

## CHAPTER VIII

### GRIFFES AND THE PUBLIC: THE PERFORMER AND THE AUDIENCE

It is not surprising that a composer such as Charles T. Griffes, whose self-appointed task was to create the most perfect musical embodiment of his chosen texts, should look to the text rather than the performer or audience for his direction. This quality of artistic integrity was not overlooked by the critics, many of whom considered this his most admirable and influential trait.

Thus we have a contemporary of Griffes characterizing the composer as "courageously espousing the new and the untried without artistic compromise to win at the end of his brief thirty-five years a widespread recognition."<sup>1</sup> Others emphasize that in maintaining this integrity he has set over himself an even more demanding taskmaster than the public.

To please the many was not the task this young American had set for himself. His self-appointed mission was to satisfy himself, and that self was a severe critic.<sup>2</sup>

It is little wonder then that a composer so uncompromising in his standards should also be uncompromising in his demands of the performer. From the very first his requirements remained rather high. There is a pervading quality of technical difficulty in his songs which disregards the shortcomings of the average performer.

For the pianist, the difficulties are encountered particularly

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas Moore, "Contemporary American Composer," Saturday Review, 26:22 (May 29, 1943).

<sup>2</sup>John Tasker Howard, Charles Tomlinson Griffes (New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1923), p. 11.

with the rhythmic complexity so common in his songs. Rhythm is not usually so complicated for the singer, yet other technical demands occur in the shape of angular melodies, taxing vocal ranges, and phrases requiring exceptional breath control or rapid articulation.

Apparently Griffes received complaints from performers concerning the difficulty of his songs. Maisel states that the composer "was inclined to disdain for the priggish misgivings of performers who attempted his songs. Singers must learn too."<sup>3</sup> Griffes's publisher, G. Schirmer, chose not to disguise this element of technical difficulty in Griffes's songs. Instead this element was grasped as a possible asset for selling his works.

. . .singers and pianists of brains and taste who are seeking after the unconventional, with increasing frequency, add weight and zest to their programs by including works by Charles T. Griffes.<sup>4</sup>

The composer made even fewer concessions to the audience who would be hearing his songs. This fact is obvious in his avoidance of popular styles except in extremely rare instances. Several critics have mentioned his supposed disregard of public opinion.

He was a student, an experimenter, a reticent person of extreme earnestness, sincerity and modesty, who worked without regard for the public.<sup>5</sup>

Others suggest that this sincerity affected not only public opinion but also his possible career as a composer. In an article with a sensation-

<sup>3</sup>Edward M. Maisel, Charles T. Griffes: The Life of an American Composer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 155.

<sup>4</sup>G. Schirmer Co., "Charles T. Griffes: An American of Indisputable Technique and Originality Coming into His Own," Musical America, 31:15 (December 13, 1919).

<sup>5</sup>Marion Bauer, "Impressionists in America," Modern Music, 4:19 (January-February, 1927).

alist title but more tempered content, one critic shortly after Griffes's death described the composer as "ever adhering to the highest ideals, making concessions neither for public favor nor professional eminence."<sup>6</sup>

Statements such as these indicate the nature of the problem Griffes suffered during his career in having his songs accepted by publishers. It was the seriousness and individuality of his compositional style, rather than any deficiencies in his songs themselves, which caused publishing firms to be wary in accepting his songs for publication.

### Formative Songs

Even in his formative songs, the demands of the text take precedence over the performer's demands. Yet this group of songs is basically composed in the late romantic style. Thus, while Griffes did not particularly compromise his integrity in these songs, his individuality was suppressed somewhat for the creation of a style more expected by both performer and audience.

Therefore, his demands of the singer and pianist are not overly uncompromising throughout this group of songs, yet generally an accomplished performer is expected. The technical difficulties in his very first song, "Si mes vers," may be due more to an ignorance of vocalists' capabilities rather than his unyielding search for the most exact setting of his text. In any case, the tessitura of this song hovers around a high a<sup>b</sup>. While the range itself is not prohibitive, many singers find continued articulation at this level both difficult and straining.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>A. Walter Kramer, "Charles T. Griffes: Cut Down in His Prime, a Victim of Our Barbarous Neglect of Genius," Musical America, 32:39 (May 22, 1920).

