

BEAT THE DRUMS PROUDLY: A COMPOSER SPEAKS

Paul W. Shahan

The composer, no less than any other true artist, reflects his own time. However, it is also true that he reflects the past. Insofar as he must to some extent use the musical forms and dramatic effects of his predecessors, he is like them and imitates them. So, in a very real sense, the modern composer draws from the vast storehouse of tricks used by his musical ancestors. Because of this constant drawing from the past, it can be truthfully said that we have a sort of pre-conditioned musical ear; and as we listen to music, we relate it to other music we have known. For example, a rippling woodwind section may remind us of a waterfall or mountain stream, or a skillful tuba player may conjure up the lumbering gait of a circus elephant. We recognize these things and identify them because of our musical past, that is, our musical ear. To illustrate: would we recognize a bird's song being imitated on a piccolo or flute if we had not first experienced this sound from our realistic associations?

By the same token we have learned to associate forms of music with human moods and emotions: the joy of music in a major tonality and the poignancy in a minor key. The tempo of music, being the most obvious of characteristics, is also very important. Here the composer's knowledge of certain psychological truths, such as the listener's response to varying tempi, would influence him in choosing a proper tempo for a given work. Psychologists tell us that humans respond to and are excited by tempi that are faster than their heart rate, and in a like manner, they are perhaps bored by tempi below their heart rate. These truths would be very important factors in composition, for these then become as tools that the composer must use when creating his new music. Likewise for the instrumentation used. Here too the media used are important in suggesting a proper response from an audience. Certainly a lush string section demands a different response from a listener than would a brass ensemble. Again, in order to communicate and stimulate a desired response from those who hear his efforts, the composer must rely to a large extent upon the pre-conditioning of the listener.

It is therefore evident that a composer must depend in great part on the music of the past before he can approach any point of communication with audiences of the present. In other words, he can only build the new emotional experience when associated to some extent with what the listener can intellectually accept, based on that listener's musical experience.

With this in mind the composer's music must tell a story using the language that the musical consumer can intellectually accept or understand within his frame of reference. Here too, the composer may utilize various aids. To expand on this point, we should understand that since the beginning of time the composer has produced two decidedly distinct types of musical composition. One being categorized as "absolute music," which is created according to accepted standards of purity or perfection of form, without suggesting to the hearer any definite object, happening or romantic thought. The second type, of course, would be that which is called "program music," or simply story-telling music. To be more specific, the three elements of "program composition" would be: imitative, narrative and suggestive. In the first of these, the composer attempts to imitate musically

certain sounds and feelings, an example of which could be found in Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony." Here, with the help of such movement titles as: "By the Brook," "Village Festival," and "Awakening of Joyful Feelings on Arrival in the Country," we find the composer actually attempting to imitate such realistic sounds as rippling water, the shepherd's pipe and the singing of birds. Here again, would the listener be aware of the composer's intent if he were not prepared for the musical content by the title of each section? The listener is told what to hear and the brain's inventiveness seeks out those musical ideas that it has been conditioned to accept as related to the title of the composition. However, I should like to point out here that the imitative music of many composers is quite convincing and the listener himself can pick out, without the aid of "program," the actual object, place or event. For example: bells (chimes) relate to religion or church; the rumble of timpani relates to thunder or storm; the snare drum relates to the military, the parade, etc. These devices suggest to the listener, without knowing the title of the work, the exact result the composer is striving for.

Again, by association, geography plays a part in our pre-conditioning. For instance, when we think of the Middle and Far East, we think of certain rhythms and color harmonies, not to mention scale patterns. When we think of the snake charmer, we think of India. So the composer uses this association to guide the listener's thoughts to a specific geographic area. In a like manner, each association then in turn becomes a tool or a suggested musical technique for the composer to call upon to properly tell his musical story. As stated previously, a great deal depends upon the listener's pre-conditioned ear and the ability of the composer to utilize his audience's experiences to build his new literature.

While in the process of developing ideas for "Beat The Drums Proudly," I sought out the important historical happenings in the development of the Jackson Purchase region: the accounts of the purchase of the land from the Indians; the division of the land into the eight counties; the war years; pioneers and early settlements; religion; and prospects for the future. Each subject suggested a mood or feeling which I attempted to describe musically as the narrative unfolded.

In conclusion, it should be understood that the composer does not copy the music of the past but uses the knowledge handed down to him by his musical forebears to build upon. From this knowledge he must create music that is fresh and new for his own generation. His ability to use acquired skills, the awareness of his audience, the dedication to his craft, along with the questionable factor called inspiration all contribute to the composer's ultimate success in creating meaningful music.

And finally, contrary to the popular image of a composer, he may be compared to any other craftsman. Just as a good carpenter must know his tools, the composer in a like manner must know his craft and the techniques thereof. The romantic idea of a composer (a bearded aesthete starving in an attic, etc.) is often misleading. He must know the tools of his craft and create with them. He must be able to map out the plans, organize the musical subjects, and notate them so that others can understand and re-create them. Hollywood and romantic novels to the contrary, no dream or vision has yet written music on paper.

The historical society is most fortunate to have, as one of its members, a generously talented lady who, as narrator for the 1976 performance, added great dramatic significance to the narrative which tells the story of the purchase. Since that time she has represented all West Kentuckians

admirably in Frankfort. And as a most fitting conclusion to my remarks this evening, I would like to ask Mrs. Dolly McNutt to read, as she did in 1976, the narrative to "Beat The Drums Proudly." Thank you all for having Jean and me as your guests this evening, and here now is the Most Honorable Dolly McNutt to read for you.

