there is an unprecedented propaganda for the popularization of serious music. It would be

unfair to say our many uplifters have no appreciation of the art except that which consists in administering it to the unenlightened. The aesthetic teleology of these moralists may be a simple rationalization of a thorough, albeit ignorant, love of music.

Our evangelist is not discouraged by the small interest the mass of the public take in his gospel. He trusts the millions are really hungry for aesthetic experience. He can quote evidences of the success of his work, comparing the modern musical audience to that of the days of Theodore Thomas.

In all innocence he forgets that in our present era of wealth and well-being every kind of showmanship is prospering as never before. To parallel the increase in the symphony clientele, there are statistics of the stunning advance in popularity of the movies, comic strips, football, record air flights, and a thousand other activities directly or indirectly attracting the public interest. If the growing number of endowed orchestras signifies important cultural progress in the life of the nation, what does it mean that thirty or forty million Americans passionately concern themselves in a prize fight that a few years ago would have touched hardly a tenth that many?

Still, the danger in the vast campaign for the popularization of music is not that it will fail. The menace is the possible bad influence of the propaganda, as it is carried out, on the art itself. It has not harmed poetry, painting, or sculpture to affect only a tiny minority of each generation. But we have seen what the will of the masses has done to such an institution as our newspapers: the more popular they are, the worse they are.

If there is at present an art truly fashioned by and for the whole public, it is the cinema. Criticism of the Hollywood product is strangely ineffective. Conscientious aesthetes deplore the crudity, banality, and obviousness of the films. The Continental producers, business men though they be, are nevertheless burdened with a traditional art consciousness. In their ineffectual nationalist propaganda they assure themselves that if financial advantages were equal, their taste and wisdom could push Hollywood off the map.

The truth is not uttered by either group of critics: motion pictures are what they are because the great public likes them

just so. As a matter of fact, only a minute percentage of what intelligent consensus has accepted as superior and artistic motion pictures have been important financial successes. Such productions as *The Last Laugh* may in a few metropolitan districts gain a short momentum of popularity. When they approach the average public in this country and abroad, they yield place universally to *Over the Hill* and Gloria Swanson.

Eric von Stroheim, in an interview that eluded press agent policy, not long ago remarked: "To me the fact that a motion picture is a popular and financial success is a perfect indication it is, in an artistic sense, a bad picture."

The statement describes the public taste more than it does the cinema. It includes, besides, disconcerting implications of the potential relations between serious music and the masses at whom hopeful educators aim their efforts to make operatic, symphonic, and chamber music a pervasive and popular art.

The public does not wish to be educated to the enjoyment of good music any more than it is susceptible to instruction in its appreciation of the movies. If a motion picture suits the general taste, the crowd goes to see it. If the vulgar formula is neglected, the production shows to empty seats.

In the familiarly touted popularization of serious music at the bigger movie theaters, the thesis of the intrinsic exclusiveness of fine art is again strongly supported. Since the first fad of the symphony orchestra, many of the feature houses have fallen back on jazz and semi-jazz musical combinations. In the few theatres where "good music" has been retained, sad as the truth may be, the will of the public has an evil effect on performance. The movie program is ridiculously limited to the most blatant numbers in the symphony repertory, and even the *Marche Slave* and the *Spanish Caprice* are commonly cut and re-orchestrated to flavor them to popular taste.

Beyond everything, there is a spirit in ordinary movie interpretation thoroughly alien to genuine musical sense. Cheap exaggeration of every fundamental musical effect is only part of the disfigurement. It is beyond conception that a movie audience should listen in patience to a slow movement, an extended passage of modestly beautiful phrasing, a true cantilena.

I have never heard an unqualifiedly conscientious reading of first-rate music in a popular theater. It does not go over.

Much as the movie musical director may regret what he does, he knows the mass public. His inevitable business is to satisfy it with what it understands to be entertainment. He is aware the populace has not the mental poise and penetration to sit through fine music well performed, to sense the effectiveness of intricate and ingenious composition, to be moved by the beauty of pure music. Therefore he cuts scores, splices hideously conflicting material, improvises trite jazzifications, arranges his readings by the watch, accompanies abstract music with a thousand irrelevant and obvious effects of light and dancing.

Our general public is not remarkably less equipped with musical taste than other publics are or have been. Liszt in his prime was celebrated most for his circus qualities and his sex appeal. Italians are joyful at every repetition of *Trovatore*, and disregard symphonic music. In the best days of music in Germany, the love of it was as widespread as it probably ever will be anywhere. Two reasons account for this—the tremendous prestige of support from the upper classes and the lack of competing entertainers. Sometimes in history music has had the appearance of being widely appreciated because of an arbitrary affiliation with powerful public loyalties and observances, such as religion and nationalism.

Nowadays the sacred association has declined and the nationalistic bond is feeble despite all efforts to strengthen it. It is left to music to become popular of itself. In our present society and culture, the art must automatically be harmed in proportion as popularization is successful. To compete in catching skillfully sought public interest music must posture and gesticulate in antics such as those which make our newspapers and movies abominable. Some branches of the art, it is true, have greater potential showmanship than others. The mere cooperation of one hundred musicians in an orchestra is sufficiently spectacular to interest a fairly large group of our population, perhaps as much as five per cent. Opera, which is palpably brilliant and showy, is always most esteemed for its least admirable qualities.

There is no possibility of making a string quartet appeal to

the masses if it is satisfied to embellish its art and reputation simply with the aesthetic virtues of good chamber music. By playing beautiful works beautifully the small ensemble can gather only a small clientele. It ought to be satisfied with that and its art. No doubt the audience would increase, for a moment, if the first violinist were to kill his wife, swim the English Channel, or marry the Queen of Roumania, but music cannot make the first page consistently without contamination.

The American vaudeville circuit is an accurate meter of the public taste. Its morality is simple: acts applauded are booked, and those little approved are quickly discarded. Variety is the essence of vaudeville. I went the other day to hear a concert pianist who is having success in variety. Her program, which by the Orpheum standard is typically representative of the best in music, consists, from city to city throughout America, of Paderewski's *Minuet*, Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*, Beethoven's *Turkish Patrol*, and Saint-Saen's *The Swan*. If this artist were to dare play a great sonata she would risk ejection from her engagement as a "flop."

To draw the universal crowd art must compete in the mart of showmanship with "Babe" Ruth, and the Prince of Wales. Supreme music cannot, any more than Keats, commune with the heart of the multitude, any more than Santayana can speak to its mind. Intelligence and specialized sensibility are not distributed with the voting privilege.

*Alexander Fried*

## THE BALLADS OF THE NINETIES

THAT dim remote period, affectionately spoken of as the Gay Nineties, is fast assuming the proportions of a cult. Thomas Beer sought to capture some of its elusive wistfulness between the highly decorative covers of *The Mauve Decade*; Gilbert Gabriel succeeded in saving much of its genial charm; Mark Sullivan reported it faithfully and accurately. Now comes Dr. Sigmund Spaeth and in his most recent opus, *Read Em and Weep*, (published by Doubleday Page and Company) collects for the edification and irreverent amusement of a sophisticated generation the artless balladry of that period.