
MUSIC

Romantics' Return

Terry Teachout

TO WHAT extent, if any, should the quality of a work of art be judged by its originality?

The answer to this question is far from obvious. Yet in the course of the century-long reign of modernism in the arts, it came to be taken for granted that to be innovative was desirable in and of itself. Despite the fact that every great artist in every medium has derived innumerable aspects of his style and technique from the example of his predecessors, the word “derivative” became one of the most commonly employed terms of abuse in the critical lexicon.

Even after the collapse of the avant-garde monopoly, many critics have continued to employ the now-discredited rhetoric of late modernism—in particular, music critics who object to the growing popularity of the kind of tonal music they contemptuously dismiss as

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“neoromantic.” For them, *any* music written after World War I, be it by Puccini and Rachmaninoff or by such present-day “new tonalists” as Lowell Liebermann and Paul Moravec, is unacceptable if it makes use of expressive devices derived from the composers of the 19th century.¹

It is tempting, and not altogether wrong, to suggest that the last word about such criticism was pronounced by Fairfield Porter, the American painter who was also one of the outstanding art critics of the 20th century:

To say that you cannot paint the figure today is like an architectural critic saying that you must not use ornament, or as if a literary critic proscribed reminiscence. In each case the critical remark is less descriptive of what is going on than it is a call for a following—a slogan demanding allegiance. In this case criticism is so much influenced by politics that it imitates the technique of a totalitarian party on the way to power.

Porter, himself a figurative painter, had in mind here the criticism of Clement Greenberg, whose

belief in the historical inevitability of abstraction was conditioned by his Marxist politics. Yet Porter might just as well have been speaking of the composer-conductor Pierre Boulez, who famously declared in 1952 that “any musician who has not experienced . . . the necessity for the dodecaphonic [twelve-tone] language is USELESS. For his whole work is irrelevant to the needs of his epoch.”

In the event, history proved Greenberg and Boulez equally wrong. Not only is figurative painting still alive and well, but the twelve-tone method of Arnold Schoenberg, which Boulez advocated with a zeal bordering on the dictatorial, is no longer practiced by any important composer anywhere in the world, and no more than a handful of twelve-tone works has entered the standard concert repertoire.

¹ For more about Liebermann and Moravec, see my essay, “The New Tonalists” (COMMENTARY, December 1997). Moravec's *Tempest Fantasy*, which won the Pulitzer Prize last year, is now available in a “creator recording” by the clarinetist David Krakauer and the Trio Solisti (Arabesque Z7691).

NONE OF this means, however, that a mature artist simply *imitates* the art of the past. The following thought experiment may help to explain why. Suppose a reputable musicologist were to announce one day that he has discovered the manuscript of a hitherto unknown Fifth Symphony by Brahms, and that this symphony is comparable in quality to its four predecessors. Then, after the work has been performed and recorded by a prominent conductor and taken up by numerous orchestras, an obscure musician discloses that he wrote it (and forged a manuscript copy sufficiently plausible-looking to hoodwink the musicologist) in order to win recognition for his other compositions, all of which are similar in style to the music of Brahms. Would we still want to listen to “Brahms’s Fifth,” knowing that it is not really by Brahms? And would the actual quality of the work itself be diminished in any way by that knowledge?

Obviously, the answer to the first question is yes and to the second question no. In practice, however, such things simply do not happen. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever successfully faked an important large-scale work of art by a great artist working in a medium other than painting. This is not to say that such a thing would be impossible, but that it seems never to have occurred to anyone.²

In fact, to anyone capable of composing a symphony as good as those of Brahms, it would almost certainly not occur to attempt one that sounded as though it were *by* Brahms. The minds of great artists do not work that way, just as the style of a master is peculiarly resistant to being counterfeited (as opposed to being parodied) by a craftsman of lesser stature. Imitability is not a trait readily associated with greatness.

In any case, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, great artists do not imitate, they steal, and in so doing they

transform their stolen goods into something wholly personal and individual. When a great composer knowingly evokes the past, he does so in ways other than imitative. The “neoclassical” compositions of Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky, for example, do not sound like Bach, Handel, Haydn, or Mozart. Even though they make use of compositional devices borrowed from the works of those earlier composers, they employ these devices in their own highly idiosyncratic ways, with highly individual results. As a result, the neoclassicism of Hindemith, Stravinsky, and their most gifted followers is viewed—correctly—as an original style in its own right.

