SIGNIFICANCE AND PROGRESS OF MUNICIPAL MUSIC, AND ITS POWER TO DEVELOP THE FESTIVAL SPIRIT: BY ARTHUR FARWELL, SUPERVISOR OF MUNICIPAL MUSIC IN NEW YORK CITY

That a reform administration of an American city should not only better civic conditions, but should also launch a musical renaissance that promises to assume national proportions, is a new and startling circumstance in American life. Such, however, is the case with New York City in its work for the uplift of municipal music during the present summer. Judging from the success of the movement and from the attention which has been given to it by the press of the country, it is safe to predict that the influence exerted will be of far-reaching effect.

The fact that such a widespread awakening should result from the experiments of a single summer points to something dynamic and new in the spirit of the advance which has been made, something holding a promise for many people and many American cities in the future. And in truth it would seem that in this beginning, coming as it does with the force of the American metropolis behind it, there lies the opening up and the limitless unfolding of a new and unexplored vista of American democracy—a nation evoking and utilizing the democratic possibilities of art. It has long been fashionable to regard democracy and art as mutually exclusive, but to those who are not clinging with a death grip to old-world culture, this attitude of mind appears to be a legacy from a past in which the condition of the life of the people was utterly different from what it now is in this country. Moreover, even now the problem before democracy is, not to produce a condition where the separate individual in the mass will appreciate the rare in art, but to produce art manifestations touching, involving and inspiring the mass.

Music, with its peculiar universality of appeal, and especially when taken not only by itself as "pure music," but also in its broader connections with poetry and drama, is better fitted for such a service than any other of the arts. Music is the great reconciler; it links man to the other arts and to his fellowmen. In democratic considerations, highly specialized appreciation not only is not a necessity, its absence is to be reckoned with from the first. A compensation exists, however, in that the mind which has no highly specialized culture development, is also free from prejudice on culture planes. The little comedy of resistance to "classical music" on the part of the average American man ends when he finds himself one of fifteen
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thousand similar persons—as happened repeatedly in New York this summer—listening in perfect silence to the great musical imaginings of the age interpreted by that most wonderful of instruments, the modern orchestra in the hands of a capable leader.

The festival spirit, mob psychology—call it what one will—creates a condition where the people find themselves, or find what they want, in the broad sweep and the rich colors of great musical art. When we add to instrumental music the immense resources of choral music and the dance, the development of both of which was begun in relation to municipal music in New York this summer, the possibility of popular art awakening, and of the celebration of American holidays and festivals through art forms, becomes vastly increased. Participation in these festivals by the people themselves now becomes possible, and with this begins popular culture in its best sense, not as an alien thing thrust upon people from without, but through a capacity and appreciation arising out of their own coöperation and effort.

Before looking further at these very tangible possibilities for the future, it will be well to survey rapidly the events and experiments in New York this summer upon which they rest. Municipal music in New York falls within the province of two departments, the Department of Parks and the Department of Docks and Ferries. It has been customary in the past to have frequent band and orchestral concerts at the Mall in Central Park with organizations of some size, and to have weekly concerts by smaller bands of twenty-one men and a leader in a number of the other parks. It has also been customary to have concerts by bands of two sizes, nineteen men and leader, and fourteen men and leader, nightly on all of the nine recreation piers on the North and East Rivers.

Without describing the status of most of the music in the past, it may at least be said that the administrations supporting it let the work out to many independent band leaders, without requiring the upholding of musical standards, or having the means to uphold them, and without even suggesting such standards.

The task of the new department heads, Charles B. Stover, Commissioner of the Department of Parks, and Calvin Tomkins, Commissioner of the Department of Docks and Ferries, was therefore to place the work of providing municipal music upon a basis admitting of musical standards, and thus to make possible the systematic carrying out of new and progressive ideas. An advisory committee of disinterested and public-spirited citizens, men and women, was called in, and plans were formulated and the supervision of the work
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arranged for. As many concerts were planned as the city’s appropriation for the purpose for each department allowed for. The first radical step was the appointing of fewer leaders than in the past, each one thus having a longer engagement and being able to retain his men for a longer period, the city thus keeping the personnel of its bands more nearly intact. The best possible leaders were secured.

