

# Music in American Life Today

by Wiley Housewright

There are widespread signs that America is on the threshold of a major cultural awakening. The feverish activities of all segments of the music profession are reported daily in the American press, but a less well publicized fact is that underlying it all is the insatiable thirst of the musical amateur for more and better performances. Americans attended more concerts than baseball games in 1955. Over 40 million of them spent over 50 million dollars in admission fees. "Music is no longer a private pastime tolerated in an corner of our culture, but rather a pervasive element of it." It is my purpose today to outline briefly some of the ways in which the art is functioning in our lives and to account for the nature of our development by allusions to our musical roots. I shall call attention to some of the problem of our complex musical life and then contemplate resolutions of them.

The widespread use of music may be demonstrated by calling attention to the extensive cultivation of the so-called social instruments, the instruments one plays for the pleasure of his friends in informal situations. In 1952 there were over nine million guitar players. Harmonica sales soared, as did those for ukelele and other similar instruments. The juke box, joy or tyranny, depending upon how one feels about it, is ever-present. High-fidelity fans have become not only authorities on mechanical equipment, but knowledgeable musicians. The over-all effect of these developments is that we now have mechanical resources available to any musical taste. The effect it has had on music teaching and performance is inestimable. Music that for generations has been known only on paper to the specialist is now available in life-size sound. The time lag between the writing of a new composition and its study and performance has been reduced considerably. Musicology has, so to speak, found its voice. It is estimated that in 1954, 17 million long-

playing discs were purchased at a cost of over 70 million dollars. Twenty years ago that figure was only 300,000 discs at a cost of about \$750,000

Experts report that about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of our population, or over 40 million, are reached by art music, that the remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  choose among light-classics, folk and jazz music. A high cult is developing among folk-enthusiasts and now one may find folk song collections from every state in University libraries. American musical shows and light opera, beginning with Victor Herbert have shown an increasing popularity.

Easily the most exportable music from America has been jazz. Selfmade experts in this realm increase in great numbers and throughout all segments of society. An example of the extent to which this interest has been carried came within my own experience last Spring when I was asked to preside at a convention program of music teachers. The purpose of the program was to acquaint teachers with the manifestation of present-day jazz well enough to be able to understand its great importance to youth.

On the panel of experts on the subject were the director of a large recording company, a college professor, a catholic chaplain, and Dave Brubeck, who is a leading idol of jazz musicians. These men spoke very seriously of the craftsmanship of jazz and later of its social implications to an audience that filled the St. Louis Opera House, one of the largest public structures in America. The conclusions drawn by the speakers were solemn indeed, but I doubt that many teachers returned to their schools and prepared units of study on jazz as a result of them. Jazz is a symptom of our restlessness, our flights of imagination, our driving energy. It often consists of a studied monotony, occasionally relieved by rather pre-meditated improvisations, underlayed with either a relentless preumatic-drill rhythm or a series of ear-splitting syncopated punctuations in brass or drums. More ideally, as in many of the small combinations now popular, it is an intellectual exercise in overcoming the

banality of the melodic material or the embarrassing vacuity of the words. Essaying the proper place of jazz in American life is no facile task. With all its limitations, it has great appeal. Basically it has stayed close to the people. It has been their form and that is why it has remained popular. It is probably no greater than waltzes, mazurkas or landler, dance music of other countries and other times, but today we take these three forms much more seriously than when they were mere popular music, because they have been idealized by R. Strauss, Chopin and Beethoven. Given the perspective of time and perhaps distance (so that he may not hear it so clearly), some composer, or a group of composers may do the same for swing, bop, rock and roll. Our musicologists these days study very seriously the popular music of the 15th century. If after a few generations they find it necessary to investigate that of the 20th century, they will probably come to the conclusion that it was a social phenomenon of the age, rather than the great musical utterance of a people.

### The Trade

The controlling groups of the business or economic aspect of music production in the United States are the unions and concert managers. The chief associations are AF of M., AGMA, BMI and ASCAP. These groups have been formed to restrict the use of their products and to assure performers and composers a minimal financial return for their efforts. Music is in great demand but the conditions under which it has flourished have not always been ideal. Nor are they now. The 3200 musicians employed in the 24 major symphonies in 1954, for instance, only worked from 8 to 48 weeks that year and averaged weekly earnings of \$89.02. The necessity for an *arbeit* to supplement this salary is as great to the American symphony orchestra player as to the Japanese student or professor. The music unions are rather unpopular in America due partially to the leadership of the most powerful one of them. On the other hand, they have been responsible for the improved financial situation of the artist.