Neoromanticism, by contrast, has almost always been regarded with suspicion by critics, even though it has been embraced by at least as many composers as has neoclassicism. (The second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* devotes twice as much space to neoclassicism as to neoromanticism.) Is this because neoromantic music is inferior in quality? Or is it merely the last gasp of the same prejudice in favor of innovation for its own sake that once led avant-garde composers and their critical sympathizers to dismiss all tonal music as “useless”?

THESE QUESTIONS are at the heart of Walter Simmons’s *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo-Romantic Composers*, the first in a planned six-volume series of critical studies of modern American composers who, in the author’s words, have “created significant, artistically meaningful bodies of work without abandoning traditional principles, forms, and procedures.”³

In *Voices in the Wilderness*, Simmons contends that the conventional wisdom regarding modern music is in need of revision. He repudiates the mistaken notion that “the evolution of the tonal system proceeded according to a linear progression that led inevitably to the

dissolution of tonality altogether.” He further believes that the avant-garde establishment, as a result of its dominance over the music departments of influential colleges and universities, was able to exert undue influence on the postwar classical-music scene in America, with devastating results:

[Its] attitudes filtered down to journalist-critics, who expressed them in the press, fostering a division in the public between those who prided themselves on their sophistication and disparaged new music that lacked “originality” and those who defiantly rejected “modern music” altogether. . . . This disparagement and suppression of tonal music amounted to a *de facto* blacklisting of composers who failed to conform to the approved version of music history.

Among those American composers who suffered most from the postwar intolerance of the avant-garde establishment, Simmons says, were Samuel Barber, Paul Creston, Nicolas Flagello, Vittorio Giannini, Howard Hanson, and the Swiss émigré composer Ernest Bloch, who spent most of his adult life in the U.S. According to Simmons, these men ranked among “the most conservative of the [American] traditionalists,” and their insistence on embracing “many of the stylistic features of late-19th-century music” made them anathema to critics who refused to believe that such an approach could yield artistically valid results at mid-century. Yet Simmons believes their best work to have

² The Dutch painter Han van Meegeren was able successfully to forge Vermeers in the 1930’s and 40’s and sell them for high prices (one was purchased by Hermann Goering) because Vermeer was at that time a comparatively obscure artist, whose true style was known only to a small group of scholars and connoisseurs. Today, van Meegeren’s fake Vermeers, which can be viewed on line at <http://www.tnunn.f2s.com/vm-main.htm>, would immediately strike any art-world professional as anachronistic.

³ Scarecrow Press, 419 pp., \$69.95.

been comparable in quality to that of such European contemporaries as Arthur Honegger, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and William Walton, and he defines the nature of their achievement in unequivocal terms:

Each composer's body of work is characterized by an overall seriousness of purpose reflected in works of ambitious scope that attempt to address the fundamental existential and spiritual concerns of humanity.

My guess is that many readers—even those well disposed to the reevaluation of the music of America's tonal modernists—will find this argument somewhat suspect, at least at first glance. To be sure, the music of Samuel Barber has always been popular with concertgoers, and in recent years it has also come to be viewed favorably by a generation of critics who do not share the biases of their elders.⁴ But none of the other four American composers discussed in *Voices in the Wilderness* has achieved anything remotely approaching Barber's near-universal currency; while Creston and Hanson were once heard frequently in American concert halls, the music of Flagello and Giannini has always been more or less obscure. In addition, the inclusion of Ernest Bloch in a group of American neoromantic composers deserving of wider recognition, though it may make a kind of sense on paper, serves in practice merely to render Simmons's argument more diffuse and less compelling.

No less problematic is that so little of what Simmons believes to be the best music of Flagello and Giannini is available on CD. To this end, he has posted on his website, www.walter-simmons.com, downloadable mp3 digital sound files of excerpts from the music of all six composers. Upon listening, alas, I conclude that Flagello and Giannini were competent but essentially academic composers whose well-

made music, putting aside the question of its originality, was not consistently interesting enough to command attention. Given the fact that this is the first in a series of volumes, it thus strikes me that Simmons's cause might have been better served had he chosen instead to write about such better-known figures as David Diamond, Bernard Herrmann, or Ned Rorem, all of whom he cites as being "arguably comparable in stature" to Flagello, Giannini, and the other composers included in *Voices in the Wilderness*.

To be sure, Simmons has spent far more time with their music than I have, and I may be wrong to dismiss Flagello and Giannini as minor figures. Moreover, his book is useful and admirable for reasons other than its specific critical judgments. To begin with, his introduction offers an impressively clear summary of the various ways in which the history of musical modernism is in need of correction and revision. His largely non-technical descriptions of the music discussed in *Voices in the Wilderness* are models of accessibility. Above all, he is a thoughtful, balanced critic whose respect for his subjects does not stop him from admitting their flaws; his analysis of Samuel Barber's musical style, for example, is exceptionally fair-minded and insightful.

