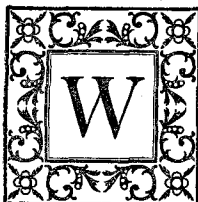


Ragtime, Jazz, and High Art

BY W. J. HENDERSON

Author of "The Emancipation of Music," etc.



WHAT is ragtime? What is jazz? And whence and whither? Ragtime is no longer mentioned. "Jazz" has lost its original meaning. Paul Whiteman, artist in popular music, protests against calling the prevailing species of dance-songs jazz. But no matter what we choose to call our popular music, it is *sui generis*. We should not apologize for it. "A poor thing, but mine own," mumbled the shamefaced Touchstone. Yet, barring her inability to babble like her chosen lord and master, Audrey was probably quite as valuable a member of the human race as the fool in the forest. Perhaps her price was not above rubies, but she was at least worthy of the respect of a Touchstone.

Now, as for what is at present called jazz, we Americans have no need to whimper "a poor thing, but mine own." It is our own, but if it is a poor thing then we are poor things too, for it represents us with uncanny fidelity. What else musical have we created? The melancholy echoes of dissenters' chapels composed by Hopkins or the solemn platitudes of Lowell Mason? Was there a rural church in all Britain from which these might not have emerged? Or shall we pin our faith on the "Hora Novissima" of Horatio Parker, breathing the blessed spirit of the venerable festival of the Three Choirs, or the "Pagan Poem" of Charles Martin Loeffler, trumpeting classic memories of Lutetia in the language of all Gaul?

We refrain. We hesitate and are lost in the mists of speculation. For if we searchingly review the history of our musical rise and progress we arrive at the inescapable conclusion that we have assimilated the arts of all the nations of earth and made none of our own. History is tiresome even to people who do not share the sceptical views of Henry Ford

as to its value; but we must refer to it in order to declare that it denudes us of all garments of musical glory. Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century we produced nothing which still moves before us. When the little group of New Englanders, our first modern composers, began its activities, the ears of all musical students were turned toward Europe, and they are still strained to the sound-waves from the east. The nations of Europe were not only nations, but peoples. They had the racial and characteristic backgrounds essential to the creation of their own types of art. They had folk-music foundations and long and painfully developed schemes of artistic musical architecture. Our would-be Mozarts and Schuberts had nothing national to build upon. We were a nation, but not a people. The melting-pot was seething and boiling with ingredients from the icy mountains and the coral strands. When we made a play it was patterned after Farquhar or Sheridan. When we painted a portrait we fixed our reverent gaze on Sir Joshua. When we fashioned a public building we bowed before the shrines of Wren and Gibbs.

Our students of music were nevertheless profoundly ignorant of the existence of the musical treasures of most of the European nations. The Italian opera and the German symphony loomed as master creations before them. Since Italian operas were obviously desirable chiefly because they were imported and but vaguely understood, whereas the native articles suffered from the shameless exposure of the language, the goal of our musicians became the concert platform. The Titans of concert art were Bach and Handel, Mozart and Beethoven; the treasures in which their traditions were hoarded were the conservatories of Dresden and Leipsic, Berlin and Vienna. But Austria was practically *terra incognita*. Berlin was gloomily repellent. So the

youthful aspirants hastened overseas to learn all the secrets of the Saxons. And when they returned they gave us symphonic Mendelssohn and water or hard-boiled fugues without salt or pepper.

We possess among our musical treasures some of the most elegantly groomed symphonies and perfectly trimmed string quartets that have proceeded from the mind of man. We have large, spacious, well-ventilated oratorios, wholesome and refreshing as country afternoons. Our operas have been anxiously made upon the Italian last and have altered their outlines with every slow shift of fashion along the Piazza della Scala. And what noble and uplifting tone poems, marching bravely behind the grizzled standard of Richard Strauss, as their forerunners paraded with the flag of Liszt! Piano concertos and violin concertos we also own, reflecting every ray of glory from those of Mozart and Corelli to those of Saint-Saëns and Tchaikowsky.

We have not stood still. We have made progress faithfully in the footsteps of Europe. We are nothing if not up-to-date. And style? Well, one may do some boasting about that, for there is nothing in the shape of style which we have not tried at least once. We are eclectic, above all things, and true to our mission as a melting-pot. Meanwhile we have missed one great thing—music of the people, by the people, and for the people. We could not produce that while the German *maennerchor* in every town was clinging to the fatherland classics, the Swedish and Italian and even Irish societies resolutely turning their backs on everything except what chanted the rhythms of their own lands.

