

so-called "service" program: "In the Aunt Jennie story today the fellow had an argument with the uncle and he blamed it on the girl. That is just like my boy friend. . . . My boy friend is rather jealous. The other day I went to a dance and some of the other fellows told my boy friend. . . . He has been so mad he hasn't talked to me since. Listening to stories like that makes me know how other girls act. . . . Now I know how to tell my boy friend where he can get off at." This, I admit, is very down-to-earth, it is, in fact, rock bottom. The inveterate uplifter prefers the "self improvement" letter of the man in Iowa who does all the work on a four-hundred acre farm "but after listening to that Music Shop program each morning for one year, I decided to study again. So for five years I have been going seventeen miles every two weeks for my lesson." That is more soothing. It is also, no matter how rural, more special. Better for those who want to reach out to the millions not to forget the artless tribute to Aunt Jennie.

There is a steady drive today to take composers out of the concert halls into the less stuffy atmosphere of almost anywhere else. The vast spaces of the ether

have been painted as a kind of wonder universe where the artist may speak directly to the great, shadowy Whitmanesque multitude. Around this commendable urge there have been draped a few clouds of rather fancy illusion. Once the technical limitations of the microphone are thoroughly mastered, it seems, program directors will be able to take the air audience direct from *The Rosary* to the *Sacre*. If this dream is not held within bounds by the Crossley ratings, let it at least be checked against the findings of the Office of Radio Research.

Broadcasters of course will study these factual surveys. It is their business to know what the public wants and what it gets. They are also under compulsion to dedicate some time to non-commercial "education." Now the interests of professional musicians — composers for instance — are not always identified with those of business men. There is in fact a war going on today between several such groups. I believe it is to the advantage of musicians to know as much about the great passive radio public as do the men who pull both the purse and the heart strings.

Minna Lederman

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN FOLK

TO the folksong enthusiast, *A Treasury of American Song* by Olin Downes and Elie Siegmeister (Howell, Soskin and Company, 1940) brings welcome and heart-warming recognition. For the past fifty years, the folk-song collector, excitedly discovering the musical treasures of the back-country and the back-alleys, has called on the musician

for help and for approbation. The help received has been part-time and largely amateurish — time taken from more important concerns. Approval and understanding have manifested themselves in occasional spurts of interest and in rather condescending and self-conscious arrangements or thematic use of American folksongs.

When the eminent musical team of Downes and Siegmester, calling their volume *A Treasury of American Song* with no strings or conditions attached, include in it one hundred and twenty-two American folksongs out of a total of one hundred and fifty-two songs altogether, then the folksong enthusiast has reason to be pleased. And all the more because the songs have been selected with such good taste and such warm understanding. Few specialists could have chosen a group of one hundred and twenty-two with more discrimination than have these editors who are, comparatively speaking, newcomers in the field.

The volume "ranges magnificently" indeed from the starkly moving hymns of Puritan New England and the rather pedantically spirited songs of the American Revolution, through the early period of expansion West (the period of *O Susannah* and *Dan Tucker* and *Davy Crockett*), to the Civil War, which produced more great songs than any war in history. The great industrial and political growth of the next forty years was paralleled by a mushroom growth of American folksong. This is the period which produced *John Henry*, *The Jam on Gerry's Rocks*, *Jesse James*, *Frankie and Johnny*, the blues, the cowboy songs, ragtime, the Negro work songs, the hobo ballads, the mountain love song, the sentimental ballads of the nineties, jazz.

All these are remarkably documented with their introductory notes, in one hundred and fifty pages. Nor do the editors allow us to forget that the people have continued their song making since the turn of the century. The final section concludes with a group of "documentaries" in which one feels that the people

have begun to examine their problems self-consciously and comment on them with an objective vigor and irony that reach deeper than a Robert Frost and are more honest and succinct than a T. S. Eliot. The last song in the book is the *Ballad of Tom Joad*, in which Woody Guthrie, Okie folk-balladist, has compressed the essence of the Steinbeck novel and movie for those of his people who couldn't afford the two dollars or even a thirty-five cent admission.

The commentary is only occasionally thin. It is usually illuminating and hardly ever precious; the introduction is, for my taste, the best single piece of writing that has been done about the American popular musical idiom. It begins nobly:

"If ever there was a time in the history of our country that our people should know themselves and renew faith in the purposes and traditions which are part of us, that time is now. This faith and these accretions of national experience are expressed in the most characteristic of our songs. They come directly from the people, of whom Lincoln said so lovingly that 'God must have loved them since he made so many of them'."

The editors have understood the seemingly incoherent diversity of American folksong as an expression of its democratic, inter-racial, international character, as a function of its inchoate and turbulent many-sided development. Do the critics, the editors demand, "really believe that the folk music of any nation is the simon-pure product of its soil? Or of a single period? Folk music is created everywhere and its seeds are flung on the winds to uncounted destinations." Later, "But there are no more hard and fast classifications of the

songs of the American people than there has been regularity in the development of our society or consistency in the program of our education" . . . Again — "A landowner, let us say, had peasants whose dancing and singing he loved . . . But he never knew what it was to sing side by side with the peasant . . . In America the great majority of its citizens . . . worked with their hands, shared on unequivocal terms the common lot, the common tasks and vicissitudes." After pronouncing folksong, minstrel song and jazz the truest expression of democratic experience, the editors conclude by asking for "a genuinely modern, all inclusive and democratic culture."

This much for a brilliant and satisfying piece of literary editing. Turn the page to the musical introduction and one encounters the old snobbery, the same old romantic attitude. The composer, apologizing for his settings of the songs, maintains that they have to be heard in the native physical environment to be appreciated, that the melodies seem rather bare on the printed page, that the accompaniments are intended to supply the color of the original physical background. The fact is that Elie Siegmeister did not collect these songs in the field, as the fly-leaf hints; he collected from books in libraries or from a few singers encountered in New York City. He has not heard the songs in their original environment and his harmonizations supply him with false color and an unnecessary variety, which he would not need if he had known or understood the complexity and richness of the songs as they actually exist on the lips of folksingers.

Siegmeister can write eloquent words about the songs, but usually not such eloquent music. His harmonizations are certainly not so ponderous, pretentious and condescending as those that have preceded his, and where he handles something familiar, like a hymn tune or a song by Billings, he is occasionally eloquent. The settings of folksongs, however, only point up the more his lack of acquaintance with folksong itself; they are pretentious, quaint, funny, cute and, in the end, distracting.

I am also annoyed because the editors have failed to acknowledge their sources, the books from which their songs are taken and because they fail to give a nod to the collectors and editors who laboriously gathered together, preserved and fought for the recognition of the material these editors now somewhat cavalierly preempt. I am, however, seriously concerned that not all the arrangers, choral conductors, composers, and music editors can capture, reproduce or even imitate the honest and passionate utterance of American folksong. Not one of them can, even when armed with the genuine critical understanding of a Siegmeister, overcome rigidity of spirit, oversophistication of soul, desire for polite applause and write music as hot and sure and unashamed as our folksingers and "blues-blowers" have created in America.

The volume is lavishly and beautifully printed. It folds back in a friendly fashion on the piano and, from a hasty glance at the best-seller list, seems to be the best current introduction to a subject in which interest is rapidly growing.

Alan Lomax