

# Charles T. Griffes: Cut Down in His Prime, a Victim of Our Barbarous Neglect of Genius

American Composer Whose Art Was Blossoming Into Glorious Fruition Died as the Result of Overwork—The Enigma, "Bread or Creation?" Faced by Contemporary Creative Musicians—A Tribute by a Friend and Colleague

By A. WALTER KRAMER

WE LOOK BACK over the lives of the poets of the world and are startled, as we realize how many of them passed from us in what we know was their youth. In literature we find Shelley at thirty, Keats at twenty-six, Chatterton at nineteen, Byron at thirty-six, and the tonal art Schubert at thirty-one, Chopin at forty, Mendelssohn at thirty-six. A little more than a month ago the young American tone-poet Charles T. Griffes passed away in his thirty-sixth year, joining the band of men whose achievement must be judged not only from what they accomplished, but from the view into the future of what they might have done.

I wonder how many who have heard the name of Griffes in the last five years, during which his music has been given hearings from time to time, know what a task this gifted young composer set himself. I doubt if more than a handful of close friends, with whom he discussed his work, are informed of the battle he fought to express himself in his art, ever adhering to the highest ideals, making concessions neither for public favor nor professional eminence. His position like that of many composers, who in our hectic times have to earn their daily bread, was a difficult one. He was a composer; of that there can be no doubt. But composers in America to-day cannot be composers seven days a week. Serious composition does not yield an income on which a man can live. To compose music without holding a position from which to live one must be one of two things, affluent or endowed. Most composers are neither. Charles T. Griffes taught music at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, N. Y. There he worked and there he composed his music in the time that he had remaining from his professional duties as teacher.

Some seven years ago I first met him, when he had put forward his shorter pieces for the piano. They had attracted my attention. I had seen some songs of his before that, a group issued by the

house of Schirmer shortly after his return from Germany where he had studied composition with the composer of "Hänsel und Gretel." Excellent *Lieder* they were, indicative of no especial individuality. But when his piano works came out I immediately recognized that Griffes had something to say. He had undergone a complete musical metamorphosis. His viewpoint had changed. The Teutonic influence was gone; a Gallic feeling had replaced it. We talked about this several times and he very logically explained to me the why and where fore of it. Those earlier *Lieder* he considered more the result of composition study than his own musical expression. And the consistency with which he worked in his new style—it was only a new style of course to those of us who knew the *Lieder*—convinced me as the years went by that this was his real expression. It is not my purpose here to catalog his published or unpublished music and comment on the various pieces. But to a few I must refer that I am most anxious for all to know who interest themselves in the best in our native musical art. The set of Fantasy Pieces, Op. 6,—Barcarolle, Notturmo, Scherzo, and the Three Tone-Pictures, Op. 5, "The Lake at Evening," "The Vale of Dreams" and "The Night Winds." These are published and are available to everyone. Fiona Macleod was a close spirit to Griffes. There are the piano pieces, "Roman Sketches" all four based on excerpts from the Scottish Kelt's poems, there are the three noble Fiona Macleod songs for high voice and orchestra, "The Rose of the Night," "Lament of Ian the Proud" and "Thy Dark Eyes to Mine."

### Early Champions

It was that able pianist, Leslie J. Hodgson, who first brought Griffes's piano music to a hearing. Through Mr. Hodgson I met Griffes; in one of his recitals in New York in April, 1914, he played Griffes's "The Lake at Evening," one of the set of Tone Pictures, Op. 5, and in December of the same year the Barcarolle from Op. 6.

Mr. Hodgson's championship of his music gave Griffes courage. Up to that time he had been unperformed, and with the exception of the set of early songs

referred to above, unpublished. Rudolph Ganz admired the piano pieces when they came out, and George Barrère performed several of them in versions made by the composer for wood-winds and harp at one of his concerts of the Barrère Ensemble. Griffes began to see light. He did a ballet "The Kairn of Koridwen" which was produced a number of times



The Late Charles T. Griffes at His Piano

at the Neighborhood Playhouse, New York, in 1917. It was scored for wood-winds and piano and if I remember rightly Nikolai Sokoloff, the present conductor of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, conducted these performances. In the fall of 1918 he met Adolph Bolm, when the great Russian artist first put on the "Ballet Intime" at the Booth Theater in New York. Griffes immediately felt the inspiration of an association with this distinguished artist and he went to work with new zeal.