One can judge how great the need for this improvement was when he knows that even today a competent symphony orchestra player with 20 years experience can expect a salary about commensurate with a first year graduate of a first rate engineering school. The sphere of the A F of M has, however, encompassed all performing artist from Heifitz to the lowliest hack and has set up a scale of wages which assures the best of them a self-respecting lifework. AGMA has accomplished a similar feat for ensemble singers and dancers and for solo artists who appear under the aegis of managers with orchestras or in concert series. BMI and ASCP protect composers in a similar way, assuring them minimum returns for their work.

It is impossible for a top-flight concert artist to launch and sustain a successful career without the assistance of a manager, with great reservoirs of musical talent now available and the insistent demands for more and better concerts, management has become big business indeed. These large firms maintain lists of artists available and book concerts for them for a fee. The two largest of them are Columbia Artists Management and National Concert Artists Corporation. Sol Hurok, an independent impresario, and these two can make or break careers; they determine who is to appear and where and they establish the size of the fees an artist may expect to receive. Technically these men do not have a monopoly and legally they act only as independent contractors and agents. The manager does not hire an artist. Rather the artist hires the manager, agreeing to pay him a commission from the fees the manager obtains by booking him. But since the performing field is over-crowded, managers take only the artists they think they can supply with profitable work. The few established artists fare well under this arrangement but even the exceptionally gifted beginner can expect small return from his efforts. A fully launched career costs not less than \$10,000. today and then the asking fee for a concert may be no more than \$350. After paying commissions

and other expenses, he may expect a net of about \$150. If he is a singer or violinist, he must pay the expenses of an accompanist, further reducing his gain. It is therefore impossible to sustain himself unless he can make a living at other work or is sponsored by a patron, a rare thing these days due to the realities of the income tax.

The fact that the destinies of most artists and large segment of the audience are dominated by approximately ten concert managers may appear to be an imperialistic tendency and in some ways it is. On the other hand they and the unions have avoided a more centralized rule by state control.

Americans know that in business the chief financial supporter of an enterprise controls it. They know that now under the present system they get the artists they want, for they are paying the bill. They therefore consider managers and unions bulwarks against political regimentation of art. They feel that the future of art is safe in private hands. The annual support given to music enterprises by local groups has justified this faith. Similar support has come from Corporations and foundations. The Detroit Orchestra has been resuscitated by corporate support; The Louisville orchestra received \$400,000. from the Rockefeller Foundation. The late Elisie Eskstein gave \$4,200,000. to Northwestern University to advance music study there.

The strains we are feeling now are due to a changing concept of individualism. Once the glamorous soloist was supported by the wealthy patron. In keeping with the "do-it-yourself" craze, Americans have become as adept at art as at plumbing and have assumed a participating role in the making of music. They take pride in belonging to a community chorus or in subscribing to a concert series. Democratic incomes these days cannot support princely undertakings but they can restore a kind of mediæval simplicity and directness to the artistic function.

## The Schools

The extent of musical activities in American educational institutions today is so vast that even the experts cannot know of their development until they are history. I do not wish to imply that every American is becoming a cultivated musician, nor even that every American is an enthusiastic consumer of music. But it is true that they now have the opportunities necessary for assuming either or these roles.

Like the insurance company advertisement of "cradle to grave coverage", music experiences and education begin early and end late. Music is taught in practically every American elementary school by one who has been professionally trained to do the job. In most schools music classes are scheduled during regular school hours and music serves not only its own artistic ends but is used to heighten the meanings of social studies and other areas. The variety and quality of activities in recent years has undergone considerable scrutiny with encouraging results.

Singing—or specifically note reading constituted the single activity of elementary school music instruction from its beginnings in the 1830s to the 1920s. Gradually interest in school-sponsored instrumental music emerged and now it forms apart of basic instruction. In addition, children are encouraged to express themselves creatively in rhythmic movement and in the composition of simple songs. But the chief purpose underlying all this instruction is to assist the individual to develop a sensitive and intelligent appreciation of the art. That educators have succeeded to a degree is attested by the large audiences music performances now have. It is reflected too in the enormous increase in the sale of recordings, hi-fi equipment, scores and books.

Private colleges and universities long ago established music departments but it may of them there was little traffic between music and their more serious concerns. The picture of this situation has changed completely within the last 25 years. Leadership is being

assumed by the large state Universities where financial support is somewhat more stable, and there the largest number of professional musicians of this generation are being trained. Because of their independence, private schools continue to offer valuable leadership in many areas, but music instruction is expensive, and few institutions can sustain the elaborate machinery necessary to a comprehensive offering in music. Areas of instruction are widely diverse and require highly trained personal: Musicologists, theoreticians, music educators, conductors, experts in opera, band chorus, orchestra, all of the instruments and singing. Here again, however, the college assumes that the usual undergraduate must include music as a part of his general education and has made this possible by allowing a modicum of it in his basic courses. Often these courses serve as a stimulus to record-collecting, reading and concert attendance. The performing organizations also sustain the interest of the amateur. Orchestras, bands and choruses now perform works that until recent years were reserved for professionals only. Indiana University Students, for instance, give excellent performances of "Parsifal" each Easter. Works commissioned by large foundations one year are heard in small-town colleges the next.

