

STUDIES
OF
CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN COMPOSERS

BY
JOHN TASKER HOWARD

ALEXANDER RUSSELL

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TO GAIN a full knowledge and appreciation of a man's creative efforts, it is essential that we be familiar, both with the man himself, and with whatever accomplishments he may possess in other directions. Whether the connection be allied or remote, each of his activities exerts its influence on his writings, either by stimulation or by limitation.

In the case of Alexander Russell his several activities may be said to have both stimulated and limited his work in musical composition. He is known to the public in four distinct capacities—as composer, as organist, as concert director of the Wanamaker Auditorium in New York, and as director of music at Princeton University. The stimulation has sprung from his constant understanding of the needs of the public; the limitation is due to insistent demands on his time, and the fact that continued association with the efforts of those who perform under his direction, has so developed his critical faculties that he permits the public to hear only the best of what he himself creates.

In a sense, Russell provides poor copy for the biographer. We find a man possessed of few peculiarities, a sane, unruffled individual whose heart is seldom on his coat-sleeve, a cultured gentleman into whose affairs it would be intrusion to pry too

deeply. His music commands the same respect as the man himself. In all he writes there is a stability, a dignity, a command of musical resources that show a thoughtful, painstaking temperament. Every note has its purpose, nothing is wasted.

The artistic temperament is present withal. Not the all too common interpretation of the term, but the true artistic temperament, which is itself a keen perception of beauty, and the ability to express a beautiful idea in an art form. Russell is essentially a melodist, and while he is never afraid of saying the obvious to avoid distortion, his melodies have a rare distinction. He has composed much, and published little. He is his own critic, his own eliminator, and as a consequence, nothing he has offered has been rejected by publishers.

George Alexander Russell was born in Franklin, Tenn., on October 2nd, 1881. His father was a Presbyterian minister, and his mother, an accomplished musician, was directly descended from Israel Putnam of revolutionary fame. During the early years of Russell's life the family moved frequently, as the father's pastorate was changed from one locality to another. When Alexander was three they took up residence in Nashville, at five they went to Mississippi, and later to Texas.

Although he showed an intense love of music at an early age, the young Russell received no serious instruction until he was ten years old, when he had his first lessons from his mother. His natural finger dexterity and his musical ear contributed to his rapid progress, and it was soon decided that music should be his profession. He was accordingly entered in the Fine Arts College of Syracuse University at the age of sixteen, from which he was subsequently graduated in 1901 with high honors, and awarded the annual post-graduate scholarship for further study in music.

His teachers at Syracuse were steeped in the best traditions. Geo. A. Parker, his organ teacher, was artistically descended from Mendelssohn, being himself a pupil of Mendelssohn's

pupil Faisst. Russell's piano teacher, Adolf Frey, had previously been a fellow student with Richard Strauss; and William Berwald, with whom Russell studied harmony and composition, had himself studied with Rheinberger and Faisst.

The year following graduation Russell was appointed a member of the Syracuse faculty, the institution that was later to honor him, in 1921, with the degree of Doctor of Music, the only degree of the kind ever conferred by Syracuse. He remained there for four years, teaching piano and organ, as well as occupying the position of organist in several prominent churches.

In 1906, upon leave of absence from Syracuse, he went abroad for further study. During the years spent in Berlin and Paris he studied with the finest teachers available. He first went to Leopold Godowsky for piano instruction, and from this master acquired a physical relaxation that has been invaluable to him as pianist and organist. He found Godowsky a great pedagogue, strict for perfection and accuracy, in every detail of technique and interpretation. With his technique permanently acquired, Russell then went on to Harold Bauer, who further stimulated his imagination and made him self-reliant. Russell studied organ, as well as composition, orchestration and fugue, with Charles Marie Widor, but it is to Edgar Stillman Kelley, the American composer, then resident abroad, that we owe the fact that Russell is to-day a composer himself. As a student, Russell had studied theory and composition merely as an adjunct to well-rounded musicianship, but with Kelley's encouragement he conceived the ambition to become a composer. Kelley's smiling injunction, "Write much, but don't publish it," has been Russell's text ever since, and this admonition, together with his own instinct for self-criticism, is no doubt responsible for the fact that to date Russell has published little more than a score of compositions altogether.

