WHY DON'T YOU RUN UPSTAIRS AND WRITE A NICE GERSHWIN TUNE?

(Through the windows of the English Grill in Radio City we can see the ice skaters milling about on the rink, inexplicably avoiding collision with one another. One cannot look at them for more than a few seconds, so dazzling are they as they whirl and plummet in the white winter sunlight. The shirred eggs are gone from our plates, and the second cup of coffee offers the momentary escape from the necessity of conversation. My lunch date with P.M. is one of those acid-forming events born of the New York compulsion to have lunch with one's business associates, at all costs, "some time," as if the mere act of eating together for ninety minutes were guaranteed to cement any and all relations, however tenuous.

P.M. is what is known in the "trade" as a Professional Manager, that unlucky soul whose fob it is to see that the music published by his firm actually gets played. This involves his knowing, more or less intimately, an army of musical performers and some composers. He must once have been a large man, I think- powerful and energetic. He must have had young ideas and ideals. He must have gloried in his close association with the giants of the golden age of popular song-writing. But the long years have wearied him, and have reduced his ideas to formulas, his ideals to memories, his persuasive powers to palliatives. Still, he knows and loves two generations' worth of American popular music, and this gives him his warmth, his zeal, his function in life. I like him.

But why has he asked me to lunch? We have ranged all the immediately available subjects, and I feel there must be some thing in particular he wants to bring up, and can't. Everyone in the Grill seems to be talking, earnestly or gaily; only we remain chained to an axis of interest terminating at one pole in the skating rink and at the other in a

cup of coffee. Again the skaters: back to the coffee. Compulsively, I break the silence.)

L.B.

How's business?

(This is inane, but he looks up gratefully. It must have helped somehow.)

P.M.

Business? Well, you know. Sheet music doesn't sell the way it did in the old days. It's all records now. The publisher isn't so much a publisher any more. He's an agent. Printing is the least-

L.B.

(Climbing on with excessive eagerness): But that ought to make good business, oughtn't it? The main thing is owning the music, the rights-

P.M.

Sure, but owning the music doesn't guarantee that we sell it. Take the music from your new show, for instance.

(So this is why he's invited me to lunch. But pretend innocence.)

L.B.

What about the show?

P.M.

(Kindly): How's it going?

L.B.

(As though this were just another subject): Fine. I caught it two nights ago. Seemed as fresh as ever.

P.M.

(Carefully): Very, very strange about that show of yours. It's a big success, the public enjoys it, it's been running for five months, and there's not a hit in it. How do you explain it?

(The bomb has dropped. The pulse has quickened.)

L.B.

How do I explain it? Isn't that your job to know? You're the man who sells the songs to the public. A hit depends on a good selling job. Don't ask me. I'm just the poor old composer.

P.M.

Now don't get excited. If you had been in this business as long as I have, you'd know that there are two sides to everything. There's no point in laying the blame here or there. A hit is the result of a combination of things: a good song, a good singer to launch it, thorough exploitation, and lucky timing. We can't always have all of them together. Now in your case, we've made one of our biggest efforts. I can't remember when we've-

L.B.

All right, I get it. You just weren't handed good material. I don't need a map. I don't write commercial songs, that's all. Why don't you tear up my contract?

P.M.

Really, L.B., you are in a state of gloom today. I didn't ask you to lunch to upset you. We all want to do our best for that score; it's to our mutual advantage. I just thought we might talk a bit about it, quietly and constructively, and maybe come up with something that might-

L.B.

I'm sorry. I'm somewhat sensitive about it. It's just that it would be nice to hear someone accidentally whistle something of mine, somewhere, just once.

P.M.

It's understandable.

L.B.

And I thought there were at least three natural hits in the show. You never hear the songs on the radio or on TV. There are a few forgotten recordings; one is on Muzak, I believe. It's a little depressing, you must admit.

P.M.

Now come on. Think of all the composers who don't have hits, and don't have hit shows either. You're a lucky boy, you know, and you shouldn't complain. Not everyone can write "Booby Hatch" and sell a million records in a month. Why, I remember George always used to say-

L.B.

George who?

P.M.

Gershwin, of course. What other George is there?

L.B.

Ah, but now you're talking about a man who really had the magic touch. Gershwin made hits, I don't know how. Some people do it all the time, like breathing. I don't know.

P.M.

(Plunging in): Well, now that you mention it, it might not be a bad idea for you to give a little thought now and then to these things. Learn a little from George. Your songs are simply too arty, that's all. You try too hard to make them what you would call "interesting." That's not for the public, you know. A special little dissonant effect in the bass may make you happy, and maybe some of your highbrow friends, but it doesn't help

to make a hit. You're too wrapped up in unusual chords and odd skips in the tune and screwy forms: that's all only an amusing game you play with yourself. George didn't worry about all that. He wrote tunes, dozens of them, simple tunes that the world could sing and remember and want to sing again. He wrote for people, not for critics. You just have to learn how to be simple, my boy.

