

A Contemporary American Composer

CHARLES T. GRIFFES. By Edward M. Maisel. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1943. 344 pp. with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by DOUGLAS MOORE

THE American composer up to now has largely escaped the streamlined, hard-hitting art of the contemporary biographer which has served up such figures as Wagner, Brahms, and Beethoven with sauce hot enough to tempt the most jaded appetite. As a matter of fact, with the exception of MacDowell and Gershwin, few of our composers of serious achievement have been popular enough to warrant similar treatment.

Charles T. Griffes, however, besides composing a number of works which are widely performed and admired, is the hero of a legend, the unappreciated genius, starving in a garret (in this instance the Hackley School for Boys in Tarrytown, New York), and his story with certain romantic embellishments is better known even than his music. Mr. Edward M. Maisel in his spirited biography seeks not to demolish but to strip the legend of its exaggerations and to portray this talented and tragic figure against a harsh American background. In his preface he is severe with writers and commentators who have garbled the facts, and in the diligently prepared body of the text he presents the true story of the composer's unhappy life.

Unfortunately the somewhat intemperate tone of the preface is maintained throughout the work and results in a biography which although eulogistic is generally unsatisfactory to Griffes's friends and admirers and which falls short of convincing the unprejudiced reader as to the attractiveness of the subject. The shy and sensitive musician, doomed by environment and by his own temperament to a life of spiritual isolation, yet courageously espousing the new and the untried without artistic compromise to win at the end of his brief thirty-five years a widespread recognition, bespeaks a gallantry which is immensely appealing. But Mr. Maisel by overstatement both of the handicaps which Griffes encountered and the importance of his achievement weakens his case.

It is true that the American composer usually has a difficult time interesting publishers in his works if they are outside the conventional mold and usually encounters apathy and pessimism on the part of the critics, but a great deal of American music of good quality including most

of Griffes's has been published and to say that music critics are or were venal by and large is unfair and absurd. And why object to suggestions made by editors employed by publishers? Such suggestions are not necessarily ill-informed or less helpful than those apparently acceptable from other musicians. The characterization of the Sonata for Piano as "the first major utterance in American music" is sophomoric. Must every good American work be hailed as the true begin-

ning of our national art? There must be an end of the beginning some time.

The shortcomings of Mr. Maisel's biography do not prevent it from being absorbing reading. He has collected a substantial amount of material, much of it interesting and all of it vividly presented. One does not have to be an enthusiast about the type of post-impressionistic music which was Griffes's chief characteristic to find his story a fascinating picture of what can happen to a sensitive musical imagination in the hurly-burly of twentieth century American civilization.

Gold Was Mike's Business

KLONDIKE MIKE. By Merrill Denison. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1943. 393 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD L. NEUBERGER

STORIES of the Klondike gold rush have a strange new pertinence today. In this land where Americans once endured incredible hardships in the race for gold, American soldiers are setting up supply lines to Alaska and the North Pacific theatre of war. Across the bleak summit of Chilkat Pass the United States Army Engineers are cutting the Haines Military Road. In the rocky valleys near Carcross and Atlin and Whitehorse, regiments of American troops are completing the 1,630-mile Alaskan Highway.

Mike Mahoney was one of the fabulous men who trekked into this fabulous region nearly half a century ago. He was looking for gold, along with thousands of other *cheechakoes*. Mike found gold principally because he was young enough and strong enough to cross the mountain passes ahead of the rest of the mob. He beat up the bouncers in Soapy Smith's crooked gambling parlors in Skagway and he lugged a piano over the Chilkoot's dreadful heights on his back. This courage and endurance made him a success in the gold fields.

He found a fortune and lost it, and made another fortune again. When he came down to Skagway with his sled loaded with gold dust, men crowded around seeking his advice and assistance and women offered him their bodies and their savings to take them back to the Klondike.

Merrill Denison, in his story of Klondike Mike Mahoney, has captured the spirit and atmosphere of an amazing period in the history of North America. Mahoney knew Jack London and Robert W. Service and Tex Rickard and others whose names epitomize the Yukon and the Klon-

dike. He blazed the mountain trail from Fairbanks to Valdez. He outdistanced wolves on the tundra and he could mush eighty miles from dawn to sunset. He was the toughest guy in the Arctic.

Today Mike Mahoney is still alive, a successful Canadian business man. But gold is no longer the main business of the Klondike. The dredges have virtually stopped. Men and equipment are needed for business more urgent — the business of war. The Klondike is now the route to our allies in Russia and China and to our enemies in Japan. The Alaskan Highway penetrates the Yukon now. Mike Mahoney's life has spanned the transition.

Mr. Denison's story of Klondike Mike is vivid and fast-moving but essentially superficial. There is little analysis of the background of the gold-seekers, of their eventual destiny, of what the hysteria of the gold rush did to Alaska and the Yukon. But for anyone who wants to know about the hardships and adventures of the old Yukon, this is the best book in many years. It is ideal background for reading about the construction of the Alaskan Highway.

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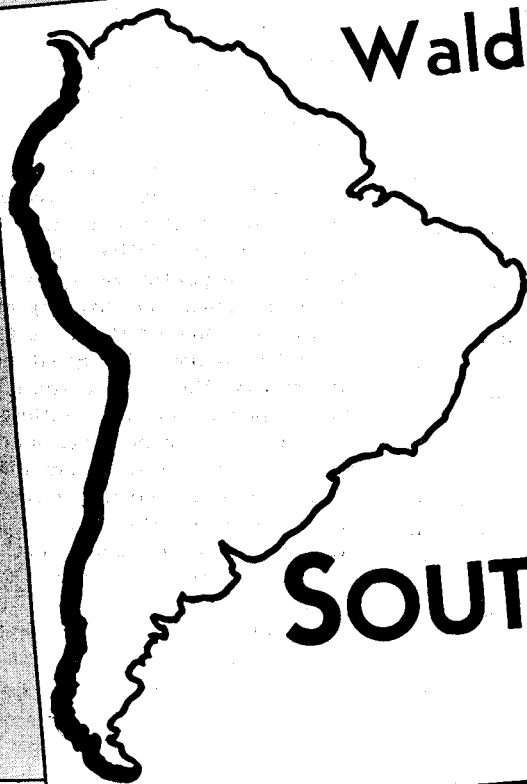
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