In 1908 Russell made his debut in Paris as a concert pianist with marked success. Upon his return to America during the

fall of that year, he toured the country as a pianist, both alone and in joint recital with other artists, among whom were Reinald Werrenrath, Florence Hinkle and John Barnes Wells.

Two years later he retired from the concert field to assume a post that has provided one of his chief activities, for, in 1910, he was called to assume the direction of the Wanamaker auditorium, a position which he has held ever since. In this auditorium Russell has played and directed thousands of concerts, and given a wealth of free music to the people of New York, and visitors to the metropolis. In this concert hall he has given the public its first hearing of many prominent artists now before the public, among them Anna Case, Forrest Lamont, Mary Mellish, Royal Dadmun, and Leo Ornstein. He has brought to America two of the world's most famous organists, Marcel Dupré and Charles M. Courboin. In 1919 Russell was appointed general director of the larger concerts of both the New York and Philadelphia Wanamaker stores.

The year 1915 witnessed what Russell himself designates the most important event of his life—marriage to Miss Eloise Holden of Syracuse. Miss Holden had been a professional singer prior to her marriage, and the two had been brought together by mutual interests and sympathies.

Russell commenced his work at Princeton in 1917, when he was appointed to the Henry Clay Frick chair of music, with the additional title of director of music for the University. By rare diplomacy he has achieved a signal success at Princeton, for he has made good music popular and altogether *au fait* among the students. This has not been easily accomplished, for it was only by slow methods that time-honored prejudices could be beaten down. While the direction of the college choir demanded only musicianship and leadership, the glee club was quite a different affair, for prior to the days of Russell at Princeton, and Davidson at Harvard, college glee clubs were not distinguished for their singing of the classics.

With characteristic tact Russell made no attempt to force Bach and Handel upon the glee club singers, but after he had won their confidence he suggested the formation of another organization, subsequently named the Princeton Choristers. It was agreed that the programs of the latter organization should consist of none but the best in choral music. Success came slowly, but after the first concert had won an ovation, new members flocked to the colors, and shortly afterward the officers of the glee club, whose membership duplicated that of the choristers, called on Dr. Russell, and asked that the two organizations be merged. To-day the combined societies are known as the Princeton Choristers Glee Club.

In addition to these activities Dr. Russell has made his lectures on music appreciation one of the most popular courses in the curriculum, in spite of the fact that at present students gain no graduation credits by attending the music classes. His Sunday afternoon organ recitals, held fortnightly during the college year, are regularly crowded to the doors.

Russell's taste in music is reflected in his own compositions. He believes in modern music, for like everything else, music must progress or it slips backward. Music has by no means stopped with Wagner, and he is confident that but a few years hence another musical giant will take rank with the milestones of the past: Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Debussy. Perhaps this colossus will be Stravinsky, the most forceful and individual of present-day composers; a man whose utterance is almost brutal in its frankness.

The work of the lesser impressionists, Bartok, Schoenberg, Milhaud, Satie, Varese, Prokofieff, Casella, is valuable, according to Dr. Russell, as experimentation rather than as achievement. With their feet on the carpet of the Romantic School, these men are trying to develop a new dimension in music, to give perspective to the facade of its structure. The orchestra, by its variety of instrumental coloring, has always been able to

bring perspective to the *hearing* of a composition, but the impressionist composers seek to make this new dimension inherent in the music itself—almost in the printed page.

Russell holds that Stravinsky has actually succeeded in doing this. By his use of polytonality he gives perspective to that which former harmonic systems would have rendered a flat surface.

In his own music Russell seeks color rather than structure, and although none of his writings are impressionistic, there is ever present a decidedly modern spirit.

