

IRVING BERLIN SUMS UP FOR SYNCOPATION

[Irving Berlin (Baline) is the best-known writer of popular music of the day. Born in 1888, in an obscure Siberian province, the son of a cantor, he came to America at the age of four. His gift for energetic rhythm and a strongly defined natural sense of buoyant melody have combined to place him in the front rank among specialists in syncopation. In a sense, he may be said to have created the school. His early success, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," started the craze in Europe, no less than in America. Mr. Berlin is probably the most potent and original figure in his particular sphere.]

"CAN syncopated strains embody a serious emotion?" said the youthful dean of American popular song composers. "Certainly! The yearning of the Southerner for Dixie portrayed in the popular syncopated ballad is just as genuine as are the Italian tenor's lyric longings for Venice."

The anteroom of Irving Berlin's musical establishment in no way resembles the Tin-Pan Alleys of serial fiction. One steps directly from an elevator into a long room which resembles a hotel corridor, done in green, with settees along the length of it, and lighted by electrolights in the form of lanterns. The regions beyond suggest the fitting-rooms of some modiste, for here new compositions are tried, and voices issue tantalizingly therefrom to accompaniments of pianos. We did not find the popular composer invoking the Muses perspiringly amid a tense silence, a horde of secretaries at his elbow to jot down the slightest Orphic hilt. Mr. Berlin moved among his artist-patrons like host at a reception—an amiable and fastidious young man, without trace of temperamental ebullition.

"Certainly Syncopated Music Can Embody a Serious Emotion," Declares America's Prince of Ragtime—Importance of Properly Devised Text in Writing of the Popular Song—His Ideal of Comic Opera—May Write an American "Beggar's Opera"—Syncopation a Complex Medium—Says Future Master Must Have Thorough Technique

By R. M. Knerr



Photo by Puch Bros.

Irving Berlin, Dean of American Composers of Syncopated Song

"One need not snap one's fingers nor sway when syncopated music is played," he continued. "That is the thing which cheapens it. The syncopated music abounds in melody—that is why it is so popular. Many composers who contemplate writing a serious piece of music, an opera, for instance, think that it will be necessary to suppress all melody. And yet the most lasting operatic hits are those with the melody clearly defined.

"THE writing of the text for a syncopated song is a most important part of the work. The requirements are quite different from those of the ordinary song, which is based upon a poem selected usually for its purely literary worth. The words and music of the syncopated song are involved somewhat as warp and woof are woven together. The lyrics of Gilbert—which, by the way, are considered classic—are done in a reg-

ular, and comparatively simple, form. The syncopated lyric is much more complex, since it must echo the music with complete euphony. The word on which the emphasis of the syncopation falls must have the proper quantitative length, must be an emphatic word in the sense of the verse, and must occur in a phrase that corresponds exactly with the musical phrase. These are the qualities emphasized in a good syncopated song, and not literary excellence in measure to appeal to the analytic student. The song aims at effectiveness: like the painting of the new schools, it has as object the creation of a single impression. It is made for practical purposes, as plays are for acting. Rhymes are not arranged according to parallel spelling, but entirely by sound, euphony being the object."

UPON being asked whether the melodic idea or the theme of the text first suggested the song, Mr. Berlin said: "The musical idea in more sustained writing, such as the finale to a musical play, occurs first. You know, I have done a complete comic opera, and expect to do further work of a sustained sort. The South is a particularly appropriate locale, since it has associations with the native Negro music and customs, the former being very closely related to the modern ballad. My ideal of comic opera is that of unconventional succession of speaking part and musical portion. There should be no obvious preparation for a 'number,' but whenever appropriate the character should continue the action of the play in a brief rhythmical song, after which they should not dance off the stage, but proceed with the action. The recent revival of the eighteenth-century 'Beggar's Opera,' was that of just such a ballad opera filled with perfectly naturally introduced songs.

"I may attempt such an opera," said the man who sets Broadway to dancing, and the farthest-removed parts of the country as well. "Certainly I am quite convinced that the syncopated music expresses the spirit of America, which is cosmopolitan and marked by energy and rhythm. The great composer of this music will possess a thorough knowledge of harmony and counterpoint."

UPROOTING THE WEED CALLED "POPULAR MUSIC"

GLASGOW, April 30.

