

## AMERICA'S POSITION IN MUSIC AND ART



WE Americans are exceedingly proud of our freedom and non-conservatism. We think, and very properly, too, that America is all right, and that she does everything just as it should be done. So we say, but over in the old world, mother of this great, strong Western world, they are apt to shrug their shoulders with a little feeling of tolerant superiority when they see an American striding along in his free, independent fashion, and they say good-naturedly enough, "Ah, yes, he is from America, the land of freedom, foolishness and fabulous gold."

I think, however, they really stand a bit in awe of us with our superb indifference to obstacles. Perhaps, though, in their heart of hearts they do feel a little superior, for they are the older, and, after all, they are right. For in spite of our boasted indifference to opinion and conservatism, we respect our old mother world in a very wholesome and natural way. Especially is this true in the domain of music and art. When we produce an artist we send him over the sea for the mother world to pass her judgment upon him. If she approves, we feel puffed up with just pride over having done something rather wonderful. If our genius falls short, we feel sorry for him, and if perhaps some of us still think him one of nature's gifted ones, it is never quite the same. He has just missed fame, that is all. And so we find that music and art must be looked at with European standards in view if we are to consider the really worth while of American arts.

The state of artistic culture is higher now than it has ever been before. This is not saying a great deal, for America has never had time to excel in these arts of music and painting. We have been too busy in exploring this great country

of ours, in developing its natural resources, to spend much time on the gentler arts. We have been a young country just attaining to the fullness of power and beauty. Add to this the fact that while the Americans are highly strung and nervous, as a race they are not possessed of deep emotional power, and we have the cause for the hitherto low state of artistic culture. At the present day American music is divided into three parts, namely: popular music, negro melodies and artistic music.

Of the first there is little to say, for if we wish to know what America is doing that is really worth while, popular music counts not at all. None of it will last, for its only quality is rhythm, and while it appeals in that way, it is too deficient in melody and harmony. Perhaps it is because America is a notoriously fad-loving land that it likes these jingling notes, and as the country grows older it will cast aside this fad as a child casts away a broken toy when he has grown to manhood. To a true musician, one to whom the wonders and depths of music are an infinite and beautiful possibility, popular music must hold but little value. Imagine, if you can, Beethoven, with his sombre poetic soul, singing such words as "Come on and squeeze, honey, take me up to Cupid's door," or "Put your arms around me, honey, hold me tight, huddle up and cuddle up," etc. I leave the rest to your imagination. Of course, to such minds as ours, these poetic strains of verse suggest nothing but memories of a horrible five-cent vaudeville show which we got into one day by some mischance and we feel a serious doubt of the writer's sanity. May the gods have mercy on the poor soul who is compelled to write popular music, but may they have very *special* mercy on all who are doomed to hear it!

A distinguished French music critic says that of all American music, negro melodies are the most truly musical, for the heart of this dusky race is overflowing with harmony and must

ever express it in songs full of human emotions. We all know these songs; quaint, weird melodies, full of the subtlest humor or the mildest pathos, vibrating with deep humanity and the throbbing heart of life.

For the most part, these negro melodies grew up of themselves, and are in a measure folk-songs. The most successful writer of them, however, has been Steven C. Foster. He was a musician of natural æsthetic taste and geniality, with a sweet, kindly nature, full of feeling and temperament. He has been called the best American composer. However that may be, he understood thoroughly the negro character and loved it, and he wrote songs matchless in their naive simplicity. We have all known these songs from the time we were little children at our old negro mammy's side, begging her please to sing to us, and it was then we learned to love the plaintive melodies of *Old Black Joe*, *My Old Kentucky Home*, *Massa's in de col', col' Ground*, and many others. I mention these negro melodies mainly because, while they are not in the annals of the world's best music, yet some very famous work has been based upon these quaint, primitive songs, and they have been regarded in a very complimentary light by critics in France and Germany.

