

WALT WHITMAN'S VISION OF AMERICA SINGING

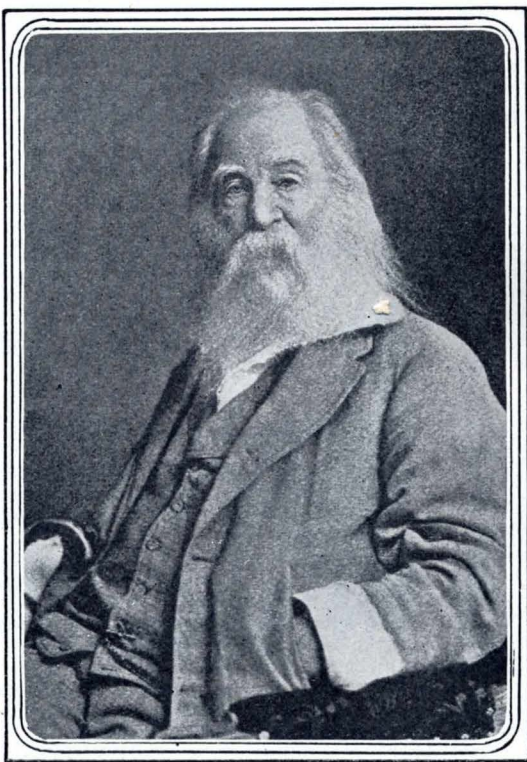
The Poet as Prophet of His Country's Future Greatness in the Art of Music—His Call for "A Higher Strain Than Any Yet"—"New Rhythmus" Needed to Convey America's Mighty Message

By AUBERTINE WOODWARD MOORE

MORE than half a century before Mr. Freund was in the high tide of his splendid campaign in behalf of American music the glorious future of this music was foretold by Walt Whitman. This clear-visioned bard and seer, whom a noted English critic has styled "the only absolutely first-rate authentic product of American literature," cherished an abiding faith in the future magnificent intellectual and spiritual output of his beloved, resourceful native land.

To musicians his confidence in the worth of the music America would one day produce is peculiarly interesting. Amid the larger conditions, larger opportunities, of this New World, there must inevitably appear, he was convinced, persons capable of formulating in musical speech, as well as in words, out of "the peerless grandeur of the modern" the great message of the new Need, the new Hope, clamoring for utterance. This coming music, he believed, would be the noblest the world had ever known, and it would arise in the Middle West, where, according to his "Democratic Vistas," "in a few years the dominion heart of America will be." Elsewhere he wonders "if the people of this continental inland West know how much of first-class art they have in these prairies—how original and all their own." Constant reference to this abiding faith of his may be found throughout his writings—prose and verse—and he spoke of it frequently to his friends. To the writer of this sketch he expressed himself very fully on the subject, and with an ardent enthusiasm that could not fail to awaken a response in the breast of a sympathetic listener.

With prophetic vision he looked ahead, through long, boundless vistas, and all that the mind's eye saw and the mind's ear heard was to him absolute Truth. He "heard America singing," heard the "varied carols" of mechanics and outdoor laborers, the "delicious singing" of the mother, or young wife or maiden at work, each singing what belonged to him or her and to none else, "singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs." He sang of "poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come! a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known," and told of seeing "the mother with her equal brood," the "varied chain of different States, yet one identity only," in her own musicians, singers, artists, unborn yet, but certain."



Walt Whitman

In his "Song of the Exposition," foretelling larger calm halls to house the products of nature, art and science, he declares that "one stately house shall be the music house," and uplifts his voice for "prouder songs, with stronger themes" and "vaster than all the old." His "Song of the Redwood Tree," which he calls "a California song, a prophecy and indirection, a thought impalpable to breathe as air," tells how as he listened to the "murmuring, fateful, giant voice of a mighty dying tree in the redwood forest dense," with the chorus of wood spirits that "came from their haunts of a thousand years to join the refrain," he saw "the genius of the modern, child of the real and ideal clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true American, heir of the past so grand to build a grander future."

In this grander future music was to play a very big rôle. "By Blue Ontario's Shore" there accosted him "a Phantom, gigantic, superb," bidding him "chant the poem that comes from the soul of America," the "carol of victory," the "song of the throes of Democracy." Inner content equally profound, Whitman demands for music, and he means both musicians and poets when he calls for "bards to corroborate" this "land of lands," bards "for the great idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals." Again he says: "He masters whose spirit masters; in the need of songs, philosophy, an appropriate native grand opera, shipcraft, any craft, he or she is greatest who contributes the greatest original practical example."

