

Honored Guests: composer William Schuman at 75

"I was 19 when I heard my first concert of serious music, at the Philharmonic. It sounds melodramatic, but that concert changed my life. I didn't know such a thing existed. Before that I wrote songs, I was a song plugger. The next day I was walking down the street and I saw this sign: 'Malkin Conservatory of Music.' I walked in and said, 'How do I become a composer?' The lady said, 'Well, you have to study harmony.' 'How do I do that?' 'We've got a class here, or you can take private lessons for \$3.' 'I'll take a few private lessons and see how they turn out.'

"I was so naive when I started writing pieces for dance band (I taught myself orchestration), I didn't know there was any such thing as a score; I spread music paper all over the floor and wrote out one part on each page, keeping all the other parts in my mind."

Three things are difficult to believe about what I'm hearing. One is that this jaunty, robust, gruff-sounding voice with its frequent New Yorkisms (I keep mistaking "art" for "ought") belongs to a man who will turn 76 next August. Another is that a story of such modest beginnings comes from the man who has written more great symphonies than any other American composer. Ten symphonies so far have flowed from the masculinely American pen of William Schuman, and at least several of them—I'd nominate the Third, the Sixth, the Eighth, and the Ninth, and I haven't heard the Tenth—are among the dozen greatest American works in the genre, and quite arguably among the 20 greatest since Mahler.

And even in today's highly fragmented music scene, my assessment of Schuman's work is hardly an uncommon one. In 1943 Schuman received the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded to a composer, and he was recently awarded a special Pulitzer citation in recognition of his life's work in music. It had to be one of the least controversial awards any Pulitzer committee has ever presented.

For William Schuman is one of those composers, incredibly rare today, whose music appeals to many and offends very few. His music is often tuneful, and yet always rugged; his harmony, even at its most austere, is always intuitively graspable; and his expansiveness and masterful handling of large-scale form strike a deep chord in the American psyche as few composers

have done. Only Aaron Copland's music is more closely identified with what is American in music, but Copland's most serious works are played less often than those of Schuman, who is perceived among connoisseurs as "the thinking man's Copland." You could call Schuman the Grant Wood of music, if Wood had grown up on the streets of Manhattan instead of a Quaker farm in Iowa; or the Edward Hopper of music, if Hopper had painted large murals.

Schuman inherited the Americanness of his music quite legitimately, by studying with the man whom, in the 30s and 40s, everyone expected to write the great American symphony: Roy Harris. After some astonishing early successes, Harris's output became self-repetitive, and he gradually fell from public favor, but Schuman is still a staunch champion of Harris's music. "One of the greatest events of my life was when I first heard Harris's First Symphony (called Symphony 1933). That's still a great work. It's flawed, but it's a great work!"

"Around '34 I had just graduated from Columbia, and I was teaching orchestration (at Sarah Lawrence College). I heard that Roy Harris was teaching right across the street, so I took him some pieces I had written. I was intrigued with his teaching; he introduced his students to early music, stuff I had only known as examples in books. He analyzed the *Rite of Spring*. I learned what composers he admired, and which ones he denigrated. He said, 'Just bring me some stuff whenever you want to,' so I never had a formal student arrangement with him."

"I remember one lesson with him very well. I went over to his house with my **American Festival Overture** (the 1939 work with which Schuman first established his reputation), and as he was shaving I sang him the theme of the fugue. I set some Thomas Wolfe to music, and he looked at it and said it was 'art music,' not 'blood music.' He thought there were two kinds of music, 'art' and 'genuine,' genuine being what was natural to the body."

"Harris was like Hindemith, he wanted to turn everybody into a little Harris. There were certain things he wouldn't permit. He would never let you write a dominant seventh chord, that was like blasphemy to the archbishop! He was a tough critic, and a very good one. That was OK if you were a

strong student like I was, but if you weren't it could be devastating. Not like Copland, Copland was more sensitive to his students."

After a relatively brief teaching career ("I found it very difficult to teach, it's the most enervating of all professions"), Schuman launched into an even more improbable career, in administration: first as president of the Juilliard School (1945-62), then as president of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (1962-69), and more recently as chairman of the board of the Videorecord Corporation of America ("Orchestras aren't going to do anything for living composers; our audience today is a **record** audience"). Most composers, one suspects, would find such a heavy administrative load quite inimical to the demands of creative work, but Schuman insists that he took those jobs because he loved doing them, and because there was work to be done. "If you looked at the appointment book open on my desk right now, you wouldn't think I was a composer, you'd think I was a dentist!"

But how did you find time to compose all those symphonies, concerti, ballets, chamber music? "I decided early on that any system would work except neglect. I figured that what my composing required was for me to be left alone 600 to 1,000 hours a year. So I kept a book: I'd write that I started composing at 8:00, and then got interrupted by a phone call at 8:20, or that I composed an hour and 16 minutes before I left for school. During the school year I could only get in about 10 hours a week, but in the summer I could get 30. I always made 600 hours a year, I never got up to 1,000."

At 75, Schuman is no retired master resting on his laurels. Asked if there will ever be an 11th Symphony, he confides that he's really too busy to think about it. "I have five commissions right now, and the last one is for an orchestra piece. That's a few years down the road, maybe '87 or '88. If I feel that I have something left to say in symphonic form, there'll be an 11th Symphony."

The William Ferris Chorale, well known for giving evening-long tributes to selected composers, will tonight present an all-too-rare such tribute to William Schuman, at which the composer will be present. The concert, which will include the body of Schuman's choral music and several area premieres, will be highlighted by his well-known **Carols of Death** of 1958, and by little-known choral excerpts from his 1953 "baseball opera" **The Mighty Casey**. "People expect that because it's a 'baseball opera' it will be in a naive style, but it's really quite advanced. The choral parts are like a Greek chorus commenting on what's going on on the playing field. Someone once asked me if baseball was important to me in my youth, and I said: 'Baseball **was** my youth.' " The concert takes place at 8 PM at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, 690 W. Belmont. Admission is \$15, \$10 for students and seniors. Further information, call 922-2070.

Oh yes, the third thing I had difficulty believing was that I was speaking with one of the idols of my adolescence. I admitted to Schuman that I have in my closet a boxful of compositions I wrote in high school, each of which begins with an attempt to imitate the stark, unforgettable opening chords of his Eighth Symphony.

"Surely," he snarled, "you can do better than that!"

He didn't sound like it, but he **must** have been joking.

— Kyle Gann



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