

The Imported and Homespun Charms of Our Musical Past

By PETER G. DAVIS

Last year's Bicentennial inspired a furious amount of musical activity—more perhaps than we could all digest at the time. Even after the official celebrations had passed, records exploring all aspects of Americana past and present continued to pour forth. The following survey attempts to catch up with the bounty, which includes, among other surprises, a musical portrait of a Ford "flivver" automobile, one of America's noted painters in the unfamiliar role of country fiddler, and a tribute to the inimitable Henry Russell, a kind of proto-British rock star who took the country by storm in the 1830's with his melodramatic songs and ballads.

The Top Hits of 1776; Adelphi AD 4106. The colonists may have thrown over English rule, but before and after independence our founding fathers relied on London for the latest popular songs and ballads. Here are a dozen of them, including a 1780 drinking song that, with new words added by Francis Scott Key in 1808, eventually became the National Anthem. Originally written as a toast for the Anacreontic Society of London, the familiar tune sounds rather surrealistic in this context, a bawdy hymn of praise to the Greek poet Anacreon, who died at the age of 86 after choking on a grape seed. The other songs, graphically describing the pleasures of wining, wenching and the hunt, possess a bracing vitality, catchy melodies and an unmistakable flavor of colonial society. Most of them are sung by John Townley, whose sweetly plangent pop-style tenor is hard to resist, and accompanied by a perky period ensemble of violin, cello, piano, guitar, bass, flute and horn.

The Disappointment; Eastman Philharmonia Chamber Ensemble; Turnabout TVS 34650. With two competing "world-premiere" productions last year, "The Disappointment" probably received a good deal more attention than it deserved. Written in 1767 by the

pseudonymously Andrew Barton but never produced owing to its controversial political satire, the piece is the first American ballad opera and as such has some historical significance if little theatrical interest today. This recording preserves the best of it, 18 pleasant little 18th-century ballads used for the Eastman School production at the Library of Congress, performed in spicy, cleverly reconstructed arrangements by Samuel Adler who has also added some clever instrumental interludes of his own.

An Evening With Henry Russell; Clifford Jackson, baritone; William Bolcom, piano; Nonesuch H 71338. Although Henry Russell spent most of his long life (1812-1901) in his native England, the years he traveled in America between 1836 and 1841 left an immense impact on our popular musical life. Russell toured the country singing his own melodramatic ballads ("Woodsman! Spare That Tree!", "The Old Arm Chair," "The Maniac"), packing the house wherever he went—today's British rock stars could hardly hope for more popular success or more disapproval from "serious" music critics than Russell received during his colorful career.

Most of his songs are narrative in style, well-calculated to hold audiences on the edges of their seats as they describe burning ships, good men caught by the evils of liquor or innocent lads on their way to certain death in the Crimea. Russell seized on just what he needed from contemporary Italian opera and German Lied, cleverly added just the right touch of popular sentiment and then delivered them himself with superb theatrical flair. Clifford Jackson's crisply articulate renditions extract every ounce of drama without overstepping into parody, while William Bolcom's accompaniments are splendidly alive. A fascinating record.

Homespun America; Eastman Chorale and Wind Ensemble; Vox SVBX 5309. This three-record set focuses on the musical activities encouraged by the townfolk of Manchester, N.H., during

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Drawing by Peter Bramley

When Britisher Henry Russell sang "Woodsman! Spare That Tree!" in the 1830's, American audiences went wild.

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The colonists may have thrown over English rule, but they still relied on London for the latest music.

Our Musical Past

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the mid-19th century: marches, waltzes, polkas and serenades as played by the Manchester Cornet Band; popular tunes of the day arranged for the town's Quadrille Orchestra; and songs of patriotism, temperance, abolition and general sentiment from the repertory of the famous Hutchinson Family Singers.

Donald Hunsberger sums up the deliciously nostalgic effect of the music succinctly in his detailed booklet accompanying the disks: "Each of these groups produced music indigenous to America's thoughtwaves, not particularly profound or searching in content, but rather directed by the honest wishes and emotional desires of these town and city people who supported such activities." Nothing vanishes quite so quickly as pop culture, and it has taken a considerable amount of musicological research to bring this specific corner of our musical past back to life. It is all skillfully accomplished and made vividly immediate in this zestful re-creation of town-square bandstands, manor balls and sentimental balladry.

William Sidney Mount: The Cradle of Harmony; Gilbert Ross, violin; Folkways FTS 32379. Most people know William Sidney Mount (1807-1869) from his paintings depicting country life in the village where he spent most of his days, Stony Brook, Long Island. He was also an avid country fiddler, having designed a special type of instrument which he poetically called "The Cradle of Harmony." Not only that, he gathered and arranged huge quantities of music for the violin, most of it based on popular music of his day. Gilbert Ross plays 35 selections from the collection on one of the three remaining instruments that Mount designed to produce a maximum amount of powerful, rich, sonorous tone. In these infectious performances Ross readily obeys Mount's heady injunction to "take out your old box and go at it, pell mell. . . . In shifting, slide your fingers up and down. You know what I mean." Only a Bicentennial could spawn such an outrageously entertaining curio, complete with an authoritative fact-filled essay on Mount and his various activities by art and music critic Alfred Frankenstein.