<sup>7</sup>See Appendix, Song 1.

"Nacht liegt" poses another problem with range. While the opening section dwells in the contralto range, the contrasting section climbs into more of a mezzo soprano range, so that the vocalist must command strength in both pitch areas. In "Auf dem Teich" a similar type of demand is made. Beginning in the lower range, the vocal melody rather rapidly works its way to the soprano level for a climax on the word "in" (Example 4). In addition, as explained earlier, this is a reverse climax, which requires a pianissimo rendering of the high note.

The technical difficulty of "Elfe" was observed by Berton Coffin in his Singer's Repertoire. In dividing the vocal repertoire into various categories of technical demands for the performer, Mr. Coffin chose this song to be included in the category of songs requiring rapid enunciation (Example 26).<sup>8</sup>

While the songs of this group are not necessarily "popular" in style, they do not venture markedly from the established style which audiences had come to expect by Griffes's time. Few songs show a definite plea for audience appeal, yet the story-telling aspect of "Zwei Könige" may have been influenced by the composer's expectations of its impact on the audience. Much clearer in its appeal to audience approval in "Wohl lag ich einst" in its almost showy exuberance. What Howard says concerning this song could apply also to many others of the formative songs in their relation to the public. He considered it "a brilliant song in the Straussian manner, straightforward, with few departures from well-trodden paths."<sup>9</sup> Griffes's earlier songs must have struck his audiences in much

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<sup>8</sup>Berton Coffin, Singer's Repertoire, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1960), 1:56.

<sup>9</sup>Howard, Charles T. Griffes, p. 13.

the same way--brilliantly conceived but not totally unpredictable.

### Divergent Songs

In general, the songs of the divergent group are an exception to the accessibility of Griffes's song style. With these songs, the stylistic demands of the text are of most importance, and it is part of the definition of this group that the styles borrowed are of less complicated construction than the styles of either the formative songs or, particularly, the mainstream songs.

This is not to say that Griffes actually compromised his ideals in deference to performer or audience preferences, but it is true that requirements of performers in these songs are much more accessible to the average singer or pianist. In the oriental songs especially, the vocal melody is extremely simple in construction, with only rare rhythmic deviations from the regular meter and few unusual intervals. The Javanese songs display more rhythmic and melodic variation, however. The typical vocal range for this group is also within the middle range easily sung by an average performer. Of this group, perhaps only "Evening Song" for its sustained phrases and "This Book of Hours" for its more complicated texture can be said to approach the more demanding technical difficulties common to the songs of the other two groups.

There are several songs in this group which seem to conflict with Griffes's overall characteristic of avoiding a more popular style. Despite his disregard for public approval in so much of his song composition, these songs appear to be written with more concern for their audience appeal. Again Barton Coffin, in classifying Griffes's songs, emphasized these exceptions, for of all of Griffes's songs listed, only one

is chosen as appropriate for closing a recital--"Evening Song"<sup>10</sup>--and only one ever appears under the heading of American "Songs of Popular Appeal"--"We'll to the Woods."<sup>11</sup> This is not surprising; one critic described "Evening Song" as "pretentious and shows Griffes' feeling for logical development and pleasing use of rhythmical figuration."<sup>12</sup> Many critics have remarked about the unusually carefree character of "We'll to the Woods": "here we have Griffes in one of his rare moods, joyous, carefree, and comparatively simple."<sup>13</sup> The same could easily be said in describing "Come, Love."

Griffes may well have explained the situation surrounding the emergence of these exceptional songs in a diary entry of May 6, 1912:

I wish I could get one or two real big successes for Schirmer and then they would take my other things which they don't want to risk now.<sup>14</sup>

When these songs, and the others of his Opp. 3 and 4, were finally accepted for publication by Schirmer in 1915, Griffes experienced a great breakthrough in his career, as nothing had been published since 1910. According to Anderson, "it is clear that the silence from 1910 to 1915 was not due to Griffes but rather to his publisher."<sup>15</sup> Yet, it must be said to Griffes's credit that his individuality and self-critical

<sup>10</sup>Coