

AMERICAN COMPOSERS. VI

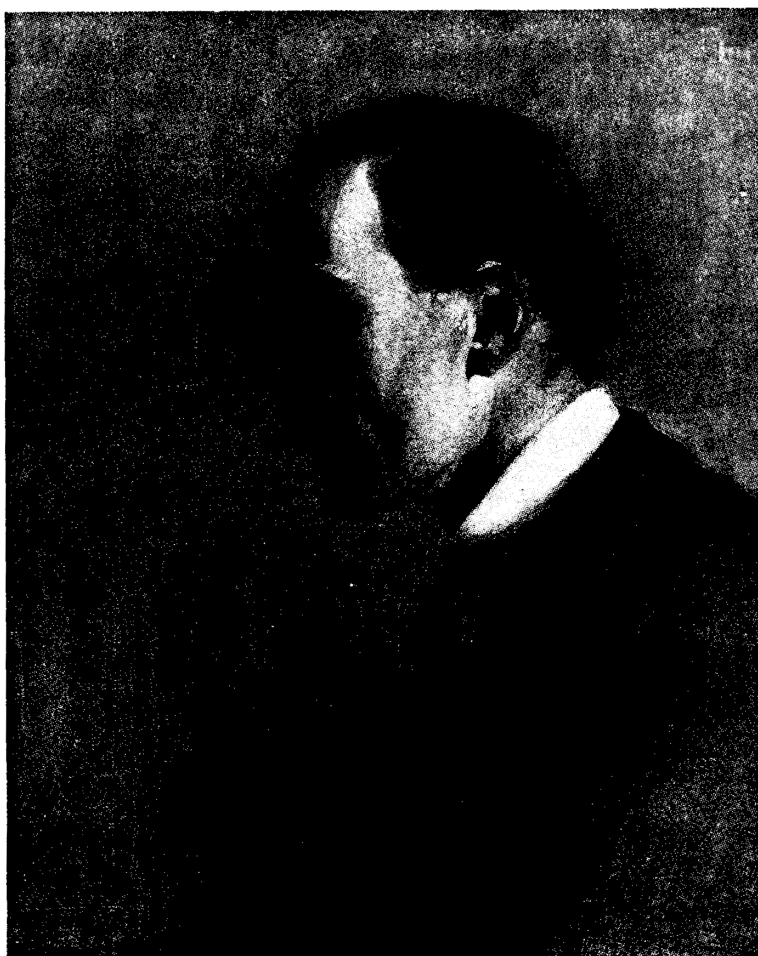
John Alden Carpenter

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THE career of John Alden Carpenter presents one of those curious contradictions so thoroughly characteristic of Americans. It puts at naught all precedent, all those arbitrary rules and principles we are so wont to lay down. By every ordinary standard, Carpenter should have been a talented amateur, one who dabbles in the arts in gentlemanly fashion, but to whom real achievement as a creative artist is impossible. Then too, a man with his aristocratic background seems logically to belong among the conservatives, if not with the reactionaries, politely experimenting, perhaps, but rarely venturing into the realm of new and strange tonal combinations. Yet just because the combination of circumstances seems inexplicable, it is probably this very contrast of influences and interests that has produced one of the most important and finely sensitive of our contemporary composers.

There is nothing that Carpenter resents so violently as being called a business-man-composer, and his resentment is justified. It is true that he is a business man and that he is a composer, yet it is superficial journalism to make a "story" of the two in combination. He is vice-president of George B. Carpenter & Company, Chicago merchants in mill, railway and vessel supplies—a family business inherited from his father. That is one phase of his life. On the other side he is a musician, trained by John K. Paine at Harvard, Bernard Ziehn in Chicago (with a few "prima donna" lessons from Edward Elgar in between), and a constant student of all that is old and new in musical literature.