The first of his published works was a song, *Sunset*, issued in 1910, the year he assumed his directorate of the Wanamaker Auditorium. The solidity that characterizes all of Russell's compositions is apparent in this first opus, as well as a consistency of idea, a unity of purpose that welds the parts into a perfect whole. The melody is almost religious in character, and is well adapted to the verses of Sidney Lanier. Another song, *My Heaven*, was also published in 1910. Like *Sunset*, it is straightforward, and goes straight to its goal.

In the following year, 1911, Russell's publishers issued four songs: a setting of Heine's *Wenn ich in deine Augen seh'*; *The Sacred Fire*; a rollickingly humorous treatment of Oliver Goldsmith's *Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog*; and *Expectation*, to verses by John Hay. As in the first songs, these works show their composer's grasp of his idiom, and the natural warmth of his melodic gift.

Three songs were issued in 1912; a stirring, virile setting of Berton Braley's *Gipsy Song*; *My True Love Lies Asleep*; and a sacred song, *The Prayer Perfect*, to verses of James Whitcomb Riley.

In the two songs published in 1915, Russell shows a whimsicality and wistful tenderness beautifully adapted to the poems chosen. In *The Blue Bonnet*, to a poem by Ada Stewart Shelton,

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he writes a simple melody that has sweetness without being cloying, that is singable without becoming obvious.

The Patient Lover, with words by John Kendrick Bangs catches the exact spirit of the poet's confidence that Patricia will change her mind at thirty-four.

In 1916 Dr. Russell published one of his finest songs, *In Fountain Court*, almost flawless in construction, with a melodic restfulness that establishes a mood perfectly adapted to the drowsiness of the poem. The second stanza opens with an enharmonic change that ushers in the lines:

"A waiting ghost, in the blue sky,
The white-curved moon;"

Rapidly shifting tonalities accompany the words:

"June, hushed and breathless waits,
And I wait too with June."

A broad climax sustains the command:

"Love come soon!"

and a lingering reminiscence of the first stanza completes the song with the words:

"Come thro' the ling'ring afternoon,"

with the sleepy repetition:

"Love come soon."

The enharmonic changes employed in this admirable song are characteristic of Russell. His delight in sudden key changes would almost constitute a mannerism were they less effectively used.

Two years later appeared the song which ranks with *In Fountain Court* as the best examples of Russell's song writing, a lyric from Tagore, *I Hold Her Hands*. This work shows the composer's feeling for modernism, a modernism which does not sacrifice the traditional. An unusual melodic figure characterizes the accompaniment and forms the basis of the entire song.

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It consists of two measures. In the first measure there is an almost startling, unprepared retardation:—



immediately followed, in the next measure, by an unprepared suspension.



Superimposed on this motive, and its development, the composer has provided a voice part that melodically and rhythmically matches every inflection of Tagore's prose-like poem. In quasi-recitative style the melodic line retains all of the quiet, restrained dignity of the text. The last lines of the song rank with the finest writing in American song literature:—

Penseroso

How can the bod - y touch the flow'r which on-ly the spir - it may

touch? the spir - it touch?

pp allargando *dim.*

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Note the color lent by the parallel fifths, and the sighing resignation of the final measures.

Russell's most extended and important work is the suite for organ, *St. Lawrence Sketches*, published in 1921. The conception of the work is in reality orchestral, and the organ registration suggests orchestral coloring and instrumentation. The first movement is entitled *The Citadel at Quebec*.

First we hear the rugged first theme, suggesting the towering rocks crowned with the citadel.



immediately followed by:—



This theme is quite British, while the second theme is Latin in character:—



supposedly representing the French element in the early struggle for the possession of Canada. The development portion is a vivid battle of themes, depicting the war over the division of the continent. In one passage the second theme is given contrapuntally with the first theme, thus:—



Near the close, the Latin theme emerges triumphant, symbolizing the fact that the French have always predominated in Quebec, even though the government of Canada is British.

Then, at the end, we hear a brusque suggestion of the Anglo-Saxon theme.

The second number of the suite is *The Bells of St. Anne de Beaupre*. It opens with the actual notes of the chimes at St.

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Anne Church, Beupre, then a stately theme suggesting the gathering of the faithful.