The extent of support given to the various phases of music instruction may be measured in part by the number of professional organizations to which teachers themselves belong. Oldest of these is MTNA and the largest is MENC. Membership in the latter numbers between 25 and 30 thousand, and as many as 13,000 attend their biennial conventions. Many influential smaller groups are organized around special interest fields: AMS, MLA, NASM, SMILAC, NATS, ASTA, CBA, etc. These are the professionals; a non-professional group of considerable importance is the National Federation of Music Clubs, a group of over 520,000 women who belong to local music clubs and who sponsor worthwhile music undertakings.

This factual description of the extent of music activity creates an optimistic atmosphere but it may not be said that activities of all of these groups have been uniformly well received

nor well directed. It may be said to their credit that they have precipitated a healthy, vigorous climate in which music has influenced the lives of a great many people. If their good intentions have in some cases been misdirected, their aims a bit idealistic, it may also be said that they have found a place of music in the educational scheme. Now they are determined to establish valid standards of judgment and intellectual content and are confidently preparing youth to assume an important role in cultural leadership.

### The Composer

One topic of interest to the entire musical world is that of the American composer and his future. It may be stated without equivocation that the American composer is at this point in history reaching maturity. He is fortunate that along with his artistic maturity he also has youth, vigor and the ear of both the public and the performing artists. Today's audiences are not the socially elite 17th century aristocrats but rather a miscellaneous group, each attending for his own reasons. They are therefore very apt to allow a wide range of individuality on the part of the composer. Free of this old constraint, today's composers are also free from dictation by governmental agencies or national academies whose approval is necessary to professional acceptance in some countries.

Until the 20th century, America developed no first-rank composers. The reasons why it did not are clear to all who have studied our history. We were preoccupied with the task of hueing out a civilization in a vast virgin land. The basic problems of sustaining life against the forces of nature had to be solved first. Later we saw the need for music impedimenta—the instruments, the opera houses. When they became realities, teachers were trained, orchestras were organized and publishing firms gum. The early composers were forced by circumstances to go to Europe for their training, and their compositions were modeled upon those European ideals they came to know. Edward Mac Dowell and Horatio Parker studied in Germany, as other Americans of their generation did. After about

1910 Aaron Copland and his generation went to Paris to study with Nadia Boulange. From the beginning, however, a few composers declared their independence of musical idioms of the day. In the 1920 s, political refugees from every corner of Europe migrated to the United States and among them were the leading composers of our time: Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Bartok and Milhaud. While the influence of these men has been great over the last 25 years, the credit for developing a vigorous generation of composers must go to the American schools of music and to the public itself. Julliard, Curtis and Eastman schools were pioneers in the effort and they have been followed by numerous universities, both private and state sponsored.

They not only provide teachers for aspiring composers but most of them sponsor festivals of contemporary music. They also train numerous performers with dazzling technique who are eager to explore new compositions on their recitals. The young composer is not without problems however. The cost of writing and getting performances of his works is enormous and his financial gains small. One composer I know wrote his fourth symphony in 1946. The cost of preparing the manuscript—the copying of parts cost him \$1100. His fees for seven performances totalled \$150. These practical problems have been partially solved and partially side-stepped by either going into the teaching profession or by doing hack work for Hollywood, Broadway, radio or television.

It has been partially solved too, especially for the young composer, by the generosity of an increasing number of grants from foundations: Guggenheim, Fromm and Fulbright. In spite of the fact that less than half a dozen Americans can make a living at composing music, the field continues to attract many. Works by these men constitute an average of 10% of the repertoire of all American Symphony orchestras, and for one orchestra in 1954 they made up 24% of the compositions played. This is not a nationalistic tendency for there is little nationalism inherent in works. It is rather

an indication that the American composer has come of age and his works are now getting the attention they deserve.

In this brief report I have attempted to give you a candid description of music in American life today. I have been forced to become subjective at certain junctures because I am away from the reference materials I normally use. It is a report, then, of the situation as observed by one American who is rather closely identified with one phase of his subject. It is doubtful that any one American can accurately assess the full range of music activity of his country. Its complexity now requires the services of expert. I have not spared you the pain of hearing our problems aired. Utopia is only a state of mind and cannot exist for the creative artist. My incorrigible optimism must be excused on the grounds that even after being a musician for over twenty years, I am sanguine as to the future of the profession.

The American musician must guard against pretense, false nationalism and imitation. He must know the social and artistic reasons for his existence and let his music reflect the tempo and rhythm of the people from whom he comes. The creative artist knows his connection to life, projects and reflects himself in his time.