OUTSIDE OF the introduction, the most valuable parts of *Voices in the Wilderness* are the chapters devoted to Howard Hanson and Paul Creston, both of whom are prime candidates for revival, albeit to different degrees and for differing reasons.

Indeed, Hanson (1896-1981) never quite disappeared from the American musical scene, and for a time he was almost as well known as Aaron Copland or Virgil Thomson. Like them, too, he was more than merely a composer. Hanson ran the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York from 1924 to 1964, and conducted the Eastman-

Rochester Orchestra in dozens of recordings of his own music and that of many other American composers. His Second Symphony ("Romantic," 1930) was a genuine popular success (Arturo Toscanini performed it with the NBC Symphony) and is still played on occasion by American orchestras, while his only opera, *Merry Mount*, was produced in 1934 by the Metropolitan Opera, though it failed to be taken up elsewhere. Gerard Schwarz recorded most of his orchestral scores with the Seattle Symphony in the 80's, and these recordings led to a resurgence of interest in his music that continues on a limited basis to this day.

Hanson's "Romantic" Symphony offers a near-ideal occasion for a consideration of the relative importance of innovation and individuality in art. A tuneful, expansive exercise in traditional romanticism, couched in an idiom conservative even by the prevailing standards of 1930, it contains no musical devices that would have sounded out of place in a symphony written a quarter-century earlier.⁵ Yet it is not "derivative," at least not in the sense of sounding like someone else's music, nor will listeners familiar with later works by Hanson have any trouble spotting his distinctive stylistic fingerprints. Save for an occasional fleeting reminiscence of Sibelius, the "Romantic" Symphony is a genuinely individual statement, one whose implications Hanson himself summed up neatly at the time of its premiere:

The symphony represents for me my escape from the rather bitter type of modern musical realism which occupies so large a place

⁴ See my "Samuel Barber's Revenge" (COMMENTARY, October 1996).

⁵ Simmons points out that Hanson began composing at a time when Debussy, Puccini, Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Sibelius, and Richard Strauss were all alive and active. He was, in other words, "not reviving a style from the past" but "evolving along a continuum still very much alive."

in contemporary thought. Much contemporary music seems to me to be showing a tendency to become entirely too cerebral. . . . I have, therefore, aimed in this symphony to create a work that was young in spirit, lyrical and romantic in temperament, and simple and direct in expression.

It is not, however, an especially *memorable* statement, for the thematic material is both undistinguished and poorly argued. This has nothing to do with the piece's alleged lack of originality. Rather, as Simmons observes, the "Romantic" Symphony consists of "a sequence of emotional states, juxtaposed with no apparent sense of progression, either psychological or purely musical." It is not bad because it is unoriginal, but because it is musically unsatisfactory, even on its own conservative terms.

Not until later in life did Hanson abandon the traditional Austro-German symphonic framework that he so clearly found unsympathetic. Once he did so, he began to produce more loosely structured pieces whose freer form was better suited to their romantic content. The strongest of these works, in particular the Fifth Symphony ("Sinfonia Sacra") of 1954, are both structurally convincing and powerfully expressive, and there is no good reason why they should not be more widely heard today.⁶

WHY, THEN, are they not? One possible explanation is put forward by Simmons, who recalls in the introduction to *Voices in the Wilderness* how in the 1980's the tonally based music of such "minimalists" as Philip Glass and John Adams was greeted with immediate acclaim by audiences who had grown tired of the hermetic insularities of late modernism:

The result of force-feeding non-traditional musical styles to a public that became increasingly uncertain of its own reactions and insecure in its own tastes was a

gradual estrangement of the audience from the music of its own time. . . . A radical repudiation of the intellectual complexity of serialism and minimalism aroused an astonishingly enthusiastic response from audiences. However, most of the composers who had maintained their commitment to traditional tonality all along were now largely forgotten.

Even more completely forgotten than Hanson was Paul Creston (1906-1985), who for a time had ranked alongside Copland as the most frequently played American composer. The son of poor Italian immigrants, Creston was a completely self-taught musician who did not finish his first full-scale work until he was twenty-six—an unusually late start for a classical composer. Despite his lack of training, he won immediate recognition, and throughout the 40's and 50's his works were performed by such world-class artists as Toscanini, Eugene Ormandy, Pierre Monteux, Fritz Reiner, George Szell, the pianist Earl Wild, and the Hollywood String Quartet. By the mid-60's, though, his music had disappeared from the programs of America's major orchestras, and for the rest of his life he devoted most of his energy to teaching and writing a series of theoretical works, dying in obscurity in 1985.