From his business he derives his livelihood, and thus he frees himself from the necessity of teaching theory, or piano, of concertizing, of writing *about* music, or of doing any of those drudgerous things that make a business of art. When he turns



JOHN ALDEN CARPENTER
A portrait by
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to music he can be a composer and nothing else. He need not write for the market-place, he may compose what he wishes, in any form he elects, and he need not care whether it is ever performed or not. And his music is important chiefly because he has been under no necessity of compromise.

It is of course a question whether the very regularity of his existence may not prove a limitation. A man who is abnormal in no direction, who is at all times seemingly poised, bred and reared in an aristocratic, polished environment, may be capable of producing art works which are thoroughly charming, but he is rarely capable of those ecstatic outbursts that result from a more volatile temperament.

The ultimate decision as to the "greatness" of any musical work rests with future generations alone, and it is hazardous to predict the verdict of our successors. It is impossible to state whether Carpenter has really overcome the limitations that his temperament and environment have imposed upon him, whether his fine sensitiveness will allow him those emotional heights which make music compelling. It is enough that he gives us music that is genuine, unartificial, and generally his own.



Walter Damrosch once remarked that Carpenter is among the most American of our composers, because he depicts the life of our cities in *Skyscrapers*, and the exaggerated humor of the comic strip in *Krazy Kat*. I agree that Carpenter is American in his music, but for more subtle reasons. He is American principally because he has absorbed the influences to which he has subjected himself and has digested them so that they become something which is unmistakably his. He has the American viewpoint, he is of an authentic American type—authentic in spite of its unfortunate rarity—and when he is genuinely creative, as he usually is, his music is truly a native expression, in spite of its obvious derivations. It is true that he uses jazz patterns, Negro songs occasionally, but that alone can never make any composer American. It is the manner of their use that stamps them as genuine or spurious. It would be too much to ex-

pect a man of Carpenter's heritage to reek of the dance hall, to write the jazz of Broadway that George Gershwin can produce, yet is it any the less American to present the effect that jazz can exert on one who has exposed himself to Broadway, even though he is not himself one of its native sons?

Obviously the answer to such a question depends on the subjectivity of the influence. If Carpenter had self-consciously commanded himself to adopt the shifting accents and other formulae of jazz, the result would have been wholly objective, and little more than an interesting exercise in composition. Most of us who have been brought up in America react quite definitely to our own light music, we are helpless against its physical urge. Carpenter is as human as any of us, and his apparent repressions never prevent his being honest, even though he cannot be bawdy. His jazz may be more polite than that of Ted Lewis, it may show a certain restraint, but I doubt if it is any the less American.

There are some who feel that Carpenter is not American because he is subjective, because he meditates and indulges in musical philosophy. Carpenter feels the moods of nature, and he has the gift of interpreting those moods subtly. The rank and file of Americans are reputed to think of the out-of-doors in objective terms—golf, tennis, baseball games and automobile rides. This is a bit unfair to Americans. There are times when it seems that most of us have no resources within us, that we must take all of our pleasures by external methods, yet there are Americans, if only a few, who really think enough to be dissatisfied with themselves, to know their limitations, and to be sensitive to hidden beauties. Of such, Carpenter's songs are a poignant expression, and while the best of them may be for the few rather than for the many, are they the less American for being finely wrought, persuasive rather than compelling?



Some might term Carpenter a conservative-modernist, a term as meaningless as it is odious, for it suggests a timid compromise which goes neither forward nor backward— a hesitation between the old and the new which results only in indecision.

Carpenter is no reactionary; compared with Chadwick, Foote, and his older contemporaries he is a radical, yet viewed from the standpoint of the advance guard, he is always a few paces behind the extremist.

It is often remarked that the legitimate use of modernism, meaning the employment of combinations that were yesterday considered discordant, is to portray scenes and emotions which are in themselves dissonant. Richard Strauss, in *Elektra*, according to this principle, was justified in any noise he wished to produce. Schönberg in his piano pieces was unwarranted in his use of close intervals, because these works were absolute music, and illustrated no such loathsome program.

