THE DANCE OF THE PEOPLE: BY MARY FANTON ROBERTS

"Except ye become as little children."
"A little child shall lead them."

I WENT the other evening to see a child dance. It was a joyous evening because it was a revelation of that spontaneous beauty every child should have the power to portray; it was also an infinitely sad evening because I realized that this one little girl was the only child I knew of in the world who was doing this spontaneously beautiful thing. She was only five years old, yet she danced with equal wonder whether her mother played a simple little tune, or whether she floated past a pale-green curtain, upborne by the music of her lovely soul. I have never seen any dancing at all like it, except Isadora Duncan's, and I realized when I saw this child that she was doing eagerly, unconsciously, joyously, what Miss Duncan has striven for twelve years to make us understand the miracle of, namely, that the perfect dance is the natural outpouring of the spirit of beauty through motion.

Mr. Percy MacKaye, who sat by me, said: "The wonder is not that the child is doing this thing, but that every child in the world is not doing it." And then Mr. Coburn, head of the Coburn Players added, what was equally true, "If only this child could live her life close to the spring of beauty, Nature, informed day by day through the winds and the sunlight, through the perfumes and color—Nature's great sources of rhythm—what tremendous things she could do to freshen the gray world."

And I realized as I watched the little child dancing, without draperies, without dramatic surroundings, without consciousness of her genius, a "Dance of the Wind," a "Dance of the Flowers," a "Dance of Sadness," a "Dance of a Little Child Going out of the House to Play," all her own improvization (if one may call by so elaborate a name anything so simple and inevitable), that it is the real things of the world, the very simple things which hold the great qualities of perfect beauty and moving joy.

How much of her readiness to interpret beauty this child owes to her parents it would be hard to estimate. Her father, Jerome Myers, is a painter of modern life, of out of doors, sunlight, children playing and dancing—the joyous aspect of everyday existence, a painter of profound insight, with technique that enables him to present his philosophy adequately through his art. But granting this artistic inheritance, this little child is of herself inherently close to the source of beauty, as only little children and the more primitive people of the world can be, and all children are, if left to their own

conception of happiness, instinctively primitive. Each child of its own accord would begin the world anew daily. Thus it is that we seek for stirrings of emotional art in the early days of the race or the individual. And so from an appreciation of what this child could accomplish through her exquisitely naïve methods of expressing her own natural joy in living, I began to understand why it is that we unconsciously turn to the more elemental folk of the world for our hope of the development of the more emotional arts, such as music and dancing. As we think into the matter, we see that hyper-cultivation, however satisfactory and interesting as a personal source of pleasure, must inevitably to a certain extent atrophy the creative forces, for cultivation absorbs our spiritual and mental energies in recording and enjoying the achievement of others, and so wide, so high, so deep are the opportunities of enjoyment in the realms of appreciation that more often than not the sum total of our activities are thus exhausted. And so it is the unencumbered soul who becomes, as a child, the unconscious channel for the great forces of life to stream through. And as we remember the few geniuses we have met, we recall with perhaps some surprise, that they were inevitably the unaffected, the naïve, the simple.

WE SHALL not develop to the fullest as a nation without the enjoyment of these emotional arts, because no people can achieve all that the sensitive among them desire without expressing the hunger for beauty that is deep in their hearts. A nation must sing, must dance, must make its own music to realize its portion of the world's power for beauty. And it is a sad fact that the spontaneous music of a modern people is apt to be discountenanced or ignored, and that here in America at least we are fearful of the thing we create, fearful of the beauty that is seeking expression out of our own hearts. We are turning back for joy in rhythm to the folk dances of the old world, and what can we ever hope to accomplish through it? We are not a rural people who find expression for our simple pleasures on the village green, who quaintly dance in the moonlight because that is the most natural thing for us to do. We may appreciate folk dances, and we may teach them to our children, but they will turn away from them, they will turn back to the waltz which we are all dancing, to the ragtime which we are more and more learning to dance.

We may also teach our children in our public and private schools that the only great expression of what we call "grand opera" is from France and Germany and Italy, that all great music must be an imitation of these things, that unless we know Debussy and Wagner

and Strauss on one hand and Puccini and Verdi on the other, we cannot express the great thoughts that are in us, and the result will be only what has already happened, the tragedy of the recent American opera, which takes for its subject British history and which expresses this subject in the most extraordinary formal classic *mélange* of the operatic music of other times and people. That anyone in this country should rejoice for the birth of an opera like "Mona" is a thing indeed to make us thoughtful. For it has no more significance as American music than Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West." We are not, as a matter of fact, a people to whom as yet opera belongs, although we have a very cultivated and right appreciation of it as the work of other races. But as for ourselves, we are at present, at least, too self-conscious; we have too keen a sense of humor to create that singular product of genius and naïveté known as "grand opera." We may have many such productions as "Mona," because it met with much kindly comment and applause. And such a production can matter little to composer or the people, if we bear in mind that never for a moment must we think of it as *American music*. We must never accept it as the great thing we are hoping for in this country,—our own music, a spontaneous outburst of a desire for and understanding of the kind of song that we as a people crave, that is deep in our souls, that would make life richer for us.