L.B.

You think it's so simple to be simple? Not at all. I've tried hard for years. After all this isn't the first time I'm hearing this lecture. A few weeks ago a serious composer-friend and I were talking about all this, and we got boiling mad about it. Why shouldn't we be able to come up with a hit, we said, if the standard is as low as it seems to be? We decided that all we had to do was to put our selves into the mental state of an idiot and write a ridiculous hillbilly tune. So we went to work with a will, vowing to make thousands by simply being simple-minded. We worked for an hour and then gave up in hysterical despair. Impossible. We found ourselves being "personal" and "expressing ourselves"; and try as we might we couldn't seem to boil any music down to the bare, feeble-minded level we had set ourselves. I remember that at one point we were trying like two children, one note at a time, to make a tune that didn't even require any harmony, it would be that obvious. Impossible. It was a revealing experiment, I must say, even though it left us with a slightly doomed feeling. As I say, why don't you tear up my contract?

(I drain the already empty coffee cup.)

P.M.

(With a touch of the basketball coach): Doom, nothing. I'll bet my next week's salary that you can write simple tunes if you really put your mind to it. And not with another composer, but all by yourself. After all, George was just like you, highbrow, one foot in Carnegie Hall and the other in Tin Pan Alley. He wrote concert music, too, and was all wound up in fancy harmony and counterpoint and orchestration. He just knew when to be simple and when not to be.

L.B.

No, I think you're wrong. Gershwin was a whole other man. No connection at all.

P.M.

You're only being modest, or pretending to be. Didn't that critic after your last show call you a second Gershwin, or a budding Gershwin, or something?

L.B.

(Secretly flattered): That's all in the critic's mind. Nothing to do with facts. Actually Gershwin and I came from opposite sides of the tracks, and if we meet anywhere at all it's in my love for his music. But there it ends. Gershwin was a songwriter who grew into a serious composer. I am a serious composer trying to be a songwriter. His was by far the more normal way: starting with small forms and blossoming out from there. My way is more confused: I wrote a symphony before I ever wrote a popular song. How can you expect me to have that simple touch that he had?

P.M.

(Paternally): But George-did you know him, by the way?

L.B.

I wish I had. He died when I was just a kid in Boston.

P.M.

(A star in his eye): If you had met him you would have known that George was every inch a serious composer. Why, look at the Rhapsody in Blue, the American in-

L.B.

Now, P.M., you know as well as I do that the Rhapsody is not a composition at all. It's a string of separate paragraphs stuck together-with a thin paste of flour and water. Composing is a very different thing

from writing tunes, after all. I find that the themes, or tunes, or whatever you want to call them, in the Rhapsody are terrific- inspired, God-given. At least four of them, which is a lot for a twelve-minute piece. They are perfectly harmonized, ideally proportioned, songful, clear, rich, moving. The rhythms are always right. The "quality" is always there, just as it is in his best show tunes. But you can't just put four tunes together, Godgiven though they may be, and call them a composition. Composition means a putting together, yes, but a putting together of elements so that they add up to an organic whole. Compono, componere-

P.M.

Spare us the Latin. You can't mean that the Rhapsody in Blue is not an organic work! Why, in its every bar it breathes the same thing, throughout all its variety and all its change of mood and tempo. It breathes America- the people, the urban society that George knew deeply, the pace, the nostalgia, the nervousness, the majesty, the-

L.B.

- the Chaikovsky sequences, the Debussy meanderings, the Lisztian piano-fireworks. It's as American as you please while the themes are going on; but the minute a little thing called development is called for, America goes out the window and Chaikovsky and his friends march in the door. And the trouble is that a composition lives in its development.

P.M.

I think I need some more coffee. Waiter!

L.B.

Me too. I didn't mean to get started on all this, and I certainly don't want to tread on your idol's clay feet. He's my idol too, remember. I don't think there has been such an inspired melodist on this earth since Chaikovsky, if you want to know what I really feel. I rank him right up there with Schubert and the great ones. But if you want to speak of a composer, that's another matter. Your Rhapsody in Blue is not a real composition in the sense that whatever happens in it must seem inevitable, or even pretty inevitable. You can cut out parts of it without affecting the whole

in any way except to make it shorter. You can remove any of these stuck-together sections, and the piece still goes on as bravely as before. You can even interchange these sections with one another, and no harm done. You can make cuts within a section, or add new cadenzas, or play it with any combination of instruments or on the piano alone; it can be a five-minute piece or a six-minute piece or a twelve-minute piece. And in fact all these things are being done to it every day. It's still the Rhapsody in Blue.

P.M.

But look here. That sounds to me like the biggest argument yet in its favor. If a piece is so sturdy that whatever you do to it has no effect on its intrinsic nature, then it must be pretty healthy. There must be something there that resists pressure, something real and alive, wouldn't you say?

