

FROM COMIC OPERA TO "HIGHWAYMAN" CANTATA, ADVANCE OF DEEMS TAYLOR

Upward Step Leads Young American Composer from "The Echo," of Broadway, to Serious Works for the Concert Halls—Reinald Werrenrath an Ardent Propagandist for the Music of His College Mate—Developing of Indian Themes Absurd, Says Mr. Taylor—This Musician as Editor and Humorist

"THE trouble with young composers is that they try to be original. One might just as well try to be eight feet tall!" I do not know if anyone has said this in just this way before; if so, it goes to prove once more how little that is new can be said in this century when nineteen hundred years have already rolled round. In any case it is a very pertinent remark and coming from the lips of a young composer, who has "made good" and of whom much may be expected in the future, it points an attitude which young America in all the arts might do well to accept.

Deems Taylor is the author of this statement. He made it to me one day last week sitting at lunch; and he delivered it without any desire to be iconoclastic, theatric or sensational. It is his very earnest opinion. Mr. Taylor is a composer whose work has had success; he is looked to already as one of the men who will carry American music far toward the goal of its ultimate international recognition as a distinct achievement. There is no composer of serious music—and it is serious music that he is writing these days—whose evolution has been along his lines. From comic opera to the cantata, "The Highwayman," a setting of Alfred Noyes's fine ballad, is a long road. Yet Mr. Taylor has traversed it in less than ten years.

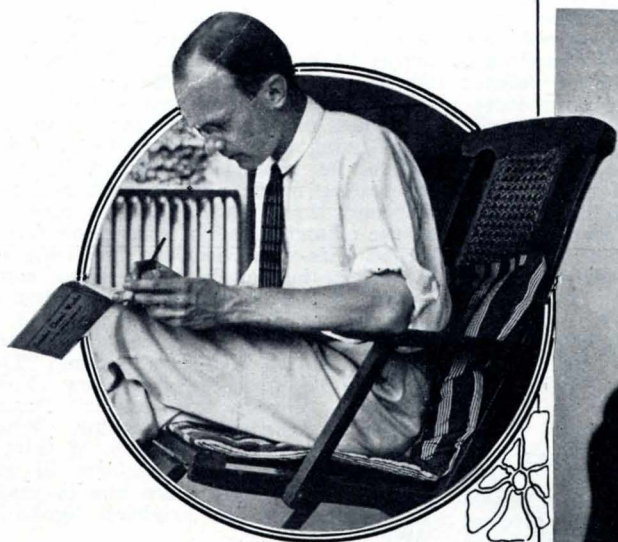
Began Composing at Ten

"When did I begin? Let's see. When I was ten I wrote a piece for piano and violin. I really would have written it for the piano alone, but I couldn't play well enough to play all of it on the piano, so I whistled the melody, wrote that for the violin and set the accompaniment on the piano. It was a waltz—in six-eighth time I wrote it, too—but waltz was too commonplace a title, so I called it *Walzer!* I don't know if I have it yet, but I can remember the opening." Here Mr. Taylor took a pencil from his pocket and on the back of the menu-card wrote out five or six measures of his *Walzer*, Op. 1, No. 1. It is a simple melody in D Major, with a tonic and dominant accompaniment, correct enough and very German in character. It is just the kind of thing that one would expect of an "aged ten" beginner. Composers who write music like this to begin with generally work up to real original composition later. It is those who begin with insincere, complex jumbles when they are tyros whose future can hardly be considered hopeful. For what foundations have they on which to erect their structures?

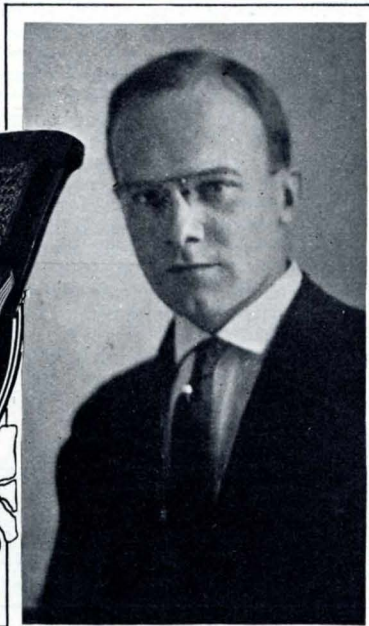
"My next composition was at the age of twenty. Ten years passed in which I did not compose. At twenty I did a comic opera, 'The Isle of Skidoo!' That was in 1906 and Mr. Taylor was then a member of the senior class at New York University. 'The Isle of Skidoo' was the varsity show of that year. And it is very important that he wrote it, for he followed it with two other comic operas, 'Captain Kidd and Co.,' and 'The Echo.' The librettist of these works was William Le Baron, a fellow student at the university. The importance of these varsity shows lies in the fact that the production of 'The Echo' at the Berkeley Lyceum in 1908 brought Mr. Taylor before the general public as a composer.

