

JAZZ OPERA OR BALLET?

BY GILBERT SELDES

THE rapidity with which American popular music changes its habits and its habitat makes keeping up with it difficult and prophecy dangerous. I had been for long an enthusiast on the subject of this music, had considered it, roughly speaking, capable of any development; but about a year or so ago I ventured to suggest that the emphasis on a jazz-opera, as the divine event toward which all Gershwin's creations moved, was misplaced. Desiring not to be known as a destructive critic, I noted that our music, at least as it is at present, tended more naturally toward jazz ballet.

There has been no jazz opera produced so far; nor any complete jazz ballet; but lesser events lead me to a kind of arrogance in reasserting this opinion with vehemence. Indeed, considering the matter again, I wonder why it has been everywhere assumed that jazz, the moment it reached the concert hall, was destined for the enrichment of our meagre national opera. Admittedly the opera needs new sources of interest, new food from which it may gather strength. The reverse of the matter is in question: does jazz need opera as an ultimate purpose? What persuades the enthusiasts that jazz is just the music to accompany an opera libretto, to create an operatic illusion? Is it the slight matter of syncopation? Or the now seriously debated "complexity" of its rhythms? Or the quaintness of the trick orchestral effects? Or merely the volume of noise?

My reason for suspecting that our popular music would not exactly do for opera was that in its present phase of development it is paying less and less attention to the voice and more and more to the feet: roughly, it is less meant for singing than for dancing. A small part of our popular music is meant to be heard: Confrey's brilliant piano pieces, for example. Another part is meant to be

sung: Berlin's ballads, Kern's and Gershwin's songs. And the third, which happens to be the part in which jazz rises to its high point, is meant chiefly to be danced. The brilliant words of the best of lyric writers would not make *Pack Up Your Sins* and *Fascinating Rhythm* part of our vocal inheritance.

The focus of interest has changed, and the change is natural because we are not a nation of singers (exceptions granted) and we are a nation of dancers. We know little of choreography; we give little significance to the patterns we create on our revue stages. But we have a supremely fine, marvelously developed dance technique, possibly due to the universal American habit of dancing—not of dancing folk dance, but of dancing socially. Reflected on our stage this social custom gives a brilliant result. The awkwardness, the dulness, the imitative banality of French and English stage dancing emphasize again and again the fresh, rich, varied, full quality of our own.

Being an enthusiast for ballet in almost all of its varieties, I feel that our dancing can, eventually, lead to an American ballet, and my ancient liking for our popular music suggests at once the source. Yet I hope that my passion for jazz ballet left me unprejudiced when I heard, at the beginning of this year a small effort to produce jazz opera. This was George Gershwin's *135th Street* as done by Paul Whiteman's band. In advance it sounded excellent, one reason being that it was composed three years ago and intended for the *George White Scandals*, was, therefore, in Gershwin's native vein, ambitious, but not solemnly so, and far less so than the *Rhapsody in Blue* which, for all its concerto effects remains an entirely legitimate development of popular music. It was based on a Harleminish theme, sympathetic to the composer, who has exceptional ability to transmute the tricks of negro music to his own uses. Finally, it was being done in an extremely unpretentious manner.

Yet what occurred was, unless it was meant to be a burlesque of Italian opera, an extremely dreary affair. A blues, a Mammy song, a love song, all naturally found their way into the score, and Gershwin's melodic gifts being what they are, were the best parts of it. Unaccompanied dialogue would have brought the piece out of the pure operatic vein, so there was a sort of recitative or

speaking through music, extraordinarily Italianate in character and unwittingly funny. Again and again it seemed as if the characters would break into a snappy American dance; and again and again disappointment followed. An over-simplified plot, expressed in an unimaginative idiom, was held together in a matrix of music which, except for the few solo numbers, was entirely without distinction. The zest and the snap of American music had died out altogether.

And that, I fear, is really what the enthusiasts for jazz opera secretly mean. The opera which learned nothing from Wagner and glories in all its dear absurdities is moribund. Give it a fresh musical impulse and it may revive! But at the same time, coerce that musical impulse to follow every convention of the opera itself. Give us, that is, in American musical idiom, the set pieces and doldrums of Puccini and we will be able to please the old ladies, while we interest the terrible young people as well. Sacrifice the independence and the impudence of jazz, and gain the doors of the Metropolitan!

