

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

ONE OF THE PARENTS

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THE Yale academic procession is passing the ornamented base of the flagstaff before the bicentennial buildings. (We are in 1911.) Unbending, handsome, he advances in the sober line; cock-robin-like among the professorial hens and wrens by virtue of his Cambridge gown of cream-colored brocade with a red silk hood. The mustachio'd face beneath the black velvet bonnet is finely-molded, slightly cool and petulant of expression, but most distinguished and sensitive . . .

Greying, well-groomed as ever, he is seated of an afternoon at the console of the organ in Woolsey Hall. A Bach prelude dithers on the pipes and breaks off. I am at a loss and annoyed. An Assistant Professor scrambles to the platform, receives a curt order, scurries away. The aura of his reputed irascibility and remoteness surrounds the impassively waiting figure of this Head of the Music School. The Assistant returns with — of all objects — a pair of specs! Resuming, the recital develops into a strikingly authoritative and sincere performance. Belated there flashes on me the knowledge that the man, there, just had made the troubling discovery of his fading eyesight and refused to chance his performance . . .

It is Horatio Parker, the most cultured, versatile and internationally esteemed American composer of his pre-World-War-I period. At twenty-eight, in 1891, he composed *Hora Novissima*, a dignified, somewhat Victorian and mellifluous but in some passages sublimely moving church-cantata. English musicians in the U. S. heard performances of it: in 1899 Parker was invited to conduct the work at the famous Three Choirs Festival in Worcester, England. A similar distinction had not been conferred

on an American musician. The Bristol Choral Society in the same year gave his "dramatic" oratorio, *The Legend of St. Christopher*. Worcester issued a request for further pieces which Parker honored with *A Wanderer's Psalm* on the "Peregrine Tone," an immemorial Gregorian theme; in 1902 his *Star Song* was performed at the Norwich Festival, and Cambridge bestowed its degree of Doctor of Music on him . . . Since 1894 he has been holding the chair of music at Yale; has developed the university's music department from out a double-room in an ancient edifice with a piano and blackboard for instruments; with the assistance of Morris Steinert organized the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, the common procession of town and gown. . . . Quite recently he has won the Metropolitan's \$10,000 prize with *Mona* (despite its shortcomings a work ranking among modern operas with *Pelléas* and *Elektra*). A year hence in 1912 it will be withdrawn after its fourth performance, almost totally unappreciated, possibly sabotaged. . . .

Simultaneously this erect figure is that of the prolific composer who in later years must come to be held more responsible for the U. S. American generation following his own than any other American-born musician. MacDowell doubtless will then be seen to have given this generation, through his idyllic evocations of landscape and history, a sentimental connection with itself. Farwell through his championship of progressive music and his conscious effort to relate music to our soil and civilization must be considered its outrider. But Parker will be perceived to have stood immediately *in loco parentis* to a number of the members of this post-World-War-I generation, a distinguished group larger than that directed and counselled by any other American musician. It is that during his career as a teacher of composers he already has had, even if in varying bonds of sympathy, Charles E. Ives and David Stanley Smith among his pupils, and that, before its close through his death in 1919 he will come also to teach Roger Sessions, Quincy Porter, Douglas Moore and other contemporary music-makers, and in his capacity as orchestral and choral conductor has been helping educate a body of amateurs – amid which mass the present writer gladly discovers himself. . . .

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At the moment of writing, he is as good as vanished. We as a generation unfortunately have almost no sense of his fine personal quality and unflagging artistic effort. His very period seems remote, beneath pearly-

cold almost alien skies, amid vaguest intellectual horizons and valuations. True, the choral *Ode* he composed for the inauguration of the Albright Gallery in Buffalo in 1904 was broadcast by the grace of St. Wallenstein two seasons since. There have been fairly recent performances of *Hora Novissima**. But it's twenty-five years since *A Northern Ballade*, his most considerable orchestral piece has been heard: the work remains in ms. *Mona*, despite Stanley Smith's valorous concert-performance of excerpts, is practically unknown to the contemporaries; *The Lark Now Leaves His Wat'ry Nest* no longer provides the inevitable encore-number for English-singers; indeed Parker the prolific may be thought to be persisting mainly through his editorial labors in connection with the Protestant Episcopal hymnal. Our unconsciousness neither proves him an artistic failure nor ourselves uniquely impious. We Americans almost chronically are the unwise children who have no interest in, do not "know" their spiritual progenitors – possibly because the constant rapid changes in the material conditions of our existence oblige the generations to overleap psychic steps. We possess antiquarian, indiscriminatingly preservative culture-histories: but for purposes of stabilization each generation requires a "usable part," an immediate sense of its own roots, a perception that it is no overnight, mushroom growth, that its fight is old and has been waged before it on its soil – this and a shrewd view of its origins, of the virtues and errors whence it issued: in fine, a creative history in Nietzsche's meaning. The capacity for the sense of continuity is three parts of culture: for the reason that we lack it Parker has disappeared, and we of the musical house forego the self-assurance which the perception not only of his relation to ourselves but his representation of American life, and his artistic figure would provide.

