

William Schuman and the Absurd Profession

Joseph Polisi's new biography, *American Muse*, reveals a complex man who straddled the worlds of serious composition and high-powered artistic administration.

by Kyle Gann

If William Schuman (1910-1992) had come from a smaller country, and one that took its national identity from its cultural achievements, he would be considerably more famous than he is today. His symphonies are forceful, evocative, memorable, and—the word that got attached to them all his life—muscular. His musical universe, divided as it is between boisterous and introspective, between joyously simple and hard-edged, makes sense as a complex whole. His vision was rich enough, and movingly enough expressed, for a nation to see its destiny reflected in it.

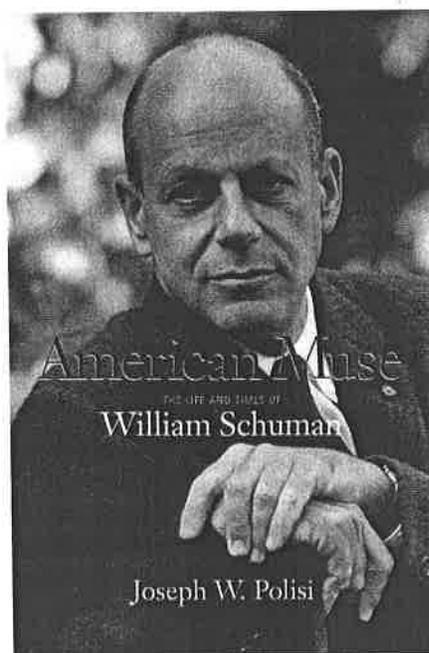
Yet Schuman's reputation remains veiled and ambiguous, for a complex web of reasons. His music was less ingratiating than that of his more visible contemporaries Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. He was part of a generation that got pushed aside and rendered "conservative" by the ascendance of the twelve-tone aesthetic; and his unique, even strange position as a composer who was also a high-powered administrator in the New York classical-music world made his artistic output difficult for many to approach objectively. A grand composer, he remains well thought of today, but far too little played.

The image we already have of Schuman is confirmed and fleshed out in a new book by Joseph W. Polisi, the man who, as president of The Juilliard School for the past 24 years, occupies the post that Schuman held from 1945 to 1961. *Ameri-*

can Muse: The Life and Times of William Schuman (Amadeus Press, 595 pages) is a full-scale biography, richly illustrated with photos and musical examples, that takes its title from the composer's tenth and final symphony.

Here we encounter the boy who loved baseball so much he would someday write a baseball opera; the young man who

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formed "Billy Schuman's Alamo Society Orchestra," but then heard Toscanini conduct music of Robert Schumann and Richard Wagner and immediately realized that he himself was born to write orchestral music; the composer who got off to a late start, but whose native optimism made him lucky in his connections; the competent administrator who actually enjoyed his day jobs running Juilliard and then Lincoln Center, but who still rose early each morning to spend five hours writing music. In its opposite and more extroverted way, Schuman's story is as far outside the mainstream of the typical composer's experience as that of Charles Ives.

Throughout his life, as Polisi recounts it, Schuman seemed to attract enough luck to squander some of it. Growing up in New York City in a German Jewish family that had Americanized its name from Schumann, Billy became best friends with Frank Loesser, who was later to find fame on Broadway with *Guys and Dolls*, *The Most Happy Fella*, and other hits. Loesser and Schuman, born just 36 days apart in the summer of 1910, became Tin Pan Alley song pluggers together. (Still extant, Polisi reports, is a 78 rpm recording of the two hawking their songs, Loesser at the piano and Schuman on vocals with his "crisp diction, high baritone, and precise intonation.") When they parted company—Loesser heading off for Universal Studios in Hollywood, Schuman for New York's Malkin Conservatory of Music—Loesser warned, "You'll never make a living at it."

