THE AMERICAN IDEA IN MUSIC, AND SOME OTHER IDEAS: BY DAVID BISPHAM: PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK CENTER OF THE AMERICAN MUSIC SOCIETY

The existence of the American Music Society with centers in our large cities seems to me to indicate that the musical life of this country is ready for, and the particular need of the time is, insistence upon nationalism, and the encouragement of everything that pertains to the building up of what should eventually come to be a national musical art. No one, of course, will forget Whistler’s retort as to British art, that there was no more such a thing as British art than there was British mathematics. “Art is art,” said he, “and mathematics is mathematics.” This axiom, of course, holds good in any discussion where art or mathematics is concerned, and we can no more rightly say “American music” than we can say “American mathematics.” Still, there are American musicians and American mathematicians, and these, by virtue of their activities, have every right to be known to the world at large as having carried on their work as Americans, and the glory of what they have done should go down to posterity with that hallmark.

One of my classmates at college hit upon an absolutely new method of demonstrating a certain problem in Euclid which astounded our professor, and it is interesting to know that this student later was ready with the bridge which carried Kitchener over the Tugela River. So much for an American mathematician who could with neatness and dispatch apply that age-old science to modern needs. Let us for one instant consider by whom our tall buildings are designed; they may be Americans, though some are not, and the fact remains that this work has been done and stands upon American soil and fits American needs; the tall buildings are called American buildings though the architects and every laborer concerned in their erection may for all we know have been foreigners. Certainly, most of the people in this country are quite recently of foreign descent. They bring their mathematics and their music along with them; they build or they compose, they do this or that, as their nature leads them. But we have now become such a concrete whole that though the mess of pottage is still boiling merrily all our work must be called American. Let there be, however, no hard or fast geographical, racial or other lines of demarcation drawn about such a fluid thing as music. The American musician who goes abroad and while
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studying under foreign influences produces his best work in another land, as in the case of Edgar Stillman Kelley, is no less an American composer than if he had worked at home. Or the composer, who, coming from Europe to our country, taking up his residence and working here, as in the case of Charles Martin Loeffler, his work also must come under the head of American music.

If among athletes it is found that their strength is increased, their nerve bettered, their endurance rendered more elastic from the moment they begin to live and work upon American soil, the reason is that they are imbibing the American spirit. There is a freedom that permeates every nerve and thought; it shows in their work. American athletics, so called, have benefited enormously by the accretion of young giants who may have arrived recently from foreign countries but who at once enter the list as Americans. In fact, everything that emanates from within our boundaries must be called American.

Now, this thought as applied to the fine arts and more particularly to music, has led me to the conclusion that in our midst there is about to spring forth a wonderful crop, not only of lovers and performers of music of the highest sort, but of producers of music of an advanced nature. This, for want of a better way of expressing ourselves, must be called American music, by whomsoever composed upon these shores. While there may be no such thing as British art or American music in itself, at least these are among the varieties of art and of music known to the civilized world. We speak of Slavonic music, we speak of Italian music, we speak of music of various schools, and there is no reason why American music should not bear its name gracefully and without cavil. And yet seemingly the output of American music up to the present time has been relatively small. It is only here and there that a composer is found who is able to express himself in the larger forms of this art; or I would modify this statement by saying that it is only here and there that a composer has been recognized as being able so to do; for I cannot believe that with the many schools, colleges and conservatories of music scattered up and down our land, that among the thousands of pupils who yearly enter and are graduated from such institutions, there are not far greater results than anyone has as yet been aware of.

IS IT possible for students to go abroad and work under the best masters year after year and return to our country barren of results? Is it possible to believe that of the thousands of educated and cultured persons of both sexes who are studying in this country, all their efforts have come to naught? Is it possible that
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the good done by the innumerable musical clubs up and down our land has resulted in nothing better than listening to well-known artists perform music by foreigners? I cannot believe it. It is, on the contrary, a fact that we have a keenly intelligent and enormous music-loving public, and from among these it is more than likely that hundreds of fine compositions have been written, produced only in private, submitted to publishers—and rejected, to return to the dust of the study shelf. Operas, oratorios, chamber music, songs of a more extensive character and lofty thought, piano and violin compositions are known to exist, and I am assured that were they brought forward and placed before able executants the moment would be found to be opportune, the time propitious, and that many of such works would immediately find a hearing.