NARRATOR'S SCRIPT

I

At the time Kentucky was admitted into the union in 1792, our Jackson Purchase region was a part of the "hunting-grounds" of the Chickasaw Indians. Under a directive from President James Monroe in 1818, Governor Isaac Shelby and General Andrew Jackson were sent to negotiate the purchase of the Kentucky region west of the Tennessee River, along with land located in Tennessee. After months of negotiation, a price was agreed upon, and the treaty was signed and ratified by congress. Thus began the homesteading of the Purchase area.

II

The land west of the Tennessee River to the Mississippi had known the presence not only of the red-man but the Spaniard and Frenchman as well. For many expeditions had been sent to explore the territory in search of riches and to lay claim to certain strategic sections. In 1682, French explorations, under Robert La Salle, arrived at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers following a long and difficult voyage down the Mississippi. When they stepped ashore on the east bank of the mighty river, they became the first white men to set foot on soil known today as the most Northwestern county in the Purchase. The first permanent white settlers to come to the Purchase arrived about 1818. Samuel Watson settled on the West Fork of the Clarks River, south of Backusburg. Bannister Wade, David Jones, and James Stewart settled near Wadesboro and with the establishment of the land office at Wadesboro, a continued stream of settlers flowed into the Jackson Purchase.

III

The growing years were happy, exciting times as our pioneer forefathers followed the rivers to their new homes. Down the Ohio, down the Tennessee, down the waters of the Mississippi they came to find Jackson's promised land and carve out homes in the wilderness. Over the Appalachians, through The Cumberland Gap they followed the Long-Hunters' paths to western settlements like Wadesboro, Columbus, Mills Point, Blandville, Mayfield, Wilmington, Hickman, Pleasant Hill, Moscow, Clinton, and Paducah. First, the Purchase was one large county called Christian, later changed to Hickman in 1821. From Hickman, eight Purchase counties were formed: Calloway, Graves, McCracken, Marshall, Ballard, Fulton and Carlisle. New settlements became towns and towns became cities.

IV

Our pastoral lands were rich with new homesteaders, new towns, newly plowed acres fertile with promise. River traffic brought tools, cloth, foreign traders, merchants seeking markets for trade, and news from old friends. Yes, the growing years were happy, exciting times.

Truly a good land filled with hope and expectancy BUT THEN!

The voices of two Kentuckians with opposing views rang loud throughout America. By 1840 the number of slaves owned by Purchase families numbered some 3,600 — 7,600 by the time of war. Perhaps because of this,

most of the Purchase manpower went to the side of the South; in fact, some 60 percent. The war that divided, yet united, raged with great anger around us. Families that had weathered the hardships of conquering a virgin region were separated by staunch feelings of loyalty to both the North and the South. Sentiments were so divided that brother fought against brother. Even our Purchase region was a hot-bed of Union and Confederate encounters. Hickman, Mayfield Creek, Fancy Farm, Viola, Clinton, Columbus, Moscow, Paducah and Fort Heiman were the settings for many engagements and skirmishes between 1861 and 1865. Boys from our area also fought bravely at Shiloh, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and in many major battles, and, on returning to the Purchase after the war, found their homes burned, cattle stolen, fields ravaged and families living in poverty. The war had left all of Kentucky in a condition of unrest. Although Kentucky had remained in the union, there had been enough southern activity in our area where confederate sympathies were so strong that there was talk of splitting the Purchase from the rest of the state, joining with a part of Tennessee, and setting up a new state. However, forceful leaders spoke out to stabilize feelings and we entered a period of reconstruction. United again and building new homes, new crops and new schools. Railroad and river traffic again brought new life into the area and the Purchase was moving again.

V

Religion has always been an important part of our culture. Known to us as the "Bible Belt", Christianity came to the Purchase around 1810. Religion had a deep rootage when planted on the rough trails in the isolated Purchase by itinerant "Cavaliers" who had participated in, or experienced, the American struggle for independence. The vanguard of "Trail Blazers" lighted the torch and kept it burning until new fuel was supplied by monthly or quarterly visits of the "Circuit Riding Preacher" who sang, christened, baptized, and married settlers in the local and surrounding communities. Yes, "BEAT THE DRUMS PROUDLY" for from our strong and steadfast beliefs in the power of faith, we the people of the Purchase erected churches of every denomination to be living monuments and to bear witness to our belief that God's teachings are fundamental to man's existence on earth: "O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing Our Great Redeemer's Praise."

VI

We the people of the Purchase, some 200 thousand strong, mindful of a rich heritage of past history and accomplishment, are now on the threshold of making new advancements in the fields of education, agriculture, industry, recreation, and energy. We "BEAT THE DRUMS PROUDLY" as we embark on the 157th year of the Purchase and stand ever so tall as we dedicate ourselves to continued efforts to mark our Nation's 200th year, only as a starting point on the road to future greatness. Let us use what we have in abundance; our land, our rivers, and lakes. Let us look to the future of our region, our state, our nation. Yes, always "BEAT THE DRUMS PROUDLY" for we ARE truly a proud people with a heritage of honor, and deep religious conviction. Let us keep alive that pioneer spirit that made our Jackson Purchase thrive and prosper. Let us keep alive the concepts of freedom for which our forefathers fought so valiantly; always guided by truth, honor, and equal justice for all.

Let THEM say that the citizens of the Jackson Purchase are people of great vision and foresight. Let THEM call us the NEW pioneers of Kentucky. PROUDLY BEAT THE DRUMS. YES, LET US ALWAYS "BEAT THE DRUMS PROUDLY" FOR WE ARE THE JACKSON PURCHASE.