We have done little in this country, if we except the great MacDowell, in the way of music that is national, that is significant. Perhaps the most genuinely natural music which we have as yet achieved here is the homely, nerve-searching, pulsating ragtime. It has been said that we "manufacture" this music for the people, that it does not belong to them any more than the grand opera music does. This is a very profound mistake. You can manufacture an opera such as "Mona," you can never in the history of any nation manufacture music for the great mass of the common people. You can manufacture bad clothes for them, you can give them a standard of artificial manners, because these things are associated in their minds with material benefits which they crave, but you cannot manufacture music for them, rhythm for them, song for them, for they will not accept these things. You *can* write music that they *will* dance because you have produced out of your heart a rhythm which reaches theirs. You can write songs that they will sing, because you can touch their hearts with a chord from your own.

Occasionally even out of what you may call the very mire will spring up something that the whole nation will accept and acclaim, because it has a universal rhythm which is wanted and needed for the expression of some joy in our lives. This is what has happened

in the modern dances that we are hearing so much about, which have been so widely condemned. It is impossible to believe that we as a people have accepted these dances, the "turkey trot," the "grizzly bear," and other much-condemned rhythmical expressions, "because they were risqué and indecent," for the great mass of our people are not indecent or risqué. They are very much horrified at anything that is indecent or even vulgar. They will not tolerate it in their plays; they will not accept it in their music, in their dances or in their songs. But the people as a whole will always respond to some great universal and fundamental rhythm, whether it is in dance or song, because they are primitive, because they have the open mind of simple folk, and the rhythm of motion is essentially a primitive expression.

ALL people in the early stages of their history have had their dances, their religious dances, their war dances, their love dances. We have had but the faintest echo of these in our lives. Our dances have been a luxury. We have paid people to do them for us, or we have held them in reserve for our more exclusive society, who paid largely to learn how to do them. Now at last we have in this country a dance of the common people. It is not an indecent dance unless it is made so, and every dance in the world can be made indecent. In fact, almost every act of life can be made indecent if we so choose. We can eat indecently, we can sleep too much, we can walk vulgarly. There is no romance, there is no artistic delight that cannot be rendered unpleasant and vulgar if we so elect. And this dance of the people for which we should rejoice, because it is the first widespread appreciation of rhythm that any modern people has had, we have elected to regard as vulgar because some indecent people have chosen to do it in a way that was not beautiful. It can be done most beautifully. It will do much to increase the sense of beauty in our people if we will only permit them to do it without maintaining that it is vulgar. The very music that is written for it carries a splendid dominating rhythm, so much so that the children in the street dance spontaneously to it, and men and women all over the country respond to it who could not afford difficult and expensive dancing lessons. It will be a sad thing for us if this first general desire for rhythmical expression that the country has had will have to be discarded because we have forced the nation to see it as something unworthy.

The music, as I have already said, that is written for these dances and which intrinsically belongs to them, has been called mechanical; "manufactured" is the word used for these extraordinary outbursts of primitive pulsating melody. If we could begin to get statistics

about the amount of music that is really manufactured in this country, and in every other country, which the people reject absolutely, we could understand better the real meaning of the tremendous response that there has been to the barbaric ragtime music in this country and all over the world, and to the outgrowth from this music which is less barbaric but no less intense and vivid.

It is but natural that a nation such as ours, that has been so long without its own musical expression should respond to the dramatic primitive dominating quality of the music as we are hearing all over the country today. For everyone wants it, no matter how it is criticized. It is wanted in the most fashionable of drawing rooms; it is wanted in the dance hall; it is wanted on the streets in the twilight springtime by the little children. And no manufactured effort in music, no sound wholly dominated by suggestiveness, nothing inherently artificial could be gathered up so completely as this from one end to another of a nation.

It may be that this wholesale universal response to a desire for motion and music will bring about the other thing that we mourned the lack of in the beginning of this note, that our little children as a whole do not dance, and that we find ourselves filled with amazement as well as joy when one of them dances with satisfying beauty. We certainly can never convert a nation to the knowledge and value and joy of a beautiful rhythmical expression through instruction in dancing, through lectures and essays and schools. The desire for it has got to spring up in the hearts of the people, and its growth as an art has got to be the spontaneous, naïve and joyous expression of that desire.