The American Music Society, the outcome of the efforts of Mr. Arthur Farwell, its national president, is the fulcrum from which this movement of encouraging and producing music by Americans should be propelled. It has for its object the encouragement of the American composer and the discovery of fine music by natives of this country or those resident among us, and it desires to coöperate in the broadest way with any and all other organizations having a similar aim. It wishes, moreover, to establish throughout the United States nuclei for the performance of acceptable works of whatever class and to enlist the sympathy of musicians in particular to be on the alert to recommend to executants what may come to their notice as being really characteristic; and it desires to call the attention of the public in general to the fact that as a nation we have musical ability, that it is necessary to foster it, that here is a movement which aims to do so and which will place American music once for all where it ought to be—namely, in the front rank.

While the attention of our composers is not diverted from orchestral, choral and chamber music, the ideas of the public, however, are more rapidly crystallizing about opera,—“grand opera,” so called,—than about other musical forms, and I find that there is a growing idea among those who attend operatic performances that many of these works should be heard in the English language rather than in foreign tongues, for it is only too obvious that many of the best artists before our public are English speaking singers, and it is a fact that in the search for novelties many a foreign work is brought forward at great expense only to fail, when others by English and American composers are allowed to rest in unmerited neglect. Why, let it be asked, should not opera be performed by English speaking singers in a house devoted to the performance of all works in our own language? There is indeed no valid reason, and I feel that the time
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is ripe when such an idea as that which I have been elaborating for some time past should be put forward in the name of the American Music Society, in the cause of musical art and with the object of encouraging American composers to work in a field which is more popular and offers them a larger prospect of reward.

LET me state, then, the following plan: I would see a theater erected in New York and devoted to the uses of opera in the English language. In this theater should be produced, not only the neglected works to which allusion has been made, but all operas upon English subjects, such as “Martha” and Goldmark’s “Cricket on the Hearth,” with such operas as used to be heard here exclusively in the English language, “Mignon,” “Lakmé,” and others of a similar nature. I would have all operas which had English stories for their foundation well translated and sung in the vernacular, among them Verdi’s “Otello” and “Falstaff,” Nicolai’s “Merry Wives of Windsor,” Goetz’s “Taming of the Shrew,” Ambroise Thomas’ “Hamlet,” Gounod’s “Romeo and Juliet,” and to these Shakespearian texts I would add such a beautiful work as “Much Ado about Nothing,” by the English composer, Villiers Stanford, whose charming light opera “Shamus O’Brien” and others from his pen should not be neglected. I would produce works by Cowen, Mackenzie, McCunn and MacLean, unknown as yet in this country, but heard in England and abroad. I would certainly produce Goring Thomas’ romantic operas “Esmeralda” and “Nadeshda,” and Sir Arthur Sullivan’s grand opera “Ivanhoe,” and lighter operas of the English school of the former generation, as “The Bohemian Girl,” “Maritana” and “The Lily of Killarney.” There are also many stories which have been set to music, such as “The Pied Piper of Hameln,” by Nessler, which I am confident would find its way quickly into the hearts of our music lovers if rendered in the vernacular. And I would produce that exquisite work “Oberon,” by Weber, which, though it is not generally known, was originally written to an English libretto for performance upon the stage of Covent Garden Theater. I would have freshly translated into English, in the light of such experience as we have had, all of Wagner’s texts, in order that these superb works might be more fully intelligible than they have heretofore been. England has just again demonstrated the possibility of their success under the baton of no less a master than Hans Richter. And after these and certain works of the modern French and Italian schools had been added to the repertoire does anyone doubt that it would be possible to secure English speaking singers to perform these works? I cannot believe it. My firm conviction is that
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when the news went abroad that such a company was in formation there would be immediately available no lack whatever of the very finest talent for beautiful presentations of everything that might be required. In almost every theater of Europe, American and English speaking singers are gathering valuable experience, holding responsible positions, doing well and working for small pay while looking with longing eyes toward the Metropolitan Opera, the Boston Opera and Mr. Hammerstein for the employment which heretofore has been offered to but a few among their fellow countrymen and women.