Discovery of His "Echo"

Reading a review of "The Echo," Charles Dillingham, the theatrical manager, was struck with the plot. He sent two of his men to see the comic opera. The men approved. Deems Taylor was sent for, with the result that Manager Dillingham gave him a contract and put it on the boards at the



Deems Taylor, the Gifted Composer, at Work and at Play. On the Left, Mr. Taylor Working on a Composition. On the Right, a Recent Photograph. Below, on the Tennis Court of His Home in New York



opening of the next season. First it was done with Richard Carle as star, this in Chicago; by the time it came East Mr. Carle had left the show and Bessie McCoy of "Yama Yama" fame was given the main part. Needless to add, the part had to be rewritten for her.

"Of course, there wasn't much of my music in 'The Echo' by the time it opened," said Mr. Taylor. "I think there were two numbers left. Later they took one of these out. Everybody wrote music in that show, Irving Berlin, and—" I was surprised to hear that the popular rag-time composer had had an interpolation in it, especially as it was before the advent of "Alexander's Rag-time Band" and those other songs which have won Mr. Berlin so much popularity. I asked Mr. Taylor if it was true that Irving Berlin had a song in "The Echo." "Well, perhaps he didn't," he added dryly. "If he didn't he was the only one who didn't. I can understand now—of course I was furious then when they ripped my numbers out of the score—how my music didn't suit for public production. I had been doing a lot of studying, working a lot in harmony and counterpoint for a year and a half before I wrote this score. The music was all right, it sounded nice and full and all that. But it was just full of counterpoint, full of those things which delight the young composer's heart and which later he learns to use as a means, rather than as an end.

Did His Own Orchestration

"Did I write the orchestral score of it? Yes, but only after much 'dickering.' The managers were very anxious to turn the score over to one of their men who does this for musical comedy composers who write only the bare tunes of their scores. Fortunately I was able to get the late Julian Edwards, who knew my work, to vouch for me and so I was permitted to orchestrate the opera myself. I was made to feel, however, that the management was conferring a special favor on me. And I can assure you that it struck me as being very funny at the time."

"The Echo" was not a hit. But Mr. Taylor was not discouraged. In fact he set to work and studied zealously. His teacher was Oscar Coon, the veteran New York theorist, who, by the way, is a pure American of Connecticut Yankee stock. "He knows more about counterpoint than any man in America to-day," said Mr. Taylor. "No encouragement from him, either; but he puts you through your paces, so that you never forget your foundation work. I remember his coming up to hear the first performance of my 'Chambered Nautilus' last year when the University Heights Choral Society sang it. After the concert he came to me and said, 'That final chorus of yours isn't bad.' Well, some might think that faint praise. Coming

this journal some time last Fall I spoke of the great aid which this composer has had through the interest in his work of Reinald Werrenrath, the baritone. Mr. Taylor and Mr. Werrenrath were students together at New York University and are also Psi Upsilon fraternity mates. It was Mr. Werrenrath who introduced Mr. Taylor's song "Witch-Woman" at his Aeolian Hall (New York) recital in the fall of 1913, and he also suggested the composition of "The Highwayman." The baritone part in the latter he created at the Peterboro Festival last summer at Peterboro, N. H., and he has sung it this winter in New Orleans, Nashua, East Orange, Jersey City, and in New York City, first with the Mozart Society and then with the St. Cecilia Club, under the baton of Victor Harris. Those who know Reinald Werrenrath realize how vital an interest he takes in that which he believes in. And Deems Taylor's music is among the things in which he does believe.

Mr. Taylor is an enemy of the man who listens to a composition and then remarks how this or that measure resembles Wagner, or Grieg, as the case may be. He launched into the subject of plagiarism with much gusto. "I can't see why intelligent musicians continue doing this ridiculous sort of detective work on other people's compositions. After all, what does a similarity of theme amount to? You can take the works of the masters and find enough pieces of thematic similarity to fill a dozen tomes. Anybody can think up a theme. As for original themes, i. e., melodic combinations which were never used before, I believe that they were about exhausted by 1800! In his essay, 'The Decay of Lying,' Oscar Wilde says something like this, speaking of novels: 'The important thing is not that the characters are what they are but that the author is what he is.' How perfectly that analogy may be transferred to the composer and his work. It is that the composer is what he is which counts.

Looking Through Others' Eyes

"What is objectionable to me is not that composers write down themes that sound like some other theme, but that they write in a style avowedly that of

from Mr. Coon, I knew what it meant. It meant that he really liked it."

In reviewing Mr. Taylor's cantata, "The Highwayman" in the columns of

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