L.B.

Of course there is: those tunes. Those beautiful tunes. But they still don't add up to a piece.

P.M.

Perhaps you're right in a way about the Rhapsody. It was an early work, after all- his first attempt to write in an extended form. He was only twenty-six or so, don't forget; he couldn't even orchestrate the piece when he wrote it. But how about the later works? What about the American in Paris? Now that is surely a well-knit, organic-

L.B.

True, what you say. Each work got better as he went on, because he was an intelligent man and a serious student, and he worked hard. But the American in Paris is again a study in tunes, all of them beautiful, and all of them separate. He had by that time discovered certain tricks of composition, ways of linking themes up, of combining and developing motives, of making an orchestral fabric. But even here they still remain tricks, mechanisms borrowed from Strauss and Ravel and who knows where else. And when you add it all up together it is still a weak work because none of these tricks is his own. They don't arise from the nature

of the material; they are borrowed and applied to the material. Or rather appliqueed to it, like beads on a dress. When you hear the piece you rejoice in the first theme, then sit and wait through the "filler" until the next one comes along. In this way you sit out about two thirds of the composition. The remaining third is marvelous because it consists of the themes themselves; but where's the composition?

P.M.

(A bit craftily): But you play it all the time, don't you?

L.B.

Yes.

P.M.

And you've recorded it, haven't you?

L.B.

Yes.

P.M.

Then you must like it a lot, mustn't you?

L.B.

I adore it. Ah, here's the coffee.

P.M.

(Sighing): I don't understand you. How can you adore something you riddle with holes? Can you adore a bad composition?

L.B.

Each man kills the thing he loves. Yes, I guess you can love a bad composition. For non-compositional reasons. Sentiment. Association.

Inner meaning. Spirit. But I think I like it most of all because it is so sincere. It is trying so hard to be good; it has only good intentions.

P.M.

You mean you like it for its faults?

L.B.

No, I don't. But what's good in it is so good that it's irresistible. If you have to go along with some chaff in order to have the wheat, it's worth it. And I love it because it shows, or begins to show, what Gershwin might have done if he had lived. Just look at the progress from the Rhapsody to the piano concerto, from the concerto to-

P.M.

(Glowing): Ah, the concerto is a masterpiece.

L.B.

That's your story. The concerto is the work of a young genius who is learning fast. But Porgy and Bess- there the real destiny of Gershwin begins to be clear.

P.M.

Really, I don't get it. Doesn't Porgy have all the same faults? I'm always being told that it's perhaps the weakest composition of all he wrote, in spite of the glorious melodies in it. He intended it as a grand opera, after all, and it seems to have failed as a grand opera. Whenever a production of Porgy really succeeds, you find that it's been changed into a sort of operetta. They have taken out all the "in-between" singing and replaced it with spoken lines, leaving only the main numbers. That seems to me to speak for itself.

L.B.

Oh, no. It speaks only for the producers. It's a funny thing about Porgy: I always miss the in-between singing when I hear it in its cut form.

Perhaps it is more successful that way; it certainly is for the public. It may be because so much of that recitative seems alien to the character of the songs themselves, instead recalling Tosca and Pelleas. But there's a danger of throwing out the baby with the bath. Because there's a lot of that recitative that is in the character of the songs and fits the opera perfectly. Do you remember Bess's scene with Crown on the island? Bess is saying (Singing):

"It's like dis, Crown,
I's the only woman Porgy ever had—"

P.M.

(Joining in rapturously):

"An I's thinkin' now,
How it will be tonight
When all these other niggers go back to
Catfish Row."

L.B. and P.M.

(Together, with growing excitement):

"He'll be sittin' and watchin' the big front gate,
A-countin' 'em off waitin' for Bess.
An' when the last woman—"

(The restaurant is all eyes and ears.)

P.M.

(In a loud whisper): I think we are making a scene.

L.B.

(In a violent whisper): But that's just what I mean! Thrilling stuff, isn't it? Doesn't it point the way to a kind of Gershwin music that would have reached its own perfection eventually? I can never get over the horrid fact of his death for that reason. With Porgy you suddenly realize that

Gershwin was a great, great theater composer. He always had been. Perhaps that's what was wrong with his concert music: it was really theater music thrust into a concert hall. What he would have done in the theater in another ten or twenty years! And then he would still have been a young man! What a loss! Will America ever realize what a loss it was?

P.M.

(Moved): You haven't touched your coffee.

L.B.

(Suddenly exhausted): It's gotten cold. Anyway, I have to go home and write music. Thanks for lunch, P.M.

P.M.

Oh, thank you for coming. I've enjoyed it. Let's do it again, shall we? We have so much to talk about.

L.B.

(With a glance at the skating rink): Like what, for instance?

P.M.

Well, for one thing, that show of yours. Very strange. It's a big success, the public enjoys it, it's been running for five months, and there's not a hit in it. How do you explain it?

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