Such an opinion may be argued consistently, even though it would prevent all musical progress were it used as a principle to guide young composers. The weakest point in this theory is its absolute objectivity. New tonal combinations, strange progressions, are used entirely for purposes of illustration, to describe something, either concrete or abstract. There is nothing of the pioneer spirit, the listening for new sounds that may mean beauty to the ears of tomorrow, no looking for the development of the art of music for its own sake, to insure its preservation.

This discussion has a definite bearing on the case of John Alden Carpenter, for it provokes the question of whether he has utilized cacophony in *Skyscrapers* merely to depict the din of rivets or whether his music for the ballet is a natural step in his own development as a composer. The answer obviously depends on what he composes in the future; yet the evolutionary progress of his style from the *Violin Sonata* of 1911 to the *Skyscrapers* of 1923-4 and the *String Quartet* of 1927 is illuminating.

The *Sonata* commands attention for several reasons. It is Franckian in spirit, but it is not César Franck. In the first movement it adds to the Belgian's contemplativeness a robust vigor which sweeps it along to its close. It is not the John Alden Carpenter of later works, but it shows that he already has the rare gift of avoiding the obvious without being unnatural or seemingly studied. The second movement is marred by a theme in the middle section which is tuneful rather than melodic, but

atonement comes in the third, where he bases an imaginative melodic meditation on an extremely simple harmonic progression—resolving a ninth chord on the subdominant to the tonic triad of F minor. To do much with little requires skilled craftsmanship. The finale is exuberant and youthful.

This sonata stamps its composer as one who is not afraid of showing influences, yet who is not content to be an imitator. It shows him also as something of a romanticist, a label that is anathema to many a modernist. Yet in the true meaning of the term every modernist shows romantic tendencies, in spite of his leanings toward realism. Romanticism was originally a reaching out beyond strict patterns, a desire to make the form fit the idea rather than to adapt the idea to the limits of the form. Romanticism may have brought sentiment into the picture, but it was not based on sentimentality. The reaction of the modernists is not so much against pure romanticism as it is against a sentimentalism which often sinks to mawkishness.



Soon after the sonata Carpenter turned to program music, and for orchestra he wrote the score that first brought him to the attention of music lovers generally—*Adventures in a Perambulator*. Within its own prescribed limits this suite accomplishes exactly what it was intended to do, it furnishes a bit of whimsy and musical description that would evoke chuckles rather than laughter. It is by no means a work in the grand manner, but then, infants do not generally think in the grand manner, any more than Carpenter does when he conceives his music. But it is all exquisite fun, accomplished with simple means, vividly.

After the suite Carpenter wrote his *Concertino* for piano and orchestra, and again he did not reach out for lofty heights, but contented himself with what he termed an intimate conversation between two friends—the piano and the orchestra.

The important fact about the *Concertino* is not that it is charming, whimsically imaginative. The *Perambulator* suite was all of that. The *Concertino* marks a definite advance in

Carpenter's growth, it shows him with a firmer grip on his tools, a more certain touch in his handling of them. It demonstrates also that he has exposed himself to all that has been taking place around him, and that he has the ability to absorb and to give back in his own fashion what he has taken in.

There are some shifting accents which betoken the jazz rhythm of later works—quadruple figures imposed on a triple pattern, and vice versa. Also a Spanish flavor present in his future writings, an influence which the composer claims is entirely subconscious, but which was nevertheless appropriate in his score for *The Birthday of the Infanta*, his first experiment with the ballet. Here he was able to present dexterously the colorful scenes of the action—the dance of the dwarf, jugglers, gypsy dancers, the mock bull fight—even though he may not have been emotionally capable of the tragic heights demanded by Pedro's death.



In spite of its limitations, *The Birthday of the Infanta* forms a logical connection between the Carpenter of the *Violin Sonata* and the *Concertino*, and the composer of *Krazy Kat* and *Skyscrapers*. For if jazz had made its first appearance in *Krazy Kat*, and dissonance, or whatever we choose to term so-called modernisms, had appeared in *Skyscrapers* as an abrupt innovation on the part of the composer, he could be marked immediately as one who consciously goes afield to find something alien to his own nature for the solution of specific problems.

