Advancing Americanization Through Music

Calling For a Higher Standard of Musical Understanding in America, An Eminent Authority on Music Gives His Candid Opinion of the Needs of Musical Education A mong the People of Our Country

PEOPLE who have become interested and, in a measure, have responded to the country's call for workers in the Americanization movement, are all agreed that America's wonderful blend of musical strains, that happily enough speak a universal language, may be made a potential factor in turning into uniformity every unit of our people, no matter where they come from, if means are developed to draw from these wellsprings of the human heart the deeper emotions that are attached to these treasures brought from many distant shores.

An American educator, Dr. A. T. Davison, speaking recently on the enobling influence of music, before a large force of service workers of an Eastern city, delivered the following masterful review of music in America. So thoroughly has Dr. Davison covered the subject that every American interested in cultivating the nobler qualities of our people should be able to draw from his discussion of the subject a practical lesson, suggestive of personal service, to make the people of America sing, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the northern to the southern boundary line.

The Boston Transcript originally published Dr. Davison's address, but as Western Americans are as much in need of corrected musical vision and understanding as the Americans of the Eastern shores of our broad land, we deem it in the interest of America's musical progress to give space in this magazine for Dr. Davison's discourse on music.

I HAVE been asked to speak on "some popular misconceptions of popular music," and of the many common fallacies which group themselves about the music of the people, I have selected four for your consideration. But first, after the philosophical manner, let me define my terms. What do I mean by the word "popular?" Certainly I do not mean "generally preferred," as in the sense of a "popular" man: by "popular" I mean "generally accepted," just as prohibition, though not, perhaps, generally preferred, is, perforce, generally accepted. It is indeed difficult to understand why we should assume that what we call "popular" music is the deliberate choice of the people at large because we give the public in general small opportunity for selecting one type of music over another. If you regularly cause a man to be fed chocolate aclaires, you have no right to assume that he will not like roast beef, until you give him a chance to exercise his own judgment in the matter. This is exactly the case as regards popular music. Composers, publishers, performers, and, alas, many Community Service workers assume that the public will, in general, select that music which is bad over that which is good, and in this they show a profound distrust in human nature. The public, in other words, is the victim of the assumption that "this is what the people want," and the patient and uninquiring American, deceived into thinking that the music we call "popular" is, after all, what he does want, concludes that "good" music is for the delectation of the few. And this leads me to the first of my four fallacies: namely, that music to be "good" must be "highbrow," complicated, difficult, hard to understand.

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The truth is that the best music is often the simplest, as in the case of folk songs, which rank among the best music, and which are, besides, the actual musical language of the people.

It is possible for anyone to enjoy nearly all kinds of music: only the "highbrow" wishes to do away entirely with ragtime. But the sad fact is that practically the entire musical knowledge of America is confined to jazz, rag time and the sentimental ballad. Those who have learned by experience the real value of good music can always turn to it as a permanent and ever-satisfying experience, to which lighter music but serves an agreeable contrast; whereas, the great majority of the public unacquainted with the good, unhesitatingly accepts as its musical birthright, the cheap, the vulgar and the vapid. Most of this experience, too, is second-hand, for in the actual making of music the public has small part. Winding the gramophone or pumping the pianola are first of all types of physical exercise and are slight indications of inate musicalness. Unless you sing, ar make music of one kind or another, and do it spontaneously, you are not really musical. This, then, brings me to the second fallacy, the belief that America is a musical nation.

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Merely because a great deal of music goes on in America, we have no right to assume that she is a musical nation. When our people sing naturally and wholeheartedly, and take enjoyment in it, America will be a musical nation. I have no hesitation in saying that I believe a large measure of the blame for the present musical conditions in this country should be laid to the mismanagement of music in the public schools. It is futile to insist upon a pedagogical programme for American schools suitable for countries like England, France and Italy, because here we have no such musical tradition or background as exists in those lands. To teach the technique of music, sight-reading, rythmical formulæ, etc., before children have a speaking knowledge of the musical language is a perversion of common sense and of the best educational procedure. The object of American musical education should be to stimulate appreciation of good music through the singing of beautiful songs, for without such a basis for musical development we shall never achieve a national musical distinction. The most important musical contribution community service can make at this time is, I believe, to undertake to bring those who have in charge the musical education of children to a sense of what this country really needs in a musical way. The problem is not an abstract, pedagogical one; it is national in every sense of the word. One of the most potent agencies in insulating American children from contact with beautiful music has been the attitude of many educators in maintaining that foreign folk songs are not adaptable to American school uses: first, because the spirit of music is alien; and, second, because the texts translated from foreign languages are not intelligible to American children. From this follows my third fallacy, namely, that text and music are inseparable.

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As a matter of fact the whole question is one of association. If I were to sing you the melody of a folk song you have never heard before, nothing but the general character of the song would be evident to you. If the music were gay, to one it would suggest dancing; to another, wind in the tree-tops; to a third abstract happiness, and so on. Consider the number of texts which are sung to the same hymn-tune. Now to ninety per cent of the public, and certainly to every American child, folk songs are unfamiliar. Here is a field of beautiful and ever-living music, the natural language of children and of grown-ups, the logical introduction to all musical experience, denied our children, either because of an educational theory or because music teachers prefer to use in their place some made-to-order tune which will serve to teach the reading of music at sight, an acquirement used by only one person in ten thousand after graduation from the public schools. Let children learn the music of all nationalities just as they learn the geography of all countries.

The work of Americanization is a great and necessary one. We must teach the immigrant loyalty to our laws and customs, but in heaven's name let

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