Because of the rage for foreign names and foreign voices, many of our own people have too long been left out of account. It is plain to be seen that the impresarios, either foreign or with European proclivities, who have till now managed opera in America are more naturally inclined to engage their own country people than to engage Americans, with the result that the latter have been set to thinking. Miss and Mr. So-and-So here at home, feeling within them the ability and that with application they could succeed in fashioning a career as well as the next, gather together the money and go abroad to perfect themselves in foreign music in foreign countries, and, naturally enough, in foreign languages. Mr. Brown has to change his name; Mrs. Jones finds it necessary to change hers; Miss Robinson can no longer retain her patronymic. Why? Because they are English names and bear with them in foreign countries the stigma of musical inability. Small wonder that in times past names were manufactured; small wonder that even yet in Europe many a singer finds it necessary to conceal his or her American or English origin in order to succeed among foreign surroundings.

But “what’s in a name?” A voice by any other name would sound as sweet, and the time of conformance to such fashions of a bygone day has passed. It is obvious that we need our own singers at home in a company devoted to the performance of artistic opera in our own language, and I feel that this is an object which should be earnestly striven for and fostered by the American Music Society, of the New York center of which I have the honor to be president. I am sure the idea would meet with ready acceptance in every musical center in our country, and I suggest to all American lovers of this branch of the fine arts that they support in thought, word, deed and money any such plan as I now advance for the furtherance particularly of musical art in our own country. I would not by any means see the masterpieces of foreign schools neglected; on the contrary, classical songs, chamber music, oratorio and opera must serve as models. But while what is outworn and useless in whatever school of musical art should be forever set aside, that which in the light of experience
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is recognized as being artistic and worthy of performance should be placed upon the list and introduced into the repertoire as occasion offered.

I WOULD see operas of the older English school produced, such as “Acis and Galatea” by Händel and “King Arthur” by Purcell. I would see revived upon the stage such masterpieces as “Orpheus” and other gems by Gluck. I would bring forward all the best of Mozart’s works, and such operas as Weber’s “Freischütz” and others of the German school, among which would be Cornelius’ “Barber of Bagdad,” Nessler’s “Czar and Zimmerman,” Humperdinck’s “Children of the King.” And along with operas of the classic French repertoire I would see performed “The Trojans” and “Benvenuto Cellini,” by Berlioz, with “The Pearl Fishers,” by Bizet, while Halevy’s “Jewess,” Gounod’s “Mock Doctor,” and “Philemon and Baucis” should no longer remain in oblivion, but would be produced with Auber’s “Fra Diavolo,” Dalcroze’s “Sancho Panza,” and Smetana’s “Bartered Bride.” These and a host of other delightful works by Russian, English and Italian composers unknown to this generation here would also see the light upon our stage.

Last, but not least, I would encourage our own composers by producing such works as exist from American pens, foremost among them Professor Paine’s “Azara,” Walter Damrosch’s “Scarlet Letter” and “Cyrano,” the latter in manuscript for six years, ready, yet deliberately ignored by the powers that were and that be; Harry Rowe Shelley’s “Romeo and Juliet;” Legrand Howland’s “Saronna” and Albert Mildenberg’s “Angelo,” Converse’s “Pipe of Desire,” with other works by American writers as they proved suitable after careful examination and private rehearsal and performance, a course which seems to me of imperative necessity and which, were these ideas ever to come to fruition, I should hope would be made possible by some among our very wealthy enthusiasts in musical circles.