It is in *Krazy Kat* that Carpenter shows most clearly his subtlety. Superficially the Herriman cartoons are nothing but slapstick humor—Ignatz Mouse hurling bricks at the head of Krazy Kat, and the spectator, or reader, varying the intensity of his guffaws according to the force of the blow. But Krazy is an intensely human figure, his weaknesses and his vanity are common to us all, and the brutal derision of Ignatz Mouse is life bringing us to earth from our dreams.

Carpenter has sharpened the elemental nature of these conflicting passions, and he has intensified the fundamental Ameri-

canism of exaggeration in symbolism. Jazz rhythms, fox-trots, quasi-Broadway tunes, and even the Spanish atmosphere of Krazy's dance, are highly appropriate, but it is a more intangible quality that gives this music its authentic American quality.

To recite the program of *Skyscrapers*, and then to tell that its music brings the noise of rivets, the monotony of labor, and the fever of relaxation, would indicate that the composer has turned to obvious devices in an attempt to write music of today. The work could easily have been altogether objective, if nothing beyond vivid description had been attempted.

The condensed scenario, as printed in the published score, affords a description of the action:—

"*Skyscrapers* is a ballet which seeks to reflect some of the many rhythmic movements and sounds of modern American life. It has no story, in the usually accepted sense, but proceeds on the simple fact that American life reduces itself to violent alternations of work and play, each with its own peculiar and distinctive character. The action of the ballet is merely a series of moving decorations reflecting some of the obvious external features of this life."

There is nothing strikingly novel in all of this—it presents a form of symbolism suggested to a number of artists by the machine age. There was accordingly every opportunity for Carpenter to be thoroughly commonplace; it is not difficult for even an experienced composer to write music that is noisy, reflective of city streets and amusement parks. But Carpenter has been finely restrained, he goes the limit only at climactic moments, and thus saves for himself the effectiveness of contrasts. He is episodic at times, as he achieves the violent shiftings of mood. But all this is on the surface, obvious to the most casual listener. What is deeper is the underlying irony and human pity for the seeming futility of it all. He has employed, too, a means which to many contemporary composers is either a lost or a shunned art—the development of his material. Ideas do not crowd upon each other in such rapid succession that they lack room to show their full contours, to attain their natural growth.

Yes, it can safely be said that the Carpenter of *Skyscrapers* is more mature than the man who wrote the *Concertino* and *The*

Birthday of the Infanta. The Carpenter subject now becomes a matter of the future. Since *Skyscrapers* he has written only one major work—a string quartet which was performed at the Library of Congress Festival in 1928. Here is absolute music in which the composer uses the complex rhythms he had formerly employed for programs. There is, too, the charm and whimsicality of the *Perambulator* suite. And uncompromising severity at times.



It is as a song composer that Carpenter shows his Gallic tendencies most clearly, for in this field the refinement and aristocratic elegance of his style amount almost to preciousness. His songs have tints rather than solid colors, and they show a strong kinship to Debussy, as well as the lesser impressionists. Yet it is highly significant to learn that *The Green River*, with its whole-tone progressions and its apparent search for overtones was composed in 1909, when its composer had not heard one note of Debussy's music.

Carpenter is no radical, no revolutionary leader. His temperament would never allow him to be that. He belongs with those who are conservatives at heart, but who must nevertheless progress. He is not afraid of the new or of the startling, but he cannot bring himself to sensationalism for the mere purpose of being original. He must digest new ideas thoroughly before they issue from his mind as a valid expression.

All of this may prove his weakness, just as the very balance and poise of his bearing may prevent his ever reaching the topmost heights. He presents, however, a striking example of one whose gifts might have won him a facile success in accepted channels, but who has had his share of courage in contributing something that definitely makes for progress in American music.