So when an American composer felt it incumbent upon him to write a symphony in B flat just because all the ancient immortals wrote symphonies, he was compelled to invent absolutely colorless themes and develop them in architectural musical forms designed by Beethoven and taught with authority in the great temples of culture in Dresden and Leipsic.

But onward-looking Europe declined to tarry beside the biers of Beethoven and Schubert. She sought and found new melodic and harmonic diction in the whole-tone scale dangled before her eyes like a

string of pearls by the delicate fingers of Debussy. And later came the prophets of the north with harmonic scales, harmony in two planes, atonal and polytonal mazes, and the bewildering procession of new creations ranging from the ecstatic poems of the polite Scriabin to the elemental disclosures of the rude Stravinsky. And with her eyes still scanning the purple horizons over the eastern sea America read the new message and took up the weak man's burden of imitation.

The ignorant people chattered noisily over the new things. "Why do they bring us this music which is not music?" some cried. "Let them keep to their Mozart, Beethoven, and even Wagner. We have gone as far as we are going." But missionary work was to be done in order that those who had nothing to say in music might bury their emptiness under a dazzling parade of the new devices. And so began the rise of the leagues and the guilds.

How beautiful is the spirit of brethren who dwell together in unity! What an inspiring influence is the good American "get-together" meeting! In all music there has been nothing more persuading than a Sunday-night gathering of one of these guilds devoted to the dissemination of the new gospel. Yet in the end it was not the valiant apostles of the new creed who wore the crowns of glory, but the unbridled prophet of the steppes, Igor Stravinsky himself. "Renard" and the "Histoire d'un Soldat" laughed their way into the memories of unbelieving recorders of musical incidents, while the solemn absurdities of the profound Varese, Salzedo, and Ruggles evaporated in the cold sunlight of the morning after.

Neither the grave and reverend seniors who brought from Europe the rubber stamp "approved by Carl Reinecke" or the youthful aspirants who dreamed they had found the fountain of eternal youth in the dead sea of Milhaud, Poulenc, and the so-called "Group of Six" produced anything that caused a single responsive throb in the heart of America. From Skowhegan to Port Jervis the spirit of the nation beat time to the rhythms of the jazz tunes, and when the inner brotherhood in Forty-seventh Street implores the people to harken to Ruggles's "Vox

clamans in deserto" or the "Octandre" of Edgar Varese, the graceless people rudely chant: "Why did you kiss that girl?"

There are signs of an awakening. The musicians have begun to discover that their ancient altars are in danger of being burned by the home fires. The *Etude*, a leading musical magazine, has enriched its columns with a symposium on jazz. Eminent musicians, such as Leopold Stokowski, John Alden Carpenter, Walter Spalding, of Harvard, and a score of others have said their say. Stokowski, the brilliant conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, is of the opinion that jazz is here to stay. Well, that may or may not be. Its effects will surely last, though jazz as it is at the moment may pass into the dim chambers of memory or figure only in more or less accurate histories of the development of music in the United States.

But what lexicographer can catch and imprison within two lines of agate type the meaning of the word jazz? For the term has become involved in inextricable linguistic confusion. Ragtime was the syncopated music that rested on the basis of the old-time negro jig. The double-shuffle and the clarion call of the floor manager for everybody to "sift sand" suggested new conjuring tricks to composers. Hardly anything of all that remains. How much ragtime can be found in Irving Berlin's latest gems?

It need not greatly concern the student of music where ragtime originated. Fred Stone, the comedian, said in an interview in the *New York Times* that he first heard it played on a piano by a negro in New Orleans in 1895. Mr. Stone believes that it was derived from a dance called the "Pasmala," which he suspected to be a corruption of "pas à mêle"—a mixed step. This dance featured the shuffling, dragging foot, and the short tone preceding the long one as in the typical ragtime snap. From this dance Bert Jordan and others developed dances which depended for their interest on the rhythms sounded by the feet and these rhythms were generally of the "rag" type.

