

## FOLK FABLES

BY FRANK PATTERSON

A TUNE is a certain succession of notes written in a certain rhythm, sung or played at a certain speed which is natural to it. If the second and third of these conditions are altered—the rhythm and the speed—the tune ceases to be what it originally was. As a rule if these conditions are materially altered it ceases to be a tune at all, and always it ceases to express the same emotions revealed in its original form.

It is for this reason that the use of folk song as the basis of musical composition need not necessarily result in the expression of any part of what we rather loosely call the soul of the folk. And when we stop to consider how superficial an aspect of that soul these popular songs generally represent, we may well wonder whether the application of folk song to serious music is of any significance.

Musically speaking, the folk song, whatever the poem may be, is rarely deep enough to convey any but the lightest externals of feeling. Although the words are sometimes soul-searching the music almost never is.

Post-war propaganda for nationalistic art has brought the folk song again to the fore as the only firm and reliable medium for such efforts. But what many people mean, and fail to realize, when they say that folk idiom has been used as the basis of this or that symphony, is that its tunes are of a rather more popular nature than a serious composer would be likely to invent or care to use except with the excuse of their folk significance. It is moreover an important fact that the harmonization and arrangement of the tunes really give them whatever soul-expression they may have.

When Scotch tunes are arranged by a Beethoven we are at a loss to know whether, from the point of view of folk-soul, the finished work expresses Scotland, Germany, or Beethoven. When Bizet

and Moszkowsky use popular Spanish melodies, do they bare the soul of Spain? Is Italy characterized or caricatured in the Italian symphonies of Tschaikowsky, Mendelssohn and Strauss, or are they writing the impressions of a traveler? When Chopin wrote "national" music of Poland, and Liszt of Hungary, did either reach the depths of those works written simply with the intention of saying something musical?



Especially in America are such questions pertinent. Dvorak writes an American symphony on real or imitation Negro folk songs and many accept it as American. American composers, in search of idioms, take them from Indian and Negro sources. Modern European composers also borrow from the American Negro. Jazz becomes a world idiom.

The way out of this maze, it appears to me, is to seek true nationalism in the spontaneous utterance of the great; the German soul in Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Wagner; the Italian in Rossini, Donizetti, Ponchielli, Verdi, Puccini; the French in Gounod, Bizet, Charpentier, Fauré, Debussy; always, above all, in those works written with nationalism most absent from the mind.

From another angle, has any strongly characteristic native work ever made appeal except by its quaintness? Is not conscious nationalism likely to be rather a disturbing influence?

National characteristics are as accidental in music as in life. A native American who set himself the task of being consciously "American" would instantly become an object of ridicule. What should be normal, natural—indeed, inevitable—would become an offensive affectation, necessarily falling into exaggeration and distortion.

It may be questioned whether we know our own characteristics, or those of others, except the most negligible externals.

It seems to me that it is impossible to set down in music this national soul by the aid of so conscious a means as folk song. There

remain, on the other hand, naturalness, sincerity, spontaneity. Each national has but to be himself to express the national soul, to the extent of his power of utterance.

Upon these characteristics rests the tremendous power of German and Austrian music, and of Italian operatic music. The great Germans and Italians have developed their natural resources with lack of self-consciousness and stubborn resistance to external influence. The Russians, with a few notable exceptions, have been self-conscious. France, until Debussy, allowed itself to be influenced from abroad, even accepting foreign composers, Gluck, Rossini, Meyerbeer, and Franck, as native. So we might run through the list of nations, but in the end, at the head of the list we would find the Germans and the Italians, because their composers, in expressing themselves, have expressed the soul of their country. Folk song and nationalistic fanaticism left them untouched—they were too busy writing music.