You will ask: whence my sudden sense of his absolute as well as relative interest? I have been reading his unpretentious biography (Putnam's, 1942) by Isabel Semler, one of his daughters. The book is fondly personal: one misses clear images of Parker the composer and of the evolution of his ideas and technic. But extracts from his early diaries and later letters – to Chadwick and other musicians but chiefly to members of his family – strung on a slim but entertaining narrative, engagingly present the external events of his excessively busy life and fully give a picture of his strict, humorous, comradely paternalism, his manly force and bright polished proficiency. Extracts from his musical addresses and articles;

*The *Introduction* to *Hora Novissima* was broadcast in April over N. B. C. by Walter Damrosch.

ubiquitous evidences of his sensitivity to language; appreciations of him by colleagues, pupils and A. Walter Kramer; revealing glimpses of him at the performance of Strauss' *Don Quixote* and Berlioz' *Requiem*; above all his photographs with their expression of wistful, subconscious "listening," meanwhile make for connection with his inner life and creative self. Through my emerging memories promptly there defined itself the idea that Parker's career provides the perfect instance of the spontaneous entrance of American life into the domain of the high sensuous arts in the '70's and '80's, indeed of all the spontaneous entrances of American life into the domains of architecture, painting and music.

One can discover few external influences which may be thought to have affected his choice, about 1878, of a musical career. His home was in Auburndale, thus near Boston and its music. But at the time there were almost no examples of serious American musical vocations. A symphony by Paine, perhaps the first American work in the larger instrumental forms, had been given a hearing; however, MacDowell was still a pupil of Raff's, Chadwick a student of Rheinberger's. True, Parker had been exposed to music since a child, for his mother was a music-teacher, his father an architect interested in all the varieties of ecclesiastical art; yet it appears he did not receive piano-lessons before his fifteenth year and that his mother's encouragement of his ambition was subsequent to his own conception of it. Of an afternoon the lad overheard the adroit performance of another boy, a pupil of his mother's. A desire to surpass the performance burningly possessed him. Within the space of two days in the same year he set fifty Kate Greenaway poems to music. At sixteen he was holding a paid position of church organist; a year later he was going into Boston for lessons in composition from Chadwick, who had returned and found the youth equipped with "a remarkable facility in harmony and modulation. . . . and a fertile vein of lyric melody." Acquaintance with Paine's experiments started him writing trios and fiddle-sonatas; at nineteen he borrowed money sufficient to take him to Munich, to Rheinberger.

Simultaneously over in England a little musical renaissance quietly was progressing. There, after almost two centuries of decline and a quarter century of utter sterility (1880) had appeared a relatively vigorous composition, in the Handelian-Mendelssohnian line but youthful in spirit, Parry's *Prometheus Unbound* – and it is possible that the American birth