It is doubtful if any recent pronouncement on a musical subject has attracted more attention than the speech delivered by Sir Hugh Allen, Principal of the Royal College of Music, at the conference of the Incorporated Society of Musicians, London. Sir Hugh did not mince matters. He is enthusiastic, and has something to say. Even if you do not agree with every syllable he uttered and want to add a personal reservation to a few of his statements, you will allow that he gave the musical world a severe jolt; and a severe jolt is precisely what does the musical world a power of good on occasion.

Sir Hugh's subject was "Personality in Teaching," but the part of his address to which most notice has been paid enlarged upon the ubiquity of inferior music. He is reported to have said, "At the present time we spent infinite time and patience, and used every resourceful method, to put children on the right road to appreciate music, and then, for the greater part of the time allowed them to run every kind of risk and to win hands with any beastly kind of tune which vitiates their taste, to destroy their judgment, and wipe out any trace of decency in their musical remembrance. . . . Freak music was becoming more and more aggressive owing to commercialism and the desire for notoriety, and pleasure was being too easily taken in dances and barbaric rhythms, although while listening, the public were usually primarily engaged in eating or dancing."

"Let the Enthusiast Take Off His Coat and Bring the Highest Class of Music to the Very Doorstep of Those Who Hear It Not at All"—Snobbish Barriers Will Strike the Rock of the Human Element—Ubiquity of Cheap Music Its Chief Means of Contamination—Conversion to Beauty of Great Music Demands Bringing It Before Public Constantly—On Reforming "Freak Music"

By D. C. Parker

To the head of an educational institution this must appear to be a pressing question. To all music-lovers it may not seem so urgent and far reaching till they reflect upon it. The trouble comes, however, when you consider what is to be done. The recognition that music not of the highest class exists and exerts a powerful influence is one thing; the discovery of a policy adequate to arrest or minimize this baneful influence another.

TO begin with, you must realize that you cannot put a lid on things which you dislike. What is poison to you is meat to the other fellow; and he will tell you pretty plainly that he is as much entitled to the thrill he gets from the restaurant band or the street organ as you are to the thrill you get from Brahms' Violin Concerto or "Par-

sifal." Certain is it that we must be careful not to erect hard and fast barriers that simply proclaim a snobbishness. The human element cannot be ignored. Many a fugue from an erudite hand deserves the name of piffle, which, as experienced concert-goers know, often woos us in classical dress and lisps in the accents of education and refinement the most appalling balderdash. Aggressive or clumsy propaganda defeats its own ends. A man convinced against his will is a Bach-hater still, and would see Brahms and Debussy in the bottomless pit with mighty sense of satisfaction."

TAKING Sir Hugh's remarks on this topic, I construe them as, by implication, a stirring appeal for good music. Sir Hugh is not a dreamer, dreaming in an ivory tower. He would be up

and doing. What he longs to see is good music enthroned. When we reflect that the most pressing artistic need of our time is concentration, and that the public will accept and pay for what it likes, not what you think it ought to like, the obstacles which lie in the way of betterment seem insuperable. I am not sure that there exists any remedy save that of making the best music easily accessible and cheap. Just as weeds have a way of growing in all kinds of curious corners, so does poor music raise its voice in many surprising places. It is the ubiquity of such music that has to be dealt with, and it can be dealt with only by a sound constructive policy. The large number of people who know only the music which is to be heard at the variety show, or which is whistled in the streets get the idioms of the day into their very marrows. This is indisputable. A proof of it can be seen in the improvement in rhythmic perception on the part of the masses, for the syncopations with which the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker are now at home would, I believe, have proved embarrassing not so many years ago. Music of substance and merit cannot be fully appreciated at a first tasting. One must live with it. Music is a goddess whose charms are not all disclosed at the earliest encounter. It follows, consequently, that in order to make converts it is necessary to bring it continually before the great public. Spasmodic outbursts of activity, however well meant, will not meet the case. You are going to displace something that has its roots deep in the affection of the man who has never troubled very much about the artistic side of the matter. You must wean him from this affection by creating a greater. The first experience with a cigar, even if it be a good one, is often far from happy. The man who relishes a cigar is a cigar-smoker; the man who relishes good music is a music-lover, in other words, one to whom music brings a sense

(Continued on page 17)

Editorial Note: By coincidence not a little peculiar, just after Irving Berlin was invited to state his views on popular music, an expression on the same subject was received from D. C. Parker, the noted British critic, who is writing a series of articles on music in Europe for MUSICAL AMERICA. Because of the contrast in opinions sincerely expressed on both sides, for and against the "popular" song, the articles are here presented on the same page. Mr. Parker, who is one of the younger British critics, has made a definite place for himself as a contributor to the leading English musical journals.