Jazz, strictly speaking, is instrumental effects, the principal one being the grotesque treatment of the portamento, especially in the wind-instruments. The

professor of jazz, in the English of genius, calls these effects "smears." The writer first heard jazz performed by trombone-players in some of the marching bands in the days of our war preparation. Afterward the ingenious players of the popular music discovered how to produce these wailing, sliding tones on other instruments. Later came the incomparable Ross Gorman, who can evoke the laugh of a hyena from a clarinet and the bark of a dog from a heckelphone. But the caterwaul of the nocturnal tabby, the baying of the wandering "houn' dawg," and the unnecessary crowing of the 2-A.-M. rooster are not essential to jazz music. They have been made a part of it because such instrumental antics entertain the crowd.

The employment of curious devices for altering the tonal quality of certain wind-instruments shocks the conservative music-lover more by its appearance than its musical effect. When a trombone-player places the bell of his instrument close to the mouth of a megaphone and obtains new and genuinely beautiful tonal effects, he is doing a legitimate musical thing which would be more subtly persuasive in dignified composition if the mechanism were not so baldly exposed. When a clarinet-player thrusts the bell of his instrument into a derby hat, thereby causing the tones to sound muffled and distant, he is not performing a new feat in jazz, but merely reproducing an effect dating back to Hector Berlioz's "*Lelio ou le Retour à la Vie*," made known in 1832. The composer directs the clarinetist at a certain passage to wrap the instrument in a leather bag, and informs us that he devised this singular "sordino," or "mute," to "give the sound of the clarinet an accent as vague and remote as possible."

The composition of the jazz orchestra is more pregnant in its promise for the future than the jazz itself. A symphony orchestra will contain about seventy-five strings to fourteen wood-wind and eleven brass instruments. A jazz band shows a decided preponderance of wind and it leans naturally toward those of the greatest flexibility. The flute and the horn are not much used. In its Æolian Hall concert Paul Whiteman's organization had eight violins, two double-basses (both interchangeable with tuba), a banjo, a celesta, two trumpets (exchangeable with

flügelhorns), two trombones, two horns, and three players operating the whole family of saxophones, a family of oboes, and another of clarinets. The great range and variety of sonorities within the powers of such an orchestra must be apparent to any one possessing even a layman's knowledge of orchestral effects.

This jazz orchestra is American. It has impressed itself upon the artistic European mind just as the ragtime and jazz music has captured the popular fancy of Europe. Can any such thing be said of any other American musical creation? In the admirable compositions of the learned Athenians who walk in the groves of the Boston Common one finds all the urbanity and all the lofty contemplation that characterize the works of the fathers. But has Europe hearkened to them? Has a European musician stretched out the arms of his flagging inspiration toward them and clasped to his throbbing breast their needed support? Alas, no! But ragtime and jazz rule the feet of France and Britain. And only last winter there came into the presence of local music-lovers a composition by Igor Stravinsky called "Symphonies for Wind-Instruments," which betrayed that famous experimentalist as an attentive listener to the seductive breathings of the saxophones, clarinets, and stopped trumpets of the jazz band.

Our jazz music is unquestionably our own. It expresses our ebullieny, our care-free optimism, our nervous energy, and our extravagant humor—characteristics which our foreign critics tell us demark us from the rest of the world. Our composers have in recent years disclosed a desire to embody in music national thought, aspiration, and emotion. Goldmark's "Gettysburg" symphony, Hadley's "North, East, South, and West," Schelling's "Victory Ball," and the negro rhapsodizings of Henry F. Gilbert and John Powell are the fruit of earnest efforts to be truly American, while John Alden Carpenter's "Adventures in a Perambulator" and Deems Taylor's "Through a Looking-Glass" publish the finer qualities of American humor.

But almost no American composer of the highly cultivated class has put forth anything that translates into the language of art the musical ideals of the people.

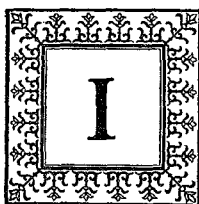
Those who have endeavored to follow the kindly advice of Doctor Dvořák and make the folk-music of the negro the basis of their compositions have failed to conquer the public because that public declined to embrace the slave music when dressed in the unbecoming robes of Teutonic tone poems. The arts do not descend upon the people, but rise from them. The opera was the true child of Italy as the symphony was of Germany. The opera was before La Scala and the symphony before the Dresden Conservatory. George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," for piano and orchestra, disclosed certain possibilities of jazz, but Liszt after all cannot father an American son.