This early one-act opera is, to be sure, nothing to go by; if it had pointed, in a single feature, to the natural development of jazz music, all these doleful anticipations might be unnecessary. But to me it seemed at every moment to point away from our popular music and toward a form which has nothing whatever to do with us, a form in which we have always signally failed. And the similar tentatives in regard to ballet have without exception pointed in the right direction. Three of these are more or less known: John Alden Carpenter's *Krazy Kat Ballet*, Cole Porter's *Within the Quota*, and Emerson Whithorne's *Sooner and Later*. It may be claimed that none of these composers stems from Tin Pan Alley, but that does not matter. Each of them was using, in parts or in all of his work, characteristic American themes, rhythms, constructions. Each of them found the composition for ballet giving him extraordinary freedom in the development of his material, and in each case the essential flavor of American popular music seemed to me to be preserved. Carpenter's ballet, *Skyscrapers*, is announced for production this month by the Metropolitan, and is to be recommended in advance to our composers of jazz. They may consider Carpenter an interloper in their field;

but at least they will recognize a form in which their own work can be heard to advantage.

They will recognize, too, that no one has yet done for them what the choreographers of Europe do for their composers. We have our dancing, a beautiful instrument which expresses almost nothing. The composers write a dance number and a dance is arranged to "go with it." Anything which isn't positively hostile to the words or the melody will do—and in a great many cases, I add hastily, does very nicely for its purpose. The involutions of the dance, the creation of steps and gestures, make the dance interesting to watch. But the dance as something implied in the music, a necessary part of the music, without which the music is incomplete—these we shall not have until we develop ballet. I think of *Parade* and of *Chout*; even of the startlingly thin *Train Bleu* in which the dance was expressive, not in the sense of interpreting the music, but in the sense of being an active and necessary parallel expression of the same themes.

It happens that the Russians are extremely interested in the development of music and of dancing in America; we cannot do better than be interested in their choreography. It is rumored that there are organizations in the mysterious heart of Russia which make even Diaghilev's troupe seem immature; but for a beginning that band of artists is certainly enough for us to study. Not to imitate; only to discover what they are up to, and to see how much of what they do is applicable to our needs. Because it would be too silly for us to take our fresh, bright, American music and rigidly force it into the mold of Russian ballet; and equally silly for us to shy away from the Russian ballet without learning what it was to teach.

Our attempts at opera, so far, have been largely concerned with the pathetic legends of the Indian, legends, by the way, with which the average American has almost no sympathy whatever. They are, however, picturesque in the operatic way; one can at once think of arias, shrieks, recognitions, and the rest of the operatic claptrap. The real American legends are of another nature. They are the legends which the moving picture has vaguely touched in its Western aspects; or the legend (you may call it a myth) of "from rags to riches;" or the legends of the immigrants; or of the

pioneers. Our heroes are Buffalo Bill and Booker T. Washington and Charlie Chaplin and Charlie Murphy of Tammany and Hinky Dink and the witch-burners of New England and Irving Berlin. Just as the Russian ballet has used myth directly, or nourished itself from myth, so can we. The field is wide; and whatever we cultivate on it will be suitable to our national expressions in music and in dance. The monotony of a jazz opera, as predicted, is not necessary; the variations, however, are most likely to be in the form of Italian music not germane to our subjects. The brevity of ballet, the sharpness of its outlines, its constant movement, make our common music entirely adequate and appropriate; and to this common music, an American choreography can be adapted. By combining then two arts in which we have really given the world something, we can produce an art which may give something to ourselves.

The composer of jazz-ballet will have to face the American prejudice against pantomime—a prejudice the movie has only partly broken down because it has cluttered itself with captions. That, of course, is one reason why jazz-opera will have a better chance at the beginning. But we haven't yet had a fair chance to learn to appreciate ballet in any form; and to make it easier at the start we could take the lesson of the American version of *Coq d'Or* and the Diaghilev production of *Noches*, and use voices, the voices of Broadway and of Harlem perhaps, with our orchestra. In the end I think we shall get along without. And I am convinced that if America is groping for a form in which it can express itself, without too much dependence upon the past, it can find the form in ballet—one of the oldest of art-forms and for us one of the newest and most promising.