This theme:—



is actually an augmentation of the second part of the first theme of the *Citadel*. Then we hear an augmentation of the first part of that motive, thus:—



This is followed by an entirely new theme, beautifully lyric in character:—



After the presentation of the latter theme, with its harp-like accompaniment, we hear the chanting of the choir processional. The theme is again the augmentation of the first motive, now accompanied by a march-like descending figure in the bass:—



Then the Miracle, the benediction, and the movement ends with the bells sounding as in the distance.

The third movement is the *Song of the Basket Weaver*, and represents an old French-Canadian woman, who sits at the door of her cabin, singing a song of long ago while her deft fingers fashion a basket of river grasses.

The opening bars suggest the dextrous weaving:—



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The principal melody is like a folk-song:—



The treatment is simple and enhances the naive beauty of the theme. A. Walter Kramer has transcribed this movement for violin and piano.

The Finale, *Up the Saguenay*, is brilliant in character, and is accompanied by the following program:

“Over the deep, mysterious waters of the Saguenay broods the spirit of vanished romance, the solitude of forest covered mountains. Along the upper reaches, the river rolls past two vast Capes, Eternity and Trinity, which rise like twin Gibaltars on guard. High against the gaunt rocks of Trinity stands a statue of the Virgin, erected by grateful mariners. Beyond are wide waters, sweeping fields reaching to a distant horizon.”

In this movement we hear frequent recurrences of themes used earlier in the suite. The first motive of the *Citadel* appears in this form:—



while the French theme of the first movement is inverted in this fashion:—



A new theme is introduced in this last movement:—



Again there appears an inversion of the Latin theme, immediately followed by an echo of the new motive:—



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At the end, all the themes are interwoven, and the suite reaches a magnificent conclusion.

The entire suite is written in Russell's best style. The harmonic idiom is individual, at times daring, but always logical, the effect justifying the means. The contrapuntal handling of the themes proves the composer's command of his technique, and the work shows the hand of the thoroughly schooled musician.

The suite is appropriately dedicated to the composer's wife, since it was sketched at her suggestion while they were on a trip in the St. Lawrence country.

Russell has written many choral works, only a few of which are published as yet. A number of them are promised for early publication. For the Princeton Glee Club he has arranged a number of Negro spirituals. Of these, *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel*, and *I'm Troubled In Mind* have already been issued in octavo form.

For the Princeton Choristers, Dr. Russell has written an anthem, *Sing Unto the Lord a New Song*, with accompaniment scored for organ, trumpets and French horns. The work was first performed at the Victory Commencement in 1919, and is dedicated to Princeton men fallen in the war. It is peculiarly adapted to men's voices, the style is vigorous, and the voices are at all times within the most effective range of the individual parts.

Such is the sum of Russell's published compositions. His success has been far from sensational, but slow steady recognition has established him a sure footing in contemporary affairs. To-day he occupies a firm position, a place far above the whims and caprice of however fickle a public.

List of the Published Works of
ALEXANDER RUSSELL

SONGS

SUNSET	GIPSY SONG
MY HEAVEN	MY TRUE LOVE LIES ASLEEP
WENN ICH IN DEINE AUGEN SEH'	THE PRAYER PERFECT
THE SACRED FIRE	THE BLUE BONNET
ELEGY ON THE DEATH OF A MAD DOG	THE PATIENT LOVER
EXPECTATION	IN FOUNTAIN COURT
I HOLD HER HANDS	

PART-SONGS

DIDN'T MY LORD DELIVER DANIEL?	/	/	/	/	T.T.B.B.
I'M TROUBLED IN MIND	/	/	/	/	T.T.B.B.

FOR ORGAN

ST. LAWRENCE SKETCHES

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. The Citadel at Quebec | 3. Song of the Basket Weaver |
| 2. The Bells of St. Anne de Beaupre | 4. Up the Saguenay |

IN PREPARATION

WALTZ-PASSACAGLIA (*Piano*)

SING UNTO THE LORD	/	/	/	T.T.B.B.
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