MUSIC IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

pianist Scott Joplin, it would be nearly 40 years before another opera by an African-American composer was staged by one of the major houses: Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, which premiered in 1986 at the New York City Opera (see Chapter 13).

MCPHEE'S IMAGINARY HOMELAND IN BALI

The music of the Canadian composer Colin McPhee (1900–1964), also featured in *American Composers on American Music*, offers a very different model for creating a musical style in its fusion of classical techniques, Indonesian gamelan music, and the rhythms and harmonies of jazz. Along with Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison, McPhee helped invent a cross-cultural tradition that bore fruit in the Minimalism and Postminimalism of the late twentieth century (see Chapter 14); the World Beat and Afrobeat of pop musicians like Youssou N'Dour, Paul Simon, and Peter Gabriel; and the global border crossings by today's emerging generation of composers (see Chapter 15).

The gamelan, as we saw in Chapter 2, has inspired composers ever since the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. But for McPhee the music and culture of Bali played a more profound role as a kind of invented homeland offering both artistic and personal fulfillment. During World War II he reflected on the years he spent on the island: "Everyone carries within him his own private paradise, some beloved territory whose assault is an assault on the heart. Some felt this when Paris was taken, others when Britain was bombed. For me it was Bali, for I had lived there a long time and had been very happy." Yet the life of privilege that McPhee experienced in Bali was to some degree an artificial reality. Nor was the island paradise free of conflict: it had been forcibly colonized by the Dutch, whose arrival in 1906 was greeted by the mass suicide of members of the royal families.

McPhee devoted over half his life to gamelan music, as both scholar and composer. His book *Music in Bali* (1966) remains an important resource, and he is credited with not only reenergizing gamelan traditions in Bali, but also establishing the foundation for the now-thriving gamelan scene in many North American colleges and universities. Some of McPhee's gamelan-inspired works remain close to the original sources; his *Balinese Ceremonial Music* (1934), for example, is essentially a transcription for two pianos of well-known examples from the gamelan repertory. The piece illustrates his talent for evoking with Western instruments what he described as the "strange beauty of the sound" of the bronze gamelan percussion orchestra. But McPhee's most famous piece, *Tabuh-tabuhan: Toccata for Two Pianos and Orchestra* (1936), is remarkably eclectic, bringing together many of the elements discussed in this and previous chapters. According to his program note from the score:

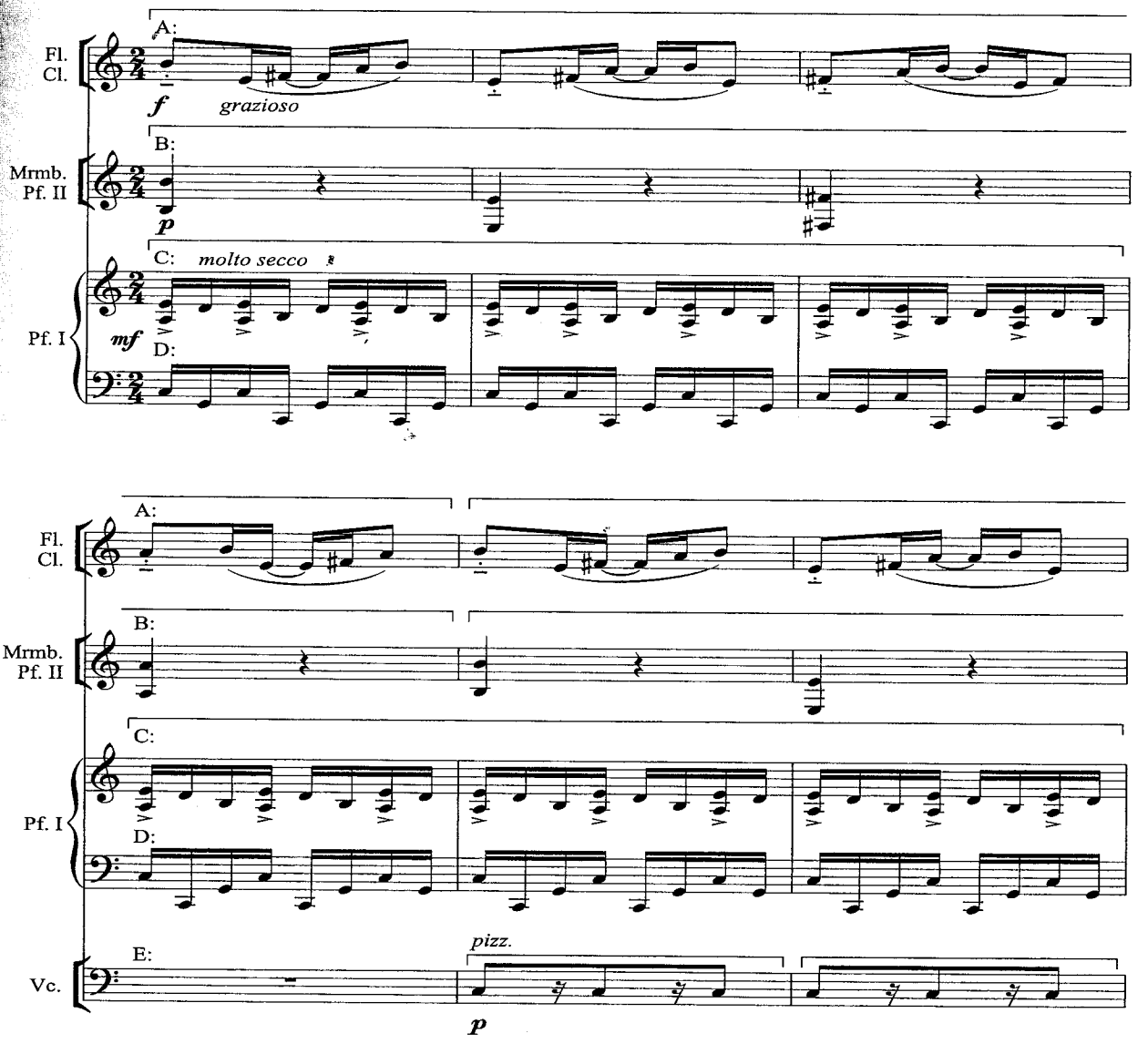
> Although *Tabuh-tabuhan* makes much use of Balinese musical material, I consider it a purely personal work in which Balinese and composed motifs, melodies and rhythms have been fused to make a symphonic work. Balinese music never rises to an emotional climax, but at the same time has a terrific rhythmic drive and symphonic surge, and this partly influenced me in planning the form of the work. Many of the syncopated rhythms of Balinese music have a close affinity with those of Latin-American popular music and American jazz—a history in itself—and these have formed the basic impulse of the work from start to finish.

The early trajectory of McPhee's career resembled that of many other North American composers. Born in Montreal, he studied piano and composition in Toronto and in Baltimore at the Peabody Conservatory. After graduating in 1921, he began to establish himself as a composer and performer, studying composition at the Schola Cantorum in Paris from 1924 to 1926. McPhee then settled in New York, where he studied with Varèse and became friends with Cowell, Copland, and others; along with Copland, he was one of the pianists in the Carnegie Hall premiere of Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* (see Chapter 5). He also joined the circle around the writer and critic Carl Van Vechten, who introduced McPhee to the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

McPhee's works from these years offer a compendium of contemporary styles, including Neoclassical elements, folk materials, jazz, polytonality, and machine art. His career took a very different turn in 1929, when he heard some of the earliest recordings of Balinese music that friends had brought back from travels in Indonesia. He described the bright, percussive sounds of the bronze instruments as "like the stirrings of a thousand bells, delicate, confused, with a sensuous charm, a mystery that was quite overpowering." In 1931 McPhee set out on the long sea journey to Bali, first visiting for several months, and then moving there for most of the next eight years. He built a large house, adopted a Balinese lifestyle, and became involved with Balinese dancers and musicians. For McPhee, who had long been frustrated by the isolation of new music from the public, the integration of music-making into the rituals of daily life in Bali represented the ideal of a functional music.