Listening alert, he declares in his "Mystic Trumpeter," he caught the notes



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of "some strange musician hovering unseen in the air" and "vibrating capricious tunes, now pouring, whirling like a tempest round him; now low, subdued; now in the distance lost." He bids the bodiless one draw near, crying: "Haply in thee resounds some dead composer, haply thy pensive life was filled with aspirations high, unformed ideals." Feeling that he himself was the instrument on which the trumpeter played, he calls for "a higher strain than any yet," calls for "hymns to the universal God from universal man—all joy." With these hymns "a reborn race appears—a perfect world. War, sorrow, suffering gone—the rank earth purged—nothing but joy left."

Treasures of All Lands Ours

It is often said that a foundation of legendary lore and folk-music is essential to the creation of characteristic literature of music. Walt Whitman reminds us that the treasures of all lands are ours by right. He bids "the ship of Democracy" sail its best, for its freight is of value. "Earth's resumé entire floats on thy keel, O ship," he exclaims, "is steadied by thy spars, with thee Time voyages in trust." The immortal bards of the past, he tells us, have done their work and passed to other spheres, "a work remains, the work of surpassing all they have done. As America has so vast a message for the world, a message of living import, our bards will insensibly find new forms suited to it. Ages, precedents, have long been accumulating undirected materials," he says; "America brings builders, and brings its own styles."

Believing firmly in the man and the woman behind the art, he asserts unhesitatingly: "Produce great persons, the rest follows." He longs to have us profit by all that has gone before us. "After all," he cries, "not to create only, or found only, but to bring perhaps from afar what is already founded, to give it our own identity, average, limitless, free, to fill the torpid bulk with vital religious fire, to obey as well as command, to follow more than to lead, these are the lessons of our New World; while how little the New, after all, how much the Old, Old World." Of one thing he was assured—however much we may hold to all that is valuable in the past, a wholly "new rhythmus" is needed to fit the mighty utterances from the soul of America.

Nature's Inspiration

A rich inspiration, he considered, was afforded our bards by our wonderful majestic Nature. There were strong influences, he felt, in the "proud music of the storm, blast that careers so free, whistling across the prairies, strong hum of the forest tree-tops—wind of the mountains, personified dim shapes—

hidden orchestras, serenades of phantoms with instruments alert, blending with Nature's rhythmus all the tongues of nations; chords left as by vast composers—choruses, undertone of rivers, roar of pouring cataracts, trooping tumultuous" and seizing the comprehending listener. All the voices of Nature were to him inspiring, infinitely varied as they are—the notes of many birds, the rushing of mighty wings, the loud swelling, perpetual hum of insects, the whistling winds, the music of the large, imperious waves, and countless sounds, too many to enumerate.

Columbus, in Whitman's wonderful "Prayer of Columbus," heard "anthems in new tongues" saluting him as he approached the shores of the New World. In these anthems Walt Whitman himself believed devoutly, as he has made clear to us: Toward the end of his life, in his "Backward Glances," he wrote: "My conviction is just as strong to-day as ever than the crowning growth of the United States is to be spiritual and heroic." Again, in the same writing, are found the words: "No land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing a race of singers and poets differing from all others, and rigidly their own, as the land and people and circumstances of our United States need such singers and poets to-day, and for the future." He ends with the oft reiterated statement: "The strongest and sweetest songs yet remain to be sung."

Applause for Chattanooga Violinist

CHATTANOOGA, TENN., May 31.—The Chattanooga Music Club entertained on May 18 with a concert given by Edith Ham, violinist, assisted by Malcolm Maynier, pianist. Miss Ham is a Chattanooga girl who has spent many years abroad studying under Sevcik and Auer. Her sound technique was especially noticeable in the G Minor Concerto of Bruch and her lighter numbers were played in a highly pleasing manner. She received an ovation and gave several encores. Mr. Maynier played several numbers by Grieg and Chopin artistically and also responded to several encores.

Unique Musical Program for Masons

AUSTIN, TEX., June 2.—Bertram T. Wheatley, organist at the Scottish Rite Cathedral of this city, arranged a unique musical program for use in Masonic work. Contrary to custom this program was not hastily thrown together but carefully designed to bring out certain features of the ceremonies. The music for the seventeenth degree was a special organ composition composed by Mr. Wheatley. The other numbers were from the works of the great masters.

MYRTLE ELVYN



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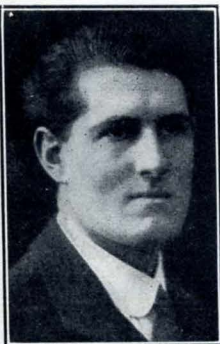
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