He produced a number of "dance-poems," among them his Japanese "Sho-Jo," which was given there, the Japanese dancer, Michio Itow performing it. And in the association of the "Ballet Intime" he met that superb artist, Eva Gauthier, another spirit whose encouragement and interest in his music meant so much to him. Miss Gauthier gave him the Japanese themes which he used in "Sho-Jo," themes, which she had collected when she lived in the Orient. For her he wrote his "Songs of Ancient China and Japan" and at the time of his passing he was setting for her a group of folksongs of Java. She had planned to sing them at her concert last Spring, but he did not have them ready.

Among other works were two movements for string quartet, which came to the attention of Adolfo Betti and were given by the Flonzaley Quartet at the MacDowell Club, New York, in February,

1918, on which occasion Griffes himself played his Piano Sonata. That sonata had a hearing in Chicago this year from Rudolph Reuter. Some of the serious singers took notice of his songs, Marcia Van Dresser doing the three Fiona Macleod songs with the Philadelphia Orchestra last season, Vera Janacopulos doing them with Griffes at the piano at Æolian Hall, New York, last season and Elizabeth Rothwell doing "Thy Dark Eyes to Mine" last December in her New York recital. I make no attempt to mention everybody who sang a Griffes song, though I can assure my readers that they are not as numerous as those who have sung songs by less gifted and also less serious composers.

Then came the two big performances of this year, George Barrère's giving the Poème for flute and orchestra at a concert of the New York Symphony in New York on Nov. 16, 1919, and Pierre Monteux's performing the tone poem "The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan" with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. And when it made good in Boston Mr. Monteux decided to give it in New York also and did on the evening of December 4. I remember well Griffes showing me his notices of the Boston performances; he felt that he had done something in gaining the approval of those "doctors of music" in the Athens of America! Came the New York performance of "Kubla" and with it a genuine success. I heard it and I rejoiced in the felicity of his orchestral expression. As I left the hall that evening I met my friend Dr. F. Morris Class. He sang out to me with great enthusiasm that an American had written a piece that had that evening stood out as a finer thing than Balakireff's "Thamar" which followed it on the program. I felt so, too. I wrote Griffes about "Kubla" and I praised it in reviewing the concert in MUSICAL AMERICA. From Tarrytown I got a letter from him in reply; it was written Dec. 10, 1919, six days after that Boston Symphony's New York performance. He wrote that letter in bed. I have the letter before me. And in it he said: "I have been feeling miserably all Fall and had decided to give up my work here before our vacation came and go to Atlantic City for a week or two. To-day was the day set for going, and then I had the bad luck to get pleurisy two days ago. The doctor thinks I may be able to go by Saturday." I never saw him again. About a week before "Kubla" was done in New York he had come into my office to see me and had told me that he was not well. It was a shock to me to hear later that he was so ill, that he had never recovered from the pleurisy of which he spoke in his letter to me. And then, making inquiries from time to time, I learned that he was no better.

### A Victim of Overwork

American music needs no patting on the back to-day. Of that I am certain. There is enough of our native music performed, but let it be clearly understood, not enough of the best of it. But what American music needs is aid to let it express itself without the problem of how the rent is to be paid. There never was a time in any country where this loomed up as a national problem more than it does here to-day. Charles T. Griffes died at the age of thirty-five a victim of overwork. As I have said he had his position at the school in Tarrytown and although that enabled him to live out of town, which was of unquestionable advantage to his health, it also permitted him to stay at work late into the night, night after night, orchestrating, often laboring more than twenty hours a day for days at a time. For I know something of the quantity of music he set on paper these last five years; and that takes time. Only the other day I learned from a friend that he had to copy all the orchestral parts of "Kubla Khan" himself, as he did not have the \$250 to spare to have them copied! Think

[Continued on page 40]

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