Yet Schuman encountered early success as a serious composer. Copland discovered him via his Second Symphony, submitted for an award that Copland helped judge and Schuman won. Both Copland and Bernstein were quick to take him up as a cause, though Schuman felt that his heterosexuality prevented him from feeling like one of that crowd. Later on as an administrator, he ruffled many feathers with his experimental ideas about education and programming, yet inspired enough faith in almost everyone he met to get his way.

And when Schuman's atypically light-

hearted orchestral jaunt *New England Triptych* met with unexpected success, he could afford to stick to his modernist guns, as Polisi tells us in a revealing quote from an unpublished memoir that Schuman set down with journalist Heidi Waleson:

"Why don't you write another *New England Triptych*? Don't you want another success?" I always say I would love another success, but I didn't write the piece to make it a success, it just happened to turn out to be successful. Writing music is really divided into two basic elements: the art of writing music and the profession of being a composer. The profession of being a composer is an absurdity—it's not a profession, it's an indulgence. But writing music is something wonderful.

A Sunny Expanse, with Clouds

No one who wrote such stark music could fail to have some dark edges, and *American Muse* reveals an occasional cloud drifting across the sunny expanse of Schuman's life. He had a younger brother born with a developmental disorder, whom the family institutionalized and seems to have all but forgotten; Schuman never mentioned him publicly until 1986. Schuman himself was hampered in both baseball and violin playing—and prevented from volunteering in World War II—by a vague neuron disorder, progressive muscular atrophy. This eventually affected his handwriting, but luckily did not hinder his work as a composer. He professed indifference to negative reviews but was hurt by them, and argued imperiously with superiors. His successes with symphonic works were not matched by his passionate forays into ballet and opera.

And while he managed to balance composing and an exhausting administrative schedule with an energy and organizational skill perhaps unequalled in the history of music since Haydn, Schuman could not keep his professional position and his music entirely out of each other's way. Winthrop Sargeant, explaining away what he considered unmerited applause for Schuman's Seventh Symphony in *The New Yorker* in 1960, speculated (quite unfairly in my opinion):

Some of the audience probably reflected that Mr. Schuman is the head of the Juilliard School of music...and that therefore what he had to say...should be considered worth listening to...[and other orchestras will perform it]...because Mr. Schuman, as head of the Juilliard School, is inevitably a dispenser of patronage in the form of teaching jobs and scholarships, and a valuable man to be on good terms with.

Schuman considered suing for libel. Crueler, though, was the unidentified colleague quoted by influential *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg: "Let's face it, if he was a great composer, then he would have been Stravinsky, and not president of Lincoln Center."

Such inner tensions dot the periphery of a hero's life in Polisi's account, and are not dwelled upon. Schuman was apparently not much given to introspection, and this is a positive, non-introspective biography. As Polisi states upfront in his Acknowledgments, the composer's widow, Frankie, "emphatically stated that she did not want a musicological study that would analyze her husband's life through a revi-

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sionist or psychological lens, nor did she want a theoretical analysis of his music such as she had read in recent biographies of composers she had known."

Both injunctions are followed here, though Frankie Schuman died in 1994. And that's altogether too bad, because Schuman's music is tremendously deeper than his hyperactive life looks from the outside, and one would love to know what made it tick. His early works are marked by a bittersweet tonality inherited from his teacher, the self-trained symphon-

ist Roy Harris, and only slightly more muted in their exuberance. (In Polisi's account, conductor Serge Koussevitzky, midwife to so much great American music, told Schuman, for his own good: "You have to learn to hate Roy Harris.") Between Schuman's Fifth and Seventh symphonies, his music took a turn for the tragic and found its deeper



Schuman Family Archives

At Camp Cobbossee in Maine, c. 1925. Schuman is seated third from left.

personality in pungent sonorities and long, sweeping, ambiguous melodies, creeping forward in rhythms that were hesitant yet bristling with energy, like a wounded animal summoning the courage and clarity for another attack, bursting at last into *presto* percussion. Negative reviews harped on Schuman's audience-unfriendly modernism, but actually his music, so often proceeding in no more than two well-orchestrated lines at once, seems today not at all difficult to grasp: "accessible" in the most unobjectionable sense, etched cleanly in the air with no pandering. "Muscular," indeed.

