

COMPOSERS OF NEW ENGLAND

NICOLAS SLONIMSKY

THE vexing question of a national style in American music is becoming further complicated by the diversity of tongues with which this country speaks. At least two main musical dialects can be differentiated: New England, indigenous and evolutionary; New York, cosmopolitan and less traditional. Both rely on extra-racial sources for material and inspiration. New York leans heavily on the Negro, while Boston prefers the more placid Indian. The Indian West and the Negro South, musically inactive, furnish the necessary folk-song element for the cultured East. Such a division of labor is a typical precedent to the formation of every great national idiom. Europeans are keenly aware of the existence of a highly original American dialect, and, from Dvorak on, they have been trying their hand at it. The quantity of pseudo-American music produced by Europeans exceeds by far the Stravinskian output of occasional Americans.

The birthplace of American music must be conceded in all fairness to the New England states. Whatever musical history this country has, was made in Boston. The early development was necessarily colonial but with Germany rather than England as the mother country. Aboriginal elements (Indian and Negro) do not make their appearance before the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Edward MacDowell is usually credited with the introduction of the Indo-American element into American music. A musician of European frame of mind, he wrote according to the precepts of Liszt and Grieg; yet, at least in all essentials, he was an American composer. In the *Woodland Sketches* and *New England Idyls* he is the cultured prophet of an American style. It is more likely, however, that such stubborn souls as the late Henry F. Gilbert, ill-equipped as he was with European technic, were the real pioneers. "My aim is to write

some American music," he said repeatedly. He did write some primitive music of strange earthy power. The Germans call him "Ur-Amerikaner," an appellation suggested doubtless by his picturesque appearance, no less than by his music. Henry Gilbert was of pure New England stock, lived a life of hardship and privation, pursued his purpose with the dogged determination of a backwoodsman. He whittled his tunes out of the raw material of his immediate surroundings; a trip to Paris, undertaken with the sole intention of hearing Charpentier's *Louise*, then the last word in modernity, brought him elementary knowledge of musical theory. With these scanty means he set to work, using musical ideas irrespective of their origin, provided their national character was unmistakable. He treated Stephen Foster's songs as folk-lore, and was eminently right in so doing; for after all, so-called folk-tunes are themselves composed by definite though anonymous individuals.

The history and character of New England have shared equally in program designs of many of her composers. Puritan hymns impart the atmosphere of early colonial days, and the drum of the Indian gives local color. (There is a certain similarity—a coincidence, no doubt—between Indian calls and the "snaps" of the bag-pipes, with the same characteristic interval of a major or minor third at the base of their melodic structure. The concomitant transfer of accent brings it into relation with early syncopation. The same technical formula may thus apply to the chief melodic and rhythmical sources of early American music.) It is mainly out of such material, tempered by a liberal application of symphonic working-out, that Edgar Stillman Kelley composed his *New England Symphony*. Henry Hadley's *North, East, South, and West* is more direct in its descriptive grandeur. But neither gives more than lip-service to the country of his ancestors. The picture changes when we turn to the *Pilgrim Symphony* of Paul Hastings Allen. Awarded the Paderewski prize in 1908, it is perhaps the nearest approach to a "synthetic style." The Indian, Negro, and British elements are therein sublimated into something that is obviously American. Like Henry Gilbert, Paul Allen set out to write American music for American consumption, but he approached his task with the

perfect technic of a European craftsman. He is indeed half-European in spite of the purity of his genealogy. He lived much abroad, and many of his works are written in the best Italian manner. But the rest are intensely American. . . One of the queerest incidents in the history of American music is the fact that Paul Allen's opera, *The Last of the Mohicans*, was written to an Italian text, produced abroad, and has never been heard in the United States.

The two most eminent New Englanders, G. W. Chadwick and Arthur Foote, have upheld New England's fame as a musical center without furthering the advance of a national idiom. There are few pages of purely American music in their voluminous works. The case of Frederick Converse, a New Englander to the bone, is more interesting; his national tendencies are clearer. His latest work, *Flivver Ten Million*, represents an attempt to create a humorous epic of the country. He has caught a variety of moods, a typical panoramic change; the underlying humor only sharpens the contours. Edward Burlingame Hill tackles the problem of American music from yet another angle: his tone-pictures, such as *Lilacs*, reflect a universal sentiment in a man for whom lilacs are the symbol of home, and, by enlargement, of country. A few American notes sound unmistakably through an idiom which is otherwise international. It is interesting to note that Hill is perhaps the only New Englander to intrude on the New York field by composing "serious jazz."

Of New England still are those non-Puritans who employ the modern idiom of expression. Carl Ruggles is undoubtedly a modernist. But his seismic impulses have not restrained him from depicting his country's stern landscapes. He, too, is enraptured by lilacs (the second movement of *Men and Mountains*), though his lilacs be entangled in Schönbergian formulas, with all their prohibitive don'ts. There are powerful strings in unison for striding men, and bulky discords for marching mountains. Yet the impression of unity prevails, as if a Plymouth Rock were braced against Carl Ruggles' music to keep it from dispersing.

Among New England musicians an extreme revolutionary is Charles Ives, a Connecticut Yankee, a redoubtable master-builder of symphonic Gog-and-Magogs. In his orchestral scores (such

as the *Fourth Symphony*), he introduces synchronized rhythms which call for the complete independence of various instrumental groups. Noiseless metronomes ticking the time for each particular section would be perhaps the best solution of the problem he sets the conductor. At certain points he directs solo-instruments to continue a recurring figure *ad libitum*, until the forces are once more gathered together. He also knows romantic moods when, to put it lyrically, the spirit of New England claims him. His *Three Places in New England*, scored for chamber orchestra, is a masterful and charming work. The second movement (*Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut*) is particularly interesting to study; it includes a variety of national airs, mostly of British origin, submitted to a highly ingenious treatment, and a contrapuntal development in various intervals that is at once simple and novel.

The New England composers considered so far, no matter how widely separated their musical beliefs, have had certain traits in common—as in the use of Indo-American themes, and, on the whole, an imperviousness to jazz. But we are somewhat at a loss as to the category in which Roger Sessions may be safely placed. He was born in Brooklyn but his family tree fixes him firmly in New England. His music, aside from the early *Black Maskers*, contains formal elements that suggest pro-Stravinskian tendencies. Roger Sessions himself declares that he does not care to write so-called American music, or any music along national lines; searching through the pages of his remarkable *Symphony* we find no testimony to the contrary. Sessions is a strong individual composer. If he does not go to American music, it may move somewhat in his direction, attracted by the granite-like solidity of his works. In this extremely interesting case we shall have to await further development.

To most European observers the question of the supremacy of the two centers of American music seems to afford a ready solution. American music is jazz and New York is of course the capital of jazz. To an American the problem of American style appears less simple. It will not be solved until the conflicting currents are amalgamated or one completely dominates the other.