like the British rebirth essentially was an Anglo-Saxon renewal. Parker certainly was pure-English in point of descent, Anglican in background, and instinctively for many years felt a special sympathy with work – thin though he knew it to be – of Parry, Mackenzie, Stanford and other members of what Bernard Shaw called their “genteel, cultured, classic, pure and experimentally mixolydian” group. At all events, characteristics of the “new start” fairly protrude from Parker’s forthright art. The basic material of it remained ever a bit unripe. The hand striking the lyre, we see, was cultivated. He was an expert contrapuntist, skilled in the art of the *a capella* chorus and texturing his compositions with richly interweaving voices; an orchestral stylist; and never cheaply effective like certain of his British contemporaries, that composer of “square” music, Elgar for example. It was that the sensuous fundament itself was crude. There is a lack of rhythmic variety; an overdose of march movements quite as in Parry and Stanford. The insipidities of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* duck up in some of his melodies, nor is it possible entirely to dissociate the sublimities of *Cáhal Mór of the Wine-Red Hand* (Parker’s robust, much-admired baritone-and-orchestra-ballad on a wild poem of Mangan’s) from those of *The Holy City*. Meantime, the harmonic sobriety prevailing in his work almost until the hour of *Mona*, which causes the faithful Kramer to rank him among the “unsensational” composers, implies the attitude of excessive extraversion: the habitual adjustment without much respect for subjective feeling to objective musical conditions in the sense of the customary and esthetically acceptable. (The implication is corroborated by the fact that all his life Parker appears to have received his most imperative stimulations to music-making from objective circumstances and remained an “occasional” composer in the word’s good sense; giving his best in the interests of special events, choral festivals, bicentennials, inaugurations and in response to the proffer of prizes. Evidences of something which amounted to a constant sacrifice of himself to objective demands, also are strewn through the accounts of his professional life as organizer, teacher, choral and orchestral leader.) And extraversion is of course the attitude encouraged by pioneer, initial situations. Only after psychological adjustment had been constant for generations do the subjective determinants acquire sufficient authority to turn the scales and decide issues.

It was almost his own apologia he made in writing in 1914, “You cannot produce composers out of desert air, but only from a musical

atmosphere. One can produce music without live composers, but not live composers without music." Still this polished rustic, this intellectual, educated, Palestrina-loving pioneer was a singer – strikingly enough in a way similar to that in which his elder fellow-Massachusettsian, Whittier – whose Amesbury was not very remote from Parker's Auburndale, and whose lyre also was crude – was a poet. Both were great hymnists by virtue of sheer fervor and sweetness of religious experience: Parker particularly in the *a capella* choruses of the *Hora* and *St. Christopher* and most especially in the latter's flame-like *Jam sol recedit igneus*. He also possessed a feeling for dramatic contrasts and a power of cumulative effect – they hallmark his accessible scores. Gradually his substance matured. One sees reflections of the expansion in the slow change of opinion in this professor who was a man of the whole world. Originally, Chadwick tells us, Parker had been an argumentative pupil. Rheinberger's academic dogmas however impressed him: for years his sympathies remained narrowly based. Admiring the immense technical progress of music on the continent, he nevertheless deplored what he termed – good extravert that he was – the "subjectivism" of Strauss and Debussy, the latter's impressionism. To the end he certainly resented "polytonality and polycapophony" by which he cruelly meant the new counterpoint he seems to have encountered for the first time about 1896 in the work of his pupil Ives. But in the years of *Mona* he was rejoicing in Strauss's and Debussy's "rich, personal melodic and harmonic vocabularies; new and gratifying rhythmic discoveries; wealth of beautiful color." The reason for radicalism, selfhood, originality appeared. "Every civilized nation must have an art of its own and do its share towards developing its own art in its own way" he wrote. "Every nation's life really centers in and radiates from its composers . . ."

Abruptly, almost, *Mona* emerged from his maturing, incipiently authoritative self: Parker neither beforehand nor afterward found more individual, distinguished, frequently subtle solutions for his artistic problems. The piece is possibly too oratorio-like in style, too undramatic in the sense of being insufficiently reproductive of motory experience to exercise a wide appeal. Inflections of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* still vaguely haunt the melody; the scene and dance commencing Act II are banal; the underlying ancient-British drama in Brian Hooker's Swinburnian verse – intended as a tragic denunciation of woman's "masculine protest" – is rather priggish.

But the almost unbrokenly noble style is exquisitely congruous to English speech. One must go back in musical history almost as far as Handel to find English declamation more exact and lyrical than that of the heroine's grand arioso-style account of her dream in Act I. The harmonic patterns are unconventional and delicate. With its passages for unaccompanied woodwinds and brasses the structural, multi-voiced instrumentation points forward to Stravinsky. Devices such as the identification of a special tonality with each of the principal personages and the block-character treatment of the scenes achieve a fine working-unity between purely musical and dramatic form. An uncommon greyness, personal and northern, "silvers everything;" and again and again the score powerfully conveys a mood; and plangent passages like the prelude to Act III and the orchestral outburst after the scene of murder have the majestic melancholy which lends joy to tragedy. A grand opera, a work of musical art, had come out of America. Today it still stands a peak solitary on the continent.