Now we come to the greatest and best—artistic music. Here it is that the true soul of music is oftenest expressed, and here it is that musicians of every race and people meet on common ground and understand each other. America has sent out her children in this field and has succeeded well. I need only to mention a few of the men and women, who have raised high the excellence of American music, to let you see its true place. Foremost of these is Alexander MacDowell. He is considered a musician of all time, a master of orchestral color, and second to no living author. His compositions—and we all know them well—take their place in the foremost rank of music and he is the only

American composer who has been unquestionably accepted in Europe.

Time fails me to tell of many names, but I must mention one of our best composers, Arthur Foote, who is noted for his creative talent. Then there is Olga Steel, "that slender little girl from Oregon," as they call her in Paris, who has just made a record for women by playing nine concertos in two weeks, and who is noted for her large mental grasp, certainty of touch and variety of tone color; Aileen Cauthorn, the girl from the far West, who has a voice of gold; and Minnie Tracey, who is to be given the honor of singing before the royal house of Germany. We, ourselves, know well Francis Macmillen, whom Europe considers one of the foremost violin virtuosos, and Frank Rogers, the man with the splendid, intelligent baritone.

And so from all these we can easily gather America's true place in music. All over our great land these poets of harmony are springing up, and in them is the fresh inspiration of a glorious new country, and it is this youth and fullness of strength and thought which is winning for America a foremost rank in the world of music.

I think James McNeill Whistler must open the door for us into the studio of American artists. He was a slender, alert little man, with a most unusual appearance. He had jet-black hair, except for one snow-white lock on the top of his head, which he always carefully separated from the rest of his hair. He wore a monocle in his right eye, and an aggressive cravat and long coat. He was peculiar in the extreme. For instance, his customary manner of greeting strangers was this: he would come in quietly, then with a disconcerting little sound caused by the abrupt parting of his lips and a simultaneous grimace, he would cause the eye-glass to bounce from his eye, and having, like the Patriarch Job, "opened his mouth," he would say fiercely, "Now I have just

three and a half minutes to spare—out with it!" Whistler was inordinately vain of his work and considered himself the foremost of artists. Kippel, an intimate friend of his, says, "I was in Whistler's studio and we were looking at a superb portrait of the violinist Sarasate, when suddenly Whistler turned to me and said, "Now, isn't it beautiful?" "It certainly is," I replied. "No," said he, "but *isn't* it beautiful?" "It is, indeed," I replied. Then raising his voice to a scream with a not too wicked blasphemy, and bringing his hand down upon his knee with a bang so as to give superlative emphasis to the last word of his sentence, he cried, "—now, isn't it *beautiful*?" If I could do nothing else as well as Whistler, I could at least shout as well as he could scream, and so, adopting his little swear word, I shouted in his face, "—, it is!" After which he seemed perfectly satisfied. But the world laughs indulgently at these eccentricities, and recognizes in Whistler's art the touch of a master-hand. His work has a wonderful purity of outline, a delicacy of finish and severity of coloring which make it justly praiseworthy.

Joseph Pennell, so famous for his etchings, has also done much to make American art famous. He has changed many old, time-worn artistic rules with his fresh sight, and this caused a good deal of trouble for him. One of the eminent critics of London said "How dare this rash young American upset our accepted theories and attack men of established reputation!" But the "rash young American" carried the day and grew famous. We are all familiar with his etchings of the great sky-scrapers of New York and Philadelphia. Every line of these pictures shows life and strength of handling.

In the Tate Gallery of Modern Artists in London, I saw wonderful paintings by Chase, Abbey, and Sargent. The old guide, who was showing us around, stopped before a magnificent canvas of Chase's and said with not a little pride:

"'Ere's a h'American one, mum. I thought h'Americans was sort o' savage-like 'till this 'ere h'artist come, and then I says, says I, ' 'E's gettin' ahead o' the Britishers!' "

The old guide was right. Some day American art will be far ahead of the Britishers and others, too. To-day it takes a foremost place, although we have comparatively few artists.

But future fame lies in the lofty mountains and lakes and rivers and in the quiet woods of this, our land beautiful. There lies an inexhaustible fund of beauty waiting for the artist to give it to the world, and in that day America will lead in the book of the names of the master artists.

PEARL SYDENSTRICKER, '14.