In the Park Department, Commissioner Stover’s first act in extending the scope and influence of the municipal music was to increase the number of music centers. Bridge plazas and other public places, as well as parks where there had previously been no concerts, were devoted to the purpose. In all there have been some thirty music centers in the parks. Most important of all was the fact that he increased the number of symphony orchestras to two, and opened a new music center for orchestral music at McGown’s Pass in the upper end of the park, where there is a natural amphitheater. The crowds from the upper East Side that frequent this portion of the park are made up of persons who for the most part have never heard a symphony orchestra. It is an interesting fact that at the first concert given them there was much curiosity, but little real response up to the performance of a movement from a Beethoven symphony, which brought forth prolonged and enthusiastic applause until an encore number was played. The concerts at McGown’s Pass have grown steadily and rapidly in popularity, eager audiences of from four to six thousand, or more, assembling at every performance. The orchestra here and at Madison Square has occupied a raised stand without either roof or sound reflector, an experiment which has proven conclusively that the best results with an orchestra in the open air can be obtained by means of such a device.

The two orchestras number each fifty-four men and leader, the leaders for the season having been Arnold Volpe, with the Volpe Symphony Orchestra, and Franz Kaltenborn, well known as a popular orchestral leader since the death of Anton Seidl. Nahan Franko conducted several concerts at the Mall at the beginning of the season, playing for the first time at popular concerts in New York an elaborate excerpt from Richard Strauss’s “Salome.”

EVEN a minimum symphony orchestra, such as these of fifty-four players, is a luxury which only the largest municipalities can be expected to provide. Nevertheless, from the experiences of the summer it is quite possible to form conclusions helpful to communities which cannot undertake things on so large a scale. One of the most significant of these conclusions concerns the popular response to symphonic or other highly developed modern music without respect
to the size of the instrument; namely, that the popular mind, unacquainted with such music, responds in direct proportion to the degree of spirit put into its interpretation by the leader. In other words, an intelligent and spirited conductor can carry the people with him in music which is supposed, too often erroneously, to be above them. The popular enjoyment of great music does not carry with it the disdain of good popular music. The people will always applaud the familiar melodies, even if they are badly played, but this in no way interferes with their enjoyment of great music well played. And that they experienced such enjoyment at the municipal concerts this summer no one will doubt who witnessed the enthusiasm awakened by the works of Haydn, Beethoven, Grieg, Tschaikowsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff and many others. The point in question received a more spectacular proof at one of the recreation piers, where with the brass bands of fourteen and nineteen, such programmes as those at the Mall had been entirely unknown. The latest song hits and the old familiar routine waltzes and light overtures had entirely constituted the programmes. To expect to gain attention, or in fact to avoid arousing actual expressions of hostility, with a symphonic work, would ordinarily be regarded as the height of folly; and yet with a brass band of twenty men, Arthur Bergh, conducting at the Barrow Street Pier, gave so stirring a performance of the first movement of Schubert’s “Unfinished” Symphony, that he received rounds of spontaneous and enthusiastic applause. A dull performance would have fallen flat. It has been the experience of the summer that the people’s alleged dislike of good music may in very large measure be attributed to a sluggish and unintelligent performance. The small band with which Arthur Bergh’s work was accomplished affords a hope to communities which are capable of undertaking municipal music only on a modest scale.

With the introduction of choral singing the horizon of possibility widens vastly. The development of choral singing may be begun in towns where the orchestra is still an impossibility. Moreover with the chorus there begins the participation of the people in a form of art expression. The orchestra must remain more remote from the people, for the orchestral player is a professional, usually a foreigner, and lives in an isolated and remote sphere of his own, emerging only to take his place in the orchestra. This condition may change when America has become a greater producer of orchestral players. But the member of a chorus is more apt to be a part of the community which provides the audience also, and thus lends to the choral event an aspect of democracy foreign to a purely orchestral performance.
THE People’s Choral Union conducted by Frank Damrosch and Edward G. Marquard, and the United Singers of New York, conducted by F. Albeke, invited by Commissioner Stover to sing in connection with the orchestral concerts at the Mall, proved no less popular than the orchestra. All the choral works were sung by the voices alone, unaccompanied, the orchestra at a distance of about one hundred feet from the chorus stand having alternate numbers on the programme. The choral numbers were all comparatively simple, and might easily have been accompanied by a good amateur orchestra incapable of performing in full the greater orchestral works. The present season is not the first that has witnessed choral singing at the Mall, although a new impulse has been given it this summer that promises greater choral events in the near future.

