

AMERICAN COMPOSERS. IV

Emerson Whithorne

RICHARD HAMMOND

IT is due to much more than novelty and chance that his *New York Days and Nights* has won for Emerson Whithorne so outstanding a success. For he is among the very few who have caught the true vibration of the great cosmopolis. Perhaps more than any other composer Whithorne may be called the Poet of the City. His music, though characterized by lyricism, is without the relaxations of pastoral gaiety and the warm rich pungency of the soil. For the most part his inspiration seems urban (particularly in his later works) but urban with an appreciation of what a city really is.

Whithorne never contents himself with a clever display of externals. Unlike so many of his colleagues, he does not lose sight of the city among the skyscrapers. His music can be mechanistic, kaleidoscopic, jazz-rhythmed, but it is because these characteristics form the very warp and woof of his tonal fabric. He does not assume a style solely by way of decoration. Living in an age of subways, radios and tri-motored planes he writes music that has the restless pulsation and staccato contrasts of the world around him—it is terse, nervous, rhythmic, polychromatic, uncompromising. He can capture for us the nostalgic wail of ferry whistles, the priapic grandeur of the upspringing tower, the jerky reiterations of electric signs, or the gleaming tranquility of night sky-lines. His approach to the modern city may be compared in essence to Beethoven's contemplation of the splendors of nature; while at times there is a yielding to the tang of local color, penetration to the inner significance always surmounts the literal. Coincident with the contemporary accent there is a vein of rich romanticism and a sensitive flow of the lyric.

It is a common custom glibly to assign definite periods to an artist's creative development. We are all so long familiar

with the Early Strivings, Transitional Experiment and ultimate Maturity of Creation that we begin almost to see definite lines of demarcation, stylistic pigeon-holes. While in the case of Stravinsky, the contrast between *Oiseau de Feu*, the *Sacre* and *Oedipus* and the *Symphonie des Psaumes* is very startling, there can always be traced a definite curve of creative evolution, which reminds us that progressive art is ever experimental, and that the musico-Freudian complexes of early works frequently make themselves manifest in later efforts. Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, one must follow the law of averages, and group into periods, generally of chronological sequence, those works which reveal the greatest amount of a given tendency. So in the case of Whithorne, if one may be forgiven a somewhat inexact classification, there may be discovered three development phases.

The first of these, into which fall the earlier piano works, songs, two orchestral suites—*Ranga* and the *Adventures of a Samurai*—and the string quartet—*Three Greek Impressions*—, was influenced principally by the colorists; nevertheless there is apparent the backbone of romanticism. Occasionally in these compositions there is a passing breath of sentimentality which disappears, however, not to return in later works. Notwithstanding, there is much intriguing and worthwhile music among them. The *Chinese Songs*, the imposing *Invocation*, those attractive bits of pianism, *Rain* and *La Nuit*, and more particularly the graceful, supple *Greek Impressions* are happy auguries of what was to come.

Then Whithorne turns realist, and the photograph supplants the aquarelle. But this photography is not slavishly adherent to the visual, for one senses always the note of a personal, creative reaction. This period, obviously, is in closer touch with the life of today. To these years we can assign that glittering essay of piano bravura, *The Aeroplane*, the brilliantly picturesque *New York Days and Nights* and the dance satire, *Sooner and Later*, so interestingly performed under the aegis of the courageous and farsighted Neighborhood Playhouse. The ballet may be considered in many ways a forerunner of John Alden Carpenter's better known *Skyscrapers*. Its subject is the work and play of mankind, from the tribal days of primitive man through the



EMERSON WHITHORNE

A portrait made in 1929 by the late
ROBERT WINTHROP CHANLER

Jazz-Age to those crystalline cities of the future where human passion exists no longer and relaxation is engendered by "synthetic moods," or "instrumental, vocal and color preludes." In the last scene Whithorne not only envisaged the art and life of distant centuries, but utilized a new development of his own age, the "clavilux" or color organ, employed for the first time, I believe, in a score in which it had an orchestral part.

Two subsequent major works that somewhat elude cataloguing are *Saturday's Child* and *The Grim Troubadour*, settings of poems by Countee Cullen. These two, the former for tenor, mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra, the latter for medium voice and string quartet, have a frankly romantic *timbre*, but at the same time are thoroughly modern in medium of expression and rhythmic invention. Effectively scored for voice, they are deeply-felt musical transcriptions of the burning Negro declamation.

Latterly Whithorne has turned to absolute music and in this genre has given us a *Violin Concerto* and two of his most important published works, a *Piano Quintet* and the striking *Poem for Piano and Orchestra*. This last-named piece, in common with the *Piano Quintet*, retains a definitely romantic flavor which is, nevertheless, thoroughly in the contemporary idiom and fits perfectly into the modern picture. Its iridescent polytonality, ingenious rhythmic superpositions and brilliant pianism render it a boon to pianists, who hunt in vain for effective new works with orchestra. In addition Whithorne has shown his aptitude in writing for the theatre by his incidental music for O'Neil's *Marco Millions*, successfully produced by the Theatre Guild.*



As with the music, so with the man. Whithorne is above all a cosmopolite. Meeting him one is impressed with that legendary alertness, perception and practical open-mindedness often so wrongly attributed to the business man. There is about him a great freedom from musical shi-shi and the stuffiness of the professional. But beneath the matter of fact manner there is a fine sensitivity, a quick response to beauty and a broadly cultured intelligence. Though nurtured on the rich traditions of an older

* Of Whithorne's most recent orchestral works, the *First Symphony* and *The Dream Pedlar*, as well as a new *String Quartet*, and two compositions written during his present visit in the West, *A California Pilgrimage* and *Four Preludes*, both for piano, I regret that I cannot speak here, as I have still to hear them.—R. H.

world, he is an American at heart. We are a mixed people, the pure Anglo-Saxon stock is dying out and those crucibles of the future nation, the cities, have within them the mixed ingredients of the metals to come; it is the cities that shall inherit the earth as provincialism falls back before the advance of science. And it is of these cities that Whithorne's music is born.

