

OUR GREAT NEED: AN AMERICAN GENIUS

We Shall Not Have an Individual National Music Until a World-Master like Wagner Rises from Among Us and Creates for Us an Ideal—European Influence Would Be Negligible if Our Creative Artists Were All-Compelling in Mastery

By ISRAEL AMTER

[Third Article]

IT cannot be assumed that selfish reasons alone have fostered the movement to have American musical students pursue their studies in America—i. e., a desire to retain in America the money that otherwise must be spent abroad. Nor patriotic reasons, suggesting that American students should be content with the best training that America affords. These reasons would be totally invalid and absolutely disregarded by the individual students.

No, it is something higher, something ethnological, something esthetic, something ideal. Not the desire to keep ourselves free and untouched by foreign influences in the belief that what is American is, at least for Americans, superior, but the wish that what we do may be as American as possible, as suggestive of our Western aspirations and conception of life, as is within the reach of man to attain. The aim is that what we do and think may be individualistic—not a composite of Old World culture and New World evolution, but New World culture as derived from all that the past has produced and moulded into an entity entirely unparalleled in the history of man. We want to be completely ourselves.

Is there not distinct German music, decidedly characteristic Italian music, music peculiarly French and Hungarian, Russian and Norwegian (at least in Grieg, although the points of resemblance between him, the Scandinavian, and Puccini, the Italian, are numerous)? Then why not American music?

Foreign Influence on Performers

Our performers, even if they study in America, will for a long time to come be dependent upon foreign influence in their interpretations. Most of the compositions are foreign, and those performers who would forget themselves as much as possible, in the notion that the composition was not created for them, but it is their office to interpret the composition, will have to sink themselves into exotic thought and in their performances try to suggest the current of conception and emotion felt by the foreign composer. True, the master performer will always insist on his own conception of what the composer intended, the performance as a consequence being a blending of the composer and performer.

Then, again, as long as our opera going public intends to remain so shallow as to be content to listen to opera in a tongue that it either does not understand at all or so imperfectly as merely to grasp—and vaguely at that—the content and nothing of the beauty of language and thought the opera will be given in the original language. And that again puts part of our musicians completely under foreign influence.

Our composer at least should be left uncontaminated is the cry. They, the creators of American music, must not be exposed to anything that will detract from their individuality. A short time ago there appeared the statement of an American musician to the effect that as the youthful years are the most impressionable those who during that time study abroad are bound to come back inoculated with foreign ideas and methods. He declared that his own life bears out his contention. It would seem, however, that for our composer to remain here completely—isolated from the rest of the thinking world—would mean to subject him to the only influence at all characteristic in America as far as music is concerned, and at that one that racially and esthetically, he as an individualist should combat and refute—viz., ragtime. Certainly nothing can be more baneful on his development than this ragtime, despite its syncopated rhythm, alluring to the feet of our one-

stepping, twosteping and downward-stepping dance-mad hordes. And even Dvorak to the contrary.

Why have our serious composers not produced genuine, undefiled American music? Why is it that in spite of 5,000 miles separating us from European thought, in spite of our nation's being composed of other constituents, in spite of our living under quite different physical conditions, in spite of our institutions being different from Old World institutions, in spite of our ideals being distinct, we have not evolved anything powerfully American? Probably for no other reason than that what has been American in music has lacked force, personality, and has yielded to the stronger influence of united Europe. And is that at all strange?

As already stated in the course of these articles, art is not the product of a day. It is the quintessence of a long period of development in a definite direction. It is the soul of tendency. It is the force giving form to outer conditions. It is the culminating power of a nation's ideals.

What is the American nation? Up to the present it has been a continually varying mass. It is a restless composite of material strugglers, who now seek a formula for their struggles and clamor for the artist to proclaim it. Shall the mere desire give birth to him? Walt Whitman is the only artist that America can claim as American—soul and spirit, mind and body. All our other writers have been bastard. Our painters are pure reflections of Europe. Were our artists masters, all-compelling geniuses, whose personality dominated everything, European thought and influence would be negligible.

Let us look at Europe. The states of Europe are in nearly the same proximity as our American states—certainly far nearer to each other than the western and eastern coasts of the United States. Great Britain is not at a great distance from Germany and France. Yet she and America are practically in the same position—no world-challenging musical genius. Both of them appreciating music, revelling in it, yet not fertile in musical thought. Is it that Anglo-Saxon thought is not musical? (It must be remembered that a good portion of our leading musicians has up to the present been of British origin.)