One other feature of fundamental importance in any truly national development, a feature wholly new, has marked the season’s concerts in Central Park. This is the establishment by Commissioner Stover of a rule that each of the two orchestras shall perform one new or little-heard composition by an American composer each week. This is a step of the utmost moment, not so much in the mere gaining of a hearing for the works now performed, as in the recognition of the composers of our own land as a factor in the creation of America’s dawning musical democracy. Upon the composer in America falls the heaviest burden in meeting the demand for musical expressions which shall represent the soul of the nation to the people. It is right that he should be absorbed at the outset into the processes of musical evolution in its relation to the mass of the people. He above all, in the end, will see most deeply the people’s musical need and will satisfy it. The beginning made in New York has been highly successful. The writer has called in orchestral scores from all parts of the country, and already seventeen have been performed. Of these, seven have been given absolutely their first hearing, six others their first hearing in New York, while the remainder have had perhaps a single performance there. Among them are works, many of them of large dimensions, by Edward MacDowell, Edgar Stillman-Kelley, Henry F. Gilbert, Henry Hadley, Ernest R. Kroeger, Wm. J. McCoy, Homer Bartlett and the writer. In many of these works the American composer has shown himself to have a strong grip on orchestral technique and to have attained a high command of melody, harmony and form. Well-known works of Ethelbert Nevin and Victor Herbert were also given. The great audiences showed themselves as hospitable to the American works as to the foreign, and it is further significant that some of the former will figure in New York Symphony concerts this coming winter.
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On the recreation piers the band concerts provided by the Dock Department have been enjoyed by many thousands. An innovation there has been to classify the programme, and give the concerts distinctive character on different evenings. The monotony of the conventional programme made by the leaders at the beginning of the season was soon seen to be oppressive, each programme having, in order, a march, a light overture, a waltz, an operatic selection, a medley, and so on. The programmes were therefore classified, with certain specified nights, for a preponderance of particular kinds of music, as Italian Opera Night, American Night, Wagner Night, Folk Songs and Dances, German-Slavonic Night, and other arrangements. After a special cycle of several weeks, the plan would be changed, and other kinds of works emphasized.

In the middle of the season Commissioner Tomkins instituted a feature which became one of the most popular and picturesque aspects of the summer’s municipal music. This was afternoon dancing for children on three of the recreation piers on the East Side. Young women from the Parks and Playgrounds Association taught the children, mostly girls, many European folk dances, for which the bands of fourteen men and leader were provided with the proper music. The common dances popular in America were encouraged as well. The Italian, Jewish, Hungarian, American and other children of the East Side took keen delight in the dancing and quickly became adept in the steps and figures of the various folk dances.

THIS movement for dancing found its culmination this season in a “Children’s Folk Dance Festival” on the East Twenty-fourth Street Pier, the largest in the City, which was gaily decorated for the occasion with flags, flowers and plants. About one thousand children took part, all in costume, and the festival was witnessed by a large audience containing many of the city officials. Aside from its intrinsic beauty, the festival was a revelation of what had been accomplished by a few weeks’ work, or rather, play. What wonders might be accomplished by further development and organization in this direction. The fancy pictures representative and organized ballets for children, forming a part of the celebration of the great American holidays. The festival atmosphere of gaiety and happiness, pronounced as it was in this mere exhibition of what the children and their teachers had accomplished, seemed but a small fraction of what it might have been if the event had been more purposefully organized and presented as an expression of the spirit of one of our national holidays.

In these activities of only a single summer, it will be seen what a vista of possibilities has been revealed. If these developments have
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any meaning whatsoever, they have a meaning of the deepest sort for every American city and village. The magnitude of New York’s operations is not the most important point. We are most deeply concerned with the spirit of these progressive activities, a spirit which may find its appropriate expression wherever there exists a community, large or small, which senses the upward trend of American humanity and democracy in the present decade.

Consider the bare elements involved in the municipal music activities of New York in this summer of nineteen hundred and ten. They are orchestral music, band music, the chorus, the dance and the composer. If there could be a more complete set of factors for the creation of beautiful and joyous festivals appropriate to American needs throughout the country, or for the establishment of enjoyable and uplifting conditions for certain longer periods of time, it would be difficult to imagine. These elements admit of combination in many ways, and in greater or less degree they are at the command of every American community. Some cities can maintain all of them. Smaller towns can maintain some, and import others on occasion.

These enlightening and uplifting activities have long been prepared and striven for by societies, clubs, coteries, progressive individuals throughout the country. It is time now that they should be lifted by the governments of cities from their narrower spheres, and placed where their light shall be shed upon all the people. The people establish the governments of cities. Let them, then, call upon their city governments to create the circumstances whereby the higher conditions of life produced by the few shall surround and uplift the many. All will be gainers by this action. Let the cities and towns support the musical organizations created by their gifted and progressive citizens, and place them where they may be enjoyed by all, as New York has done with its symphony orchestras, bands and choral organizations during the past summer. Let the cities plan appropriate and expressive festivals of music, dance, and song for the national holidays, and call upon the nation’s composers, poets and artists to help conceive and organize them.

It is toward such ends that the work in New York this summer is pointing—is, in fact, making practical headway. The country has long dreamed of such things. New York is no longer dreaming—it is acting.