Cousins: Gerard Schwarz, trumpet; Ronald Barron, trombone; Kenneth Cooper, piano; Nonesuch H 71341. This record apotheosizes that magic moment in every summertime band concert when the cornet or trombone soloist steps forward for his specialty number. Here are a dozen of the best, written by such colorful turn-of-the-century composer-performers as Herbert L. Clarke and Arthur Pryor, performed in spectacular fashion by two of their most talented modern-day counterparts. The tone of this amiable recital—waltzes, polkas, one-steps, variations—catches the unique flavor of American country bandstand music in all its easygoing, tuneful, eager-to-please exuberance. The joyful title number by Clarke, in which the two instruments meet as equally paired virtuoso "Cousins," tells it all.

Beach: Violin Sonata, Op. 34; Foote: Violin Sonata, Op. 20; Joseph Silverstein, violin; Gilbert Kalish, piano; New World Records NW 268. Foote: Violin Sonata, Op. 20; Carpenter: Violin Sonata; Eugene Gratovich, violin; Regis Benoit, piano; Orion ORS 76243. Beach: Piano Concerto, Op. 45; Mason: Prelude and Fugue, Op. 20; Mary Louise Boehm, piano; Westphalian Symphony Orchestra, Siegfried Landau, cond.; Turnabout TVS 34665. The so-called "Boston Classicists," a large and influential group of New England composers who flourished during the early years of this

century, have had a pretty bad press over the past several decades. Even the Bicentennial retrospectives have not been very successful in refurbishing their reputations as misplaced German Romantics and slavish imitators of Brahms.

No doubt European influences prevailed in their compositions, but this hardly prevented them from writing skillfully, expressively and even at times with unexpected individuality. Now that a mere mention of her name no longer produces an automatic smirk, Mrs. H.H.A. Beach (1867-1944) seems to be recovering from the twin onus of being a woman and a Boston Classicist. On the basis of her Violin Sonata and Piano Concerto, only two major works from her large output, she was a superbly trained composer who projected a strong musical personality and considerable depth of feeling. Ironically, her melodic invention, bold harmonic coloring and spacious architectural sense seems more rugged and virile than Arthur Foote's (1853-1937) in his more conventional although thoroughly pleasant Violin Sonata. John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951) draws on the French school for his pungent Violin Sonata and Daniel Gregory Mason (1873-1953) bears the standard of classical purity in the best Teutonic tradition. While these three interesting disks may not show American composers at their most original, they do offer music that is highly enjoyable, well-crafted and occasionally even eloquent.

Converse: Endymion's Narrative; Flivver Ten Million; Chadwick: Euterpe; Louisville LS 753. Foote: **Francesca da Rimini; Bird: Carnival Scene; Ornstein: Nocturne and Dance of the Fates; Louisville LS 754; Louisville Orchestra, Jorge Mester, cond.** In their large-scale orchestral works, the Bostonians frequently favored programmatic tone poems on themes from classical antiquity. The three examples by Converse, Chadwick and Foote performed here are frankly pretty pallid statements, although Converse's musical tribute to Henry Ford's "flivver" automobile has moments of genuine wit while celebrating the horseless carriage as a heroic symbol of "the indomitable spirit of America." The real discovery on these disks, however, is Leo Ornstein's sumptuously orchestrated and powerfully brooding Nocturne and Dance composed in 1935.

Piano Music in America: 1900-1945; Roger Shields; Vox SVBX 5303. The second volume in Vox's comprehensive survey of American keyboard music (the first, with Neely Bruce, covered the 19th century and the third, again featuring Roger Shields, will examine the post-war scene) is a revealing compendium of diverse styles and trends, containing a lot of intriguing music along with a few minor problems. The compositions are presented in a hodge-podge fashion, several works are not complete (only movements from sonatas by Ives and Barber, and excerpts from suites by Griffes, Riegger and MacDowell), and the works by Ives, MacDowell, Gershwin, Sessions, Copland and Barber are already well represented on disk.

Even so, there is still a great deal left to discover—George Antheil's aggressively motoristic "Airplane" Sonata, Ruggles's granite-like "Evocations," Piston's suave Passacaglia, Harris's broadly sonorous First Sonata and Thomson's pithily inventive Sonata No. 3. It's an instructive as well as entertaining panorama of American music during a time of ferment, rapid development and new ideas, while Shields's accurate fingerwork and obvious sympathy for the wide-ranging material provide a most stimulating guide. ■