Another part of the island's attraction for McPhee was an acceptance of homosexual relationships that had to be hidden in North America and Europe; Henry Cowell, for example, spent four years in the late 1930s in San Quentin Prison for having a consensual homosexual relationship with a 17-year-old. McPhee traveled to Bali with the anthropologist Jane Belo, whom he had married the year before, but for much of the time they lived separately. Scholars have discussed McPhee's role in helping to establish the sound of the gamelan as a marker of "queer" identity, for example in the operas of Benjamin Britten, who collaborated with McPhee on the premiere of *Balinese Ceremonial Music*. Such associations help explain Britten's evocations of gamelan in passages dealing

Example 8.3: *Colin McPhee,* Tabuh-tabuhan, *movement 1, mm. 1–6, reduction. Adapted from Carol Oja.*



with unusual and mysterious desires (see Chapter 9). A crackdown by the Dutch in 1938 on Westerners in general, and homosexuals in particular, may have been a factor in McPhee's decision to return to the United States early the following year.

McPhee wrote *Tabuh-tabuhan* in New York and Mexico City during an extended absence from Bali in 1935–36; it was premiered in Mexico City in 1936 under the baton of Carlos Chávez. The title refers to the Balinese word for a mallet, and the score features an extensive percussion section that includes two large Indonesian gongs. McPhee evokes the timbres and textures of Balinese music, with its static pentatonic pitch content, stratified layers, sudden interruptions, and dramatic contrasts. The opening movement, *Ostinatos*, is based on five layers, labeled A–E in Example 8.3, differentiated by rhythm, timbre,

and register. As in gamelan music, there is a slowly moving melody, "B" (B–E–F♯–A), ornamented by "A" with high, fast figuration using the same four notes in shifting patterns.

All three movements of *Tabuh-tabuhan* include extended quotations of Balinese music, alongside which McPhee brings in references to Latin rhythms and Gershwin-style orchestral jazz—leading one critic at the time to label the piece "An American in Bali." Just as important are the work's many Neoclassical features, evident in the subtitle *Toccata*, in the use of the concerto genre, and in McPhee's characterization of the form as "more or less that of the classical symphony." McPhee's description of watching a group of men and boys in concentrated rehearsal also suggests that he heard the music in terms of both the New Objectivity and *l'art nègre*, as a way of escaping subjectivity and expression into a new world:

> I wondered at their natural ease, the almost casual way in which they played. This, I thought, is the way music was meant to be, blithe, transparent, rejoicing the soul with its eager rhythm and lovely sound. As I listened to the musicians, watched them, I could think only of a flock of birds wheeling in the sky, turning with one accord, now this way, now that, and finally descending to the trees.

McPhee struggled to reestablish himself as a composer after his return to the United States, and his life was marked by long periods of depression, self-doubt, and alcoholism. Many of his scores were lost or destroyed. His work, like much of the music discussed earlier in this chapter, soon came to be regarded as out of place in the very different cultural climate that emerged after World War II. As we will see in Chapter 9, although works by Villa-Lobos, Vaughan Williams, Copland, Still, and McPhee have continued to resonate with concertgoers, many composers of the next generation felt the need to distance themselves from styles that evoked a particular nation, folk, or tradition. When composers in the 1960s and 70s once again became interested in working with elements from the past and other styles, their efforts could seem less like an attempt to invent traditions than a demonstration that any sense of wholeness or stability is illusory. Only in recent decades have composers reconsidered the possibility of attempting without irony or anxiety the remarkable and persuasive musical syntheses achieved during the interwar years.

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