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COMPOSERS ON MUSIC

Eight Centuries of Writings

SECOND EDITION

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was no use for Satie to shout: "Go on talking! Walk about! Don't listen!" They listened without speaking. The whole effect was spoiled—Satie had not bargained on the charm of his own music. Nevertheless, Satie wrote another *ritournelle d'ameublement* for Mrs. Eugene Meyer of Washington, when she asked him, through me, to give her an autograph. But for this *Musique pour un cabinet préfectoral* to have its full meaning, she should have had it recorded and played over and over again, thus forming part of the furniture of her beautiful library, adorning it for the ear in the same way as the still life by Manet adorned it for the eye. In any case, the future was to prove Satie right; nowadays, children and housewives fill their homes with unheeded music, reading and working to the sound of the radio. And in all public places, large stores and restaurants, the customers are drenched in an unending flood of music. In America, every cafeteria is equipped with a sufficient number of machines for each client to be able, for the modest sum of five cents, to furnish his own solitude with music or supply a background for his conversation with his guest. Is this not *musique d'ameublement*—heard, but not listened to? [4]

JAZZ

It was during this visit to London [in 1920] that I first began to take an interest in jazz. Billy Arnold and his band, straight from New York, were playing in a Hammersmith dance hall.

In his *Coq et l'Arlequin,* Cocteau described the jazz accompaniment to the number by Gaby Deslys at the Casino de Paris in 1918 as a "cataclysm in sound." In the course of frequent visits to Hammersmith, where I sat close to the musicians, I tried to analyze and assimilate what I heard. What a long way we had traveled from the gypsies who, before the war, used to pour their insipid, treacly strains intimately into our ears, or the singers whose questionably tasteful glides were borne up by the wobbly notes of the cimbalom, or the crudity of our bals-musettes with the unsubtle forthrightness of cornet, accordion, and clarinet! The new music was extremely subtle in its use of timbre: the saxophone breaking in, squeezing out the juice of dreams, the trumpet, dramatic or languorous by turns, the clarinet, frequently played in its upper register, the lyrical use of the trombone, glancing slidingly over quartertones in crescendos of volume and pitch, thus intensifying the feeling. The whole, various yet not disparate, was held together by the piano, subtly punctuated by the complex rhythm of the percussion, a kind of inner beat, the vital pulse of the rhythmic life of the music. The constant use of syncopation in the melody was of such contrapuntal freedom that it gave the impression of unregulated improvisation, whereas, in actual fact, it was elaborately rehearsed daily, down to the last detail. I had the idea of using these timbres and rhythms in a work of chamber music, but first I had to penetrate more deeply into the arcana of this new musical form, whose technique still baffled me. The musicians who had already made use of jazz had confined themselves to what were more or less interpretations of dance music. Satie, in the "Rag-time du paquebot" of *Parade,* and Auric, in the fox-trot *Adieu New York,* had made use of an ordinary symphony orchestra, and Stravinsky had written his *Rag-Time* for eleven solo instruments, including a cimbalom. [5]

THE EFFECTS OF POPULARITY ON JAZZ

I disappointed the American reporters by telling them that I was no longer interested in jazz. It had now [by 1926] become official, and won universal recognition. The Winn School of Popular Music had even published three methods: *How to Play Jazz and the Blues,* in which syncopation was analyzed—I might even say dissected. The various ways of assimilating jazz were taught, as well as jazz style for the piano, and improvisation; its freedom within a rigid rhythmic framework, all the breaks and passing discords, the broken harmonies, arpeggios, trills and ornaments, the variations and cadences that can return ad lib in a sort of highly fantastic counterpoint. You could also find instructions on playing the trombone, including the principal types of glissando and the way to make the sound quiver by a rapid little to-and-fro movement of the slide, and there were clarinet manuals exploiting all the new technical possibilities opened up by jazz. Even in Harlem, the charm had been broken for me. White men, snobs in search of exotic color, sightseers curious to hear Negro music, had penetrated to even the most secluded corners. That is why I gave up going. [6]

William Grant Still

1895–1978

Still had a varied training that included learning the violin and oboe, attending Oberlin Conservatory, studying composition with Varèse, and working for several years with W. C. Handy. His lifelong ambition was to found an African American tradition of classical music, a goal exemplified in his best-known work, the Afro-American Symphony. *Four other symphonies followed, as well as several operas and ballets, some chamber works, and a wide variety of pictorial and programmatic symphonic works.*

AN AFRO-AMERICAN COMPOSER'S POINT OF VIEW

Statement in Henry Cowell's
American Composers on American Music, *1933*

Melody, in my opinion, is the most important musical element. After melody comes harmony; then form, rhythm, and dynamics. I prefer music that suggests a program to either pure or program music in the strict sense. I find mechanically produced music valuable as a means of study; but even at its best it fails to satisfy me completely. My greatest enjoyment in a musical performance comes through seeing as well as hearing the artist.

The exotic in music is certainly desirable. But if one loses sight of the conventional in seeking for strange effects, the results are almost certain to be so extreme as to confound the faculties of the listeners. Still, composers should never confine themselves to materials already invented, and I do not believe that any one tonality is of itself more significant than another.

I am unable to understand how one can rely solely on feeling when composing.