Few classical composers have achieved such popularity so quickly, followed by an equally quick decline in prestige. Part of the problem may have been that Creston's mature style failed to develop to any substantial degree—his music was all of a piece, early and late—and this caused him to become increasingly predictable and repetitious from the mid-50's onward. In addition, his extroverted, brightly colored work, redolent of the optimism of the postwar era, clashed violently with the mounting intellectual sourness of critics of the 50's, who had no use for populists like Creston. As they grew more influential,

he found it harder and harder to get a fair hearing.

Still, it is impossible to see why a beautifully crafted, unfailingly effective piece like Creston's Second Symphony (1944), perhaps his best and certainly his most successful composition, should have fallen out of the standard repertoire. A two-movement work of tremendous rhythmic vitality in which the expanded language of modern tonality is used to ingenious effect, it was aptly described by the composer as "an apotheosis of the two foundations of all music: song and dance." While the Second Symphony breaks no new musical ground, it is a wholly personal statement, and Simmons's enthusiastic summing-up of its considerable virtues is in no way exaggerated:

Perhaps Creston's most remarkable compositional gift was his ability to create music that sounds spontaneous and natural, but, on closer inspection, reveals a subtle logic underlying virtually every measure. . . . In its rich elaboration and thorough integration of a personal and original aesthetic concept into a cohesive work of great appeal, Creston's Second stands as a major landmark of American neoromanticism and one of the most significant American symphonies of the 1940's.⁷

The failure of American orchestras to program this piece—or any of a half-dozen of Creston's other

⁶ The composer's 1958 recording of the "Romantic" Symphony with the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra is available on *Hanson Conducts Hanson* (Mercury 432 008-2). Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony have recorded the Fifth Symphony (Delos DE 3130).

⁷ Creston's Second Symphony has been recorded several times, most recently (and very effectively) by Theodore Kuchar and the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, coupled with the First and Third Symphonies (Naxos 8.559034). Of like interest is the Hollywood String Quartet's 1953 recording of Creston's String Quartet (Testament SBT 1053).

important works—says much about the continuing effects of the now-defunct avant-garde monopoly on our musical life.

IN HIS old age, Samuel Barber spoke bitterly of his failure to win the same acclaim from critics that he had won from American concertgoers:

It's true I've had little success in intellectual circles. I'm not talked about in the *New York Review of Books*, and I was never part of the Stravinsky "inner circle." In Aaron Copland's book, *Our American Music*, my name appears in a footnote. . . . In fact, it is said that I have no style at all, but that doesn't matter. I just go on doing, as they say, my thing. I believe this takes a certain courage.

It did indeed, and it took even greater courage for those American composers who became even more isolated than Barber to live with the uncomprehending hostility of the

critics of the 60's and 70's. As late as 1981, the *New York Times* was capable of writing in its obituary of Howard Hanson that he "stood for a tradition that most of his influential colleagues considered dead." Only a few of Hanson's younger contemporaries, most notably Ned Rorem, would live long enough to see the tide turn in favor of tonality. "The Red Queen [of *Alice in Wonderland*] said you've got to run fast to stay in one place," Rorem once said. "I stayed in one place. Now it's clear I've run fast."

Hanson and Paul Creston were not so fortunate, and even now their music, like that of other American traditionalists like Walter Piston and William Schuman, is more talked about than played. Fortunately, the existence of recordings of many (though by no means all) of the major works of these composers has made it possible for individual listeners to uncover the lost tradition of tonal modernism.

No less significant is the fact that younger tonal composers like Paul Moravec are coming at last to be seen as major figures in their own right. It would be salutary if this development were accompanied by the discovery by younger performers of those earlier composers who were wrongly dismissed as "derivative" because they believed in the enduring validity of tonality. Whatever they may have lacked in "originality," the best of them lacked nothing in individuality. As Walter Simmons rightly says, their attractive, accessible music "had—and still has—the ability to bridge the gap between composer and audience [and] to enrich a musical repertoire that has become stagnant with the tried and true."

For all these reasons, their music deserves to be heard, not merely on record but also in the concert halls and opera houses of America and, ultimately, the world. I hope that *Voices in the Wilderness* and its successors will help make that happen.