In epitomizing Whithorne the composer, one can best begin by describing what he is not. There is about his music little attempt to startle or astound. He is no slavish follower of the fads and isms that so quickly date a work for the years to come. Nor is he a propagandist. He creates music for music's sake and it bears no trademark. There are no periwigged posturings of neo-classicism, no tinkling inanities of the Dadaists, nor the emotional constipation of the post-Schönbergians. Though at first we may not be struck with great novelty of idiom, the profile becomes constantly more clear and the speech more characteristic of both Whithorne and of the age in which he lives.

Amidst all the abortive attempts to find ourselves as American, Whithorne pursues his course, quiet in the assurance that in the sincere expression of himself alone, he makes his best contribution. He does not seek the obvious "Americanism" of the Jazz Opera, the Jazz Ballet, although he has used the Broadway accent with the greatest deftness when requisite to his needs. But as the American language is the composite of the many tongues of which it is born, so is Whithorne's music the vivid translation of the multicolored panorama, the sharp emotional contrasts, the machine-like splendor and the energy that make America.

LIST OF WORKS BY EMERSON WHITHORNE

OPUS

PUBLISHER

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|---|------------------------------|
| 8. Two Oriental Pieces (piano) | Metzler |
| 9. Valse de Concert (piano) | Elkin |
| 10. String Quartet in A minor | Manuscript |
| 11. Die Waescherin auf der Wiese (song) | Manuscript |
| 12. The Rain (piano, orchestral score) | Schirmer |
| 13. Songs: 1. Pan 2. The Feast of the Tired Souls | Manuscript |
| 14. Hitotogisu—The Cuckoo (song, piano arrangement) | Schirmer |
| 15. Songs: 1. Put by the Lute 2. The Golden City of Saint Mary | Manuscript |
| 16. Down by the Eastern Gate (song) | Carl Fischer |
| 17. Adventures of a Samurai (orchestral suite) | Manuscript |
| 18. Songs: 1. The King of Liang 2. The Feast | Composers' Music Corporation |
| 19. Three Greek Impressions (string quartet) | Senart, Paris |
| 20. Pierrette and I (song) | Composers' Music Corporation |
| 21. Quartettino Orientale (string quartet) | Manuscript |
| 24. Songs: 1. Twilight 2. Before Dawn | Carl Fischer |
| 3. In the Cypress Grove | |
| 25. Sur l'Eau (piano) | Art Publication Society |
| 26. Ranga, symphonic phantasy (orchestra) | Manuscript |
| 29. Invocation (song) | Composers' Music Corporation |
| 30. The City of Ys, symphonic poem (orchestra) | Manuscript |
| 31. Songs: 1. Dalua | Ricordi |
| 2. Shy One | Schirmer |
| 32. Songs: 1. Hea Nan 2. A Chinese Serenade | Composers' Music Corporation |
| 3. The Bride Cometh 4. The City of Chow | |
| 33. The Gate of Memory (piano) | Elkin |
| 34. Songs: 1. Tears 2. The Golden Nenuphar | Composers' Music Corporation |
| 35. La Nuit (piano, orchestral score) | Schirmer |
| 36. Sylvan Song | Elkin |
| 37. Sooner and Later, dance satire (chamber orchestra and chorus) | Senart, Paris |
| 38. The Aeroplane (piano, orchestral score) | Composers' Music Corporation |
| 39. The Babe in the Garden (song) | Ricordi |
| 40. New York Days and Nights (piano, orchestral score) | Carl Fischer |
| 1. On the Ferry 2. Chimes of St. Patrick's | |
| 3. Pell Street (Chinatown) 4. A Greenwich | |
| Village Tragedy 5. Times Square | |
| 41. Portrait (piano) | La Revue Musicale |
| 42. Saturday's Child (mezzo-soprano, tenor, chamber orchestra) | C. C. Birchard |
| 43. Poem (piano and orchestra) | Carl Fischer |
| 44. Fata Morgana, symphonic poem (orchestra) | Manuscript |
| 45. The Grim Troubadour (medium voice and string quartet) | Carl Fischer |
| 46. Violin Concerto | Manuscript |
| 47. Blue Dusk (violin) | Carl Fischer |
| 48. Piano Quintet (piano and string quartet) | Manuscript |
| 49. First Symphony (orchestra) | Cos Cob Press |
| 50. The Dream Pedlar, symphonic poem (orchestra) | Manuscript |
| 51. Quartet for Strings | Cos Cob Press |
| 52. A California Pilgrimage (piano) | Manuscript |
| 1. Mission San Juan Capistrano (Dawn) | |
| 2. The Samarkand Gardens (Midday) | |
| 3. In The Yosemite (Evening) | |
| 4. Fiesta at Monterey (Night) | |
| 53. Four Preludes (piano) | Manuscript |
| 1. Death Valley 2. The Devil's Kitchen | |
| 3. Palos Verdes 4. Surf at Malibu | |

WITHOUT OPUS NUMBERS

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| Three Old English Tunes (violin) | Schirmer |
| 1. Air 2. Bourrée 3. Rigaudon | |
| At the Court of Kublai Khan (piano, orchestral score, from the incidental music to Marco Millions) | Carl Fischer |
| Four Old English Melodies (piano) | Art Publication Society |