Whence this change toward so dark a temperament in a composer known for his optimism? Polisi notes that the late symphonies were written during Schuman's fights over the creation of Lincoln Center, but this is insufficient explanation. "One cannot help but wonder," he writes

elsewhere in the book, “about Schuman’s inner world as he created such troubled and tortured musical lines.” The musical tide was turning toward twelve-tone music and avant-gardism during Schuman’s late career, but there was no indication that he was much influenced by trends. Unlike Copland (whose twelve-tone piece *Connotations* fell flat at the opening of Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall in 1962), Schuman realized that the 1960s considered him middle-of-the-road, but he never seemed to feel any compulsion to keep up with anything but his own heart. “Trying to be fashionable,” he said in a *New York Times* interview in early 1969, “is the quickest way to go out of fashion.”

Bureaucracy and Art

The book’s organization is a little unwieldy, its chapters ordered more by topic than chronology. One struggles to line up the major works with the job changes. Polisi had access to Schuman’s papers and unpublished memoirs at the Lincoln Center Archive, and documents his administrative life in considerably more detail than his personal or creative one. Those especially interested in the reorganization of Juilliard and its integration into the new Lincoln Center complex—and willing to read through dozens of bureaucratic

Sheet music for “Lovesick,” 1930. Words by Edward B. Marks Jr.; music by William H. Schuman



Schuman with his wife, Frankie, November 1944

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memos—will be the most satisfied of all.

For all his personal discipline and talent for oratory and persuasion, Schuman must have seemed a very loose cannon to his colleagues. He infuriated the Metropolitan Opera’s general manager, Rudolf Bing, by neglecting to confer with him before approaching the Met’s assistant manager about his interest in managing the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center; stated in an interview his intention to start a film center at Lincoln Center, without warning anyone there; and gave an incendiary speech to Lincoln Center backers about how important it was to promote artistic excellence without worrying about the financial bottom line, horrifying Lincoln Center Chairman John D. Rockefeller III. (The goal of an arts organization, Schuman wisecracked characteristically at another time, should be to “lose money wisely.”) Somehow he battled on until

his institution of a Chamber Music Society—including laying the plans for the building of Alice Tully Hall—raised the deficit past expectations, and finally he agreed to resign, not in very good grace, late in 1968. Meanwhile, in six years, he had launched not just the Chamber Music Society but the Film Society, the Lincoln Center Institute, the Mostly Mozart Festival, the Great Performers Series, and Lincoln Center Out of Doors. Much of what we now consider the galaxy of Lincoln Center programs began in the vision of William Schuman.

The other vision—the one that brought forth the rushing, angular fugue theme of the *Symphony for Strings*, the dark, reiterating major-minor chimes of the Eighth *Symphony*, the hovering polychords of the *Larghissimo* of the Tenth *Symphony*—awaits further analysis. In the final chapter, Polisi seems to partly acquiesce to the common opinion that Schuman’s music suffered from not being his sole focus; I disagree, certainly with respect to the orchestral music. An appendix discusses ten major Schuman works with musical examples, not so much analytically as descriptively, in detailed program notes.

I met Schuman once, in 1986. Having interviewed him by phone for the *Chicago Reader* before an upcoming performance, I introduced myself at the concert. I told him that at home in storage I had a box full of pieces I’d written in high school that attempted to plagiarize the bleak atmosphere of his Eighth *Symphony*. Perfectly in character, he jauntily growled, “Surely you can do better than *that!*” I was thrilled. *American Muse* isn’t the definitive, more analytical and psychological biography that such a towering creative figure ultimately deserves, but it certainly marshals the outward facts. Meanwhile, for a better idea of Schuman’s inner life, we can always turn to the music. **S**

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