If such a theater as I propose should be devoted to the purpose of this work I would advocate the broadest possible policy, and upon afternoons and evenings, in an auditorium provided for the purpose, there should be concerts of chamber music and miscellaneous concerts, along with performances on Sundays of orchestral works and oratorios, with the avowed object of producing as often as possible, in conjunction with masterpieces of other nations, the carefully selected works of our own most talented composers. Upon the stage of the theater during the week I would, besides operatic performances, include from time to time in the repertoire such special works as needed the coöperation of celebrated players in the repre-
sentations which demand a large force of musicians and singers. I refer to such dramas as Goethe’s “Egmont,” with Beethoven’s incidental music, which then for the first time in this country should have a performance worthy of the best traditions. I would see, given with the aid of every modern stage appliance, a performance of Byron’s “Manfred,” with Schumann’s melodramatic musical accompaniment, than which there is nothing more beautiful in the whole range of art, involving, as it does, in addition to the art of the actor, the assistance of a great orchestra, chorus and soloists. I would have Ibsen’s “Peer Gynt” performed according to the traditions of the theater at Christiania and with Grieg’s music in full. I would advocate the revival of Alphonse Daudet’s “l’Arlesienne,” with Bizet’s wonderful incidental music, and finally I would from time to time see performances of what, let us say, for the sake of ballast, I am sure our stage needs more than anything else,—namely, Greek tragedies as, for instance, the “Antigone” of Sophocles, with Mendelssohn’s music, or the “Edipus,” with the extraordinary accompanying music of Professor Paine, of Harvard. This is but part of the work I would advocate as being obvious for the American Music Society to occupy itself withal, and were this made possible, as I cannot but feel assured it will, I would reach out into all the country and connect with the parent body in New York every wealthy town which as yet has not been favored with more than an occasional performance of so-called “grand opera,”—a poor name, by the way; let us call it “opera” pure and simple, allowing comic opera to take care of itself as best it may. American composers flourish in this field, which seems to need no fostering. Would that certain of our undoubtedly brilliant writers saw fit, however, to allow themselves time for the musical elucidation of tales more worthy of their mettle.

BUT to return to the thread of my wishes: In such cities as Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Providence, Albany, Rochester, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh,—needless to mention Chicago, which great center of music in this country, I am sure, would be the first to assist in the furtherance of this idea,—in such cities, indeed, as would guarantee sufficient support I would advocate the formation of a local orchestra and opera chorus, which the parent body in New York would supply with scenery and costumes for a limited number of the favorite works performed in the New York repertoire. To these cities for their winter and spring opera festivals of one or two weeks each (for I take it for granted these publics are as eager for opera as the rest of America seems to
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be) I would send from the large force of artists in New York those principal singers required to perform the leading rôles, while the minor parts should find exponents from the local companies. These artists would return to New York for their duties after performing in other cities, where others when needed would take their places. My plan in detail has been submitted to theatrical and musical authorities and has been approved as money saving and sensible in every detail. No city, of course, would be visited that did not see its way to enter financially into the scheme proposed.

I take it that every person who understands musical conditions in this country will agree that by such a project as I propose the impetus given to musical art in America would be enormous—indeed, such as the musical world has never seen at any other period or in any other country; but I feel it right to say that a similar plan which was put forward last autumn as emanating from other sources was entirely based upon uncopyrighted suggestions obtained from myself and given as according to the above presentment. If, however, the coöperation of the powers that be at our leading temple of music could be obtained, I doubt not that many of the preliminary obstacles could be overcome at once, and the movement started well on its way.

Debussy has recently stated that he considers that a remarkable amount of work has been accomplished in America of late, and while an original voice could scarcely be expected to declare itself in less than a century, he felt that what America had already absorbed was much greater than could have been expected, and that there was no telling what it might not produce. When we think of the mixture of races in our body politic, the French to the north and south of us, the Latin to the east and west of us, the Indian and negro at our door, and that most musical of all races, the Hebrew, leavening the whole lump, there is indeed no telling what a wisely directed musical enthusiasm may not produce. There is no more use in forcing such a growth than in patronizing it. Each is distasteful to art; but encouragement—yes, that is the need of the moment, the encouragement that is to art as the sunny side of a wall to a fruit tree; and I ask the public for its encouragement and support of the American Music Society in behalf of what it is attempting and in furtherance of the suggestions made above.