Are the barriers between the nations of Europe so strong? Do frontiers represent a complete cleavage of thought? Frontiers are fantastic lines of separation—nothing more. The transition from one state to the other is so gradual, so imperceptible that for political reasons it must be emphasized by distinct institutions and forms. The differences of nationality in Europe arise from racial and geological conditions. The railway and steamship are overcoming these barriers so formidably that we now know of the influence of Russian music in the West (an instance is to be found in a very recent American work). And certainly this is not because Western composers have studied in Russia.

Let us but regard the latest phenomenon in music—the Futurists. Do they not demonstrate that nations (in music) are disappearing, outline, form and content being practically given, with a slight addendum on the part of the composer? I say slight addendum, because that is all that distinguishes the various nationalities among them. A certain plane of thought has been arrived at among them which they all understand—the social spirit dominant. Where now is the wild anarchist, the destructive iconoclast, the devastating breaker-down and sweeper-away of all that is considered good, proper and true, that will take the tools that all musical evolution has brought him, adding thereto his own and clarion forth into the world a new song of life?

Beethoven, living under the régime of Italian music, remained Beethoven; Mozart became part Italian. Beethoven's

genius withstood all the seductive influences that Italian opera radiated; Mozart fell prey to them.

Birth of Our Own Music

And yet we, who have produced no genius in music, are to emancipate ourselves from these influences—perhaps by the distance! It is impossible. The steamship will bring fresh supplies day by day. We who recognize that art is not the product of a single day still stretch forth a begging hand, seeking aid. We whose ears still drink in melody will hearken to new strains. We whose minds crave new ideals will heed a new voice. When the American genius has arrived American music will have registered its birth.

Are conditions in America such, firstly, that all talents in this direction are discovered? (By talents I mean not our especially gifted young men and women, but the faculty of music resident in every person.) Secondly, are they cultivated, supported and encouraged? For our present argument it is quite immaterial whether they grow up into American artists or not—they are merely to develop.

Both of these questions must be answered in the negative. This statement must be taken relatively. To be more explicit, let me designate that which seeks out, fosters and propagates every artistic trait as "atmosphere." Does, then, atmosphere congenial to this work exist in America?

The word "atmosphere" is so little understood, so mistaken for but one of its elements that a definition ought to be attempted. And yet it is so comprehensive that it could only be deduced from a complete analysis of conditions in places where this atmosphere exists. Conditions in Germany (i. e., normal conditions) are not conducive to the artist spirit.

It has not been a mere matter of chance that Germany has produced such world-wide geniuses. (This Germany is not to be understood as the present political unit Germany, but that larger confederation of the German-speaking people in Central Europe, which, therefore, includes Austria and part of Switzerland.) It is not a mere matter of chance that as a result of her geniuses hosts of foreign disciples of the art have pilgrimed to that font of melody. It is not a mere matter of chance that the great masters and teachers of the art have made the Teutonic realm the place of their activity. It is not a mere matter of chance that great interpreters

have made it their abode. It is not a mere matter of chance that every composer and performer seeks final judgment of his works in Germany.

It is because the German people are one of the most musical people in the world and have added thereto a sense of system and method that spells to-day technic—technic, the means of a more amplified expression of thought. To state that they are the most musical people in the world would cause endless dispute and lead us to neglect the primary argument at this point. The phenomena mentioned in the preceding paragraph are so convincing that no question can be raised. German sense of system, thoroughness, breadth of idea have all placed new implements at the disposal of the composer and produced that gigantic form of composition that is exclusively German.

Germany takes her art seriously. Every German, whether he understands or occupies himself with art or not, knows that it is one of the nation's great assets. And the artists are counted among the great men.

This is "atmosphere," not in its supreme, but highly superior form. The student gives impetus and receives impetus not from a small coterie of similarly employed individuals, but from a nation. He lives and works among a people that can respond, that regards his calling as an exceptional one, that honors him for it, that thinks of its musicians as among its greatest sons. This is the "atmosphere" that surrounds the novice. This is that something which is not as intangible as we are made to believe. It is a something that spurs on to never ceasing effort.

America is, unfortunately, too far away to grasp these influences keenly. And the distances in America, though bridged over by railroad and telegraph, are too great to allow a nation-wide impulse and "atmosphere" to be felt. Furthermore, the blight of the nineteenth century weighs on her. Can she, not emancipate herself, but awaken to her artistic conceptions? She can only if a genius like Wagner appears, whose personality is evidently strong, whose conception of life is not taken from the clouds, but from living men, and is so engrossing, so overpowering, so colossal that we, too, will bow before him and perceive in him a creator not of dollars, but of ideals—a hero! Only then will the world take something from us. Till then we must imbibe at the font—imbibe till our own personalities grow large and strong, and produce the new ideal.

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