

American music (A meditation)

This program note was originally conceived for the Erato Cd, An American Christmas

"Christmas music," -- this desperate thought tends to arrive in the minds of some North American residents shortly before December 24 -- "is really pretty hard to take." This sentiment occurs after the yearly, omnipresent onslaught of "standard" carols -- their banality, the vacuity of their glitzy arrangements -- has nearly succeeded in turning many otherwise kind and generous people into Scrooge forever.

Where, we may ask, are the songs the mass media forgot to promote? Where are the true and good works of the American spirit? Why are they so hard to come by? The answer, at least in part, has to do with the way we tend in this country to become estranged from our own roots.

Estranged from our roots? That is a heavy accusation, and a hard one to prove all up and down the line: but let us test it with one work that was highly respected in its (fairly recent) day: *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, American Supplement* (New York, 1941). We search its pages for fact and opinion concerning the musical world of the present program:

Some of William Billings' music, according to this once-standard reference work, "continued in use for some time, *though steadily replaced by the better productions of later writers.*" (Italics are mine throughout this paragraph). Concerning early American tune-books in general, *Grove's* opines that "though the technical art displayed...was often crude and faulty, the movement did much to spread skill in singing, to awaken popular interest in music, and *to prepare the way for more artistic enterprises.*" Concerning early nineteenth century hymn books of the less "learned" type, the judgement is severe: "Taken together, these lesser books have contained a huge amount of original music, *but usually of so trivial and ephemeral a character that no summary of them is here attempted.*" I find no citation in the 1941 *Grove's* of the most important sources of Southern folk hymnody -- not *The Southern Harmony*, not *The Sacred Harp*. There is mention neither of William Walker nor of Major B. F. White, although Lowell Mason's biography takes up nearly three columns.

Conclusion: Our official music history has misled us. We Americans have one of the most rich, diverse, and challenging musical civilisations on this planet! We also, unfortunately, have a collective inferiority complex about popular culture, and an unfortunate tendency to make "official" thoughts and "correct" attitudes replace the spontaneous movements of the soul. Too often, the public has been miseducated to prefer counterfeit culture to the real thing.

Much of American music defies classification. The early-tune-book/ folk-hymn repertoire we sing for you in this program is a case in point. The forms are dead simple, the part writing is often rough and ignorant of the "rules." Is this art music? By conservatory standards, it fails the test -- anyway, it was intended for amateurs, not career professionals. The tunes often evoke English and Scottish folksongs (some of them clearly *are* European folksongs, preserved in the New World). But this repertoire is mainly *written down* in books, so it is not simply folk art. The musical style or styles are profoundly atavistic, evoking medieval polyphony or Renaissance partsong, and "concert-hall" singing techniques are inappropriate. Yet this stuff was mainly published in the nineteenth century, so til recently it has not generally been considered as "early music."

Neither classical music nor folk music, neither "early" nor "modern," this body of song is nonetheless true and significant art. It is about important things -- life and death, faith and doubt, struggle and regeneration. It is drawn up, in a natural and unselfconscious way, both from the wellsprings of European music, and from the everyday experience of people on this continent. It is full of melodic invention and fresh, spontaneous harmony.

In the Christmas-related repertoire we now present to you, the timeless contemplation of rebirth and renewal are given new meaning and immediacy. Some of our texts are directly connected to the season; others echo and comment on the holiday themes (the profoundly spiritual ones, not the reindeers and jingle bells). A few of these tunes will be familiar to most of us as "Christmas carols;" others have a Christmas resonance even today, as they continue to be sung in isolated parts of this country. Still others recently received their first performances since the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Neglected and shunned, like the baby Jesus himself, these small American masterpieces nonetheless speak with the clear, pure voice of grace, recalling the inner sense of the season, and restoring a part of our own selves.

Joel Cohen Newbury, March 1993