

FOR AN AMERICAN GESTURE

THE supreme function of the creative artist is to seek new forms of expression and to place them in new and beautiful settings; it is the quality that marks all progress in art and differentiates the seer from the imitator. There is, however, great danger in a search for new impressions without an adequate foundation of technique and knowledge of what has been done up to the present. The older generation, having that knowledge, do not

dare, and the younger generation, having the daring, do not know. The composer who has found a successful medium is fearful of losing what he has acquired with such effort; the newcomer, having no reputation to lose, seizes the possible chance of creating interest for his experiments. The world of music is divided into two distinct camps, with a large neutrality fluctuating between. It follows that the only gauge by which to judge the value of an effort, is the individual impression of sincerity disseminated by the work, for only rarely is the final value of a composition properly estimated by contemporaries.

While there is in all countries an intense desire to create a national idiom, great art has always been international through its universality. It is a fallacy to regard Moussorgsky as *merely* Russian, Richard Strauss as German, and Debussy as French. It is also a fallacy to consider a work great art, when it expresses little more than local color. There is as example the promising English school that is interesting by the vigor and freedom of its expression. One is forced to the conclusion that it is the individual characteristics of its members which are impressive, and not their endeavor to build a national music on British folk song.

In an effort to appraise music today in Paris, London, Berlin, and Vienna, it becomes my firm conviction that the American composer can only achieve individual expression by developing his own resources, instead either of submitting to the prevailing tendencies of various countries, however vociferous they may be in their appeal and in their success, or of blindly following the traditions of classical form.

These resources are vital and manifold, for we have at least three rich veins indigenous to America alone,—Jazz, Negro spirituals, and Indian themes. There is, besides, local color in California (Spanish), Louisiana (Creole French), Tennessee (English), and along the Canadian border (French Habitant). From these extraneous influences, an idiom must be evolved that will be tinged with the same quality that makes the foreign incomer, after a short period of habitation in the United States, decidedly an American, recognizable the world over as such. It seems to me that it is the indefinable and at the same time unmistakable atmosphere in

America that must be youthfully interpreted in a new idiom, not merely exploited in a characteristic melody.

A new technique should be invented which will combine a knowledge of tradition and the modern experiment, if for no other reason than to avoid the pitfall of imitation. Music in Europe today is suffering from over-sophistication and perhaps America's trouble is under-sophistication.

By Louis Gruenberg