Much of the music beloved of the people and called jazz is not jazz nor even closely related to it. The sentimental songs, which seem to awaken responsive chords in the souls of people apparently devoid of all sentiment and sunk in hopeless vulgarity and sordid views of life, are for the most part without traces of an origin similar to that of jazz. They are descendants not of the jig and the double-shuffle but of the negro's religious melodies, his "Roll, Jordan, Roll" and "Come Tremblin' Down." The semi-hysterical emotion of the "spiritual," given over into the hands of "poor white trash," has been transformed into maudlin sentiment which one would expect to find lauded not by serious commentators but by the industrious society of "sob sisters." These tearful ditties are prone to fall into slow waltz tempo, unknown to negro music, while the real jazz seems unable to break away from the tyranny of the fox-trot.

If jazz is to rise to the level of musical art, it must overthrow the government of the bass drum and the banjo. It must permit itself to make excursions into the regions of elastic rhythms. When Paul Whiteman gave his now historic concert in Æolian Hall, Victor Herbert was the one composer who pointed out definitely the way to freedom. If jazz must be wed to the dance, then let it seek new dance forms and rhythms. Mr. Herbert's suite of dances was a triumphant demonstration of the possibilities of the popular melody in this direction. It proved effectively that jazz need not be a poor thing, though assuredly our own.

Memories of Some Parisians

BY H. C. CHATFIELD-TAYLOR



IN the days of my childhood the kaleidoscope was a popular toy; and during many an hour I marvelled at the figures of colored glass formed in a long black tube by the mere turning of a handle. In a way, memory is a kaleidoscope; only its reflections are not symmetrical like those of the optical instrument; nor are they changeable at will. Moreover, in looking through darkened years upon the faces of Parisians I knew in the days of long ago, I find that of some a bare outline of the face, or only the suggestion of a trait, remains, while of others there are full-length portraits in memory's halls, even though the name of the subject may have been obliterated by the ravages of time. In fact, while the recollection of many with whom I was once on terms of intimacy has become dimmed, that of others whom I merely looked upon with admiration or curiosity at the age when impressions are deepest, remains vivid to this day.

Thus, I remember the tawny face of Marshal Mac-Mahon, with its high cheekbones, grizzled mustache, and tuft of beard beneath the lower lip. Attired in baggy trousers and an epauletted tunic, I see him leaving the Elysée Palace in a stately carriage surrounded by troopers whose breast-plates glisten in the sun, while I, a boy of ten, stand on the sidewalk watching him go forth to grace some occasion, the purport of which I have forgotten.

Both Gambetta and Victor Hugo I saw, as well; but there is a confusion in regard to their bearded faces which renders them indistinct the one from the other. Thiers and Ferdinand de Lesseps, too, are Frenchmen I gazed upon in those days of boyhood; but I was of an age when men of action appealed to me far more than men of parts; so, while the recollection of these great men of France

is hazy, that of a *beau sabreur* whom I watched with awe and admiration as he took his daily constitutional aboard an ocean liner, is as vivid as if I had seen him yesterday. General de Charette, who led the Papal Zouaves in vain, but valiantly, to battle on the Loire, is the soldier I have in mind, and I can see him planking the deck hour by hour, slim of limb as a greyhound, straight as an Iroquois brave.

General de Galliffet I remember, too, though I met him long after he had ridden to glory upon the field of Sedan; for, while the plain about him was strewn with the corpses of his azure-coated Chasseurs d'Afrique, he had struggled from it in a dying state, to be saved for a ripe old age by the skill of a surgeon, who placed a silver plate within him where the wall of his stomach had been. Like General de Charette, this hero of Sedan remains in memory as my ideal of the aristocrat to whom fighting for France is a dutiful tradition.

"Le brave Général Boulanger," made the hero of an hour by a march sung by Polus, a music hall idol of the eighties, was a soldier of another ilk, whom I once saw in the Champs Elysées acknowledging the plaudits of the crowd, but lacking in the courage to turn his popularity to political account. He had been in America to attend the centenary of the surrender of Yorktown, and had sat at a club in my native city drinking with a few young sparks until the early hours of morning; so, even upon a black charger, he appeared far from a hero in my eyes, an opinion justified by subsequent events.

Opéra bouffe soldiers, however, such as Boulanger, are not alone in their failure to display courage and tact at crucial moments; in fact, if those who are intrusted with the management of international relations were endowed more frequently with those faculties I would not have been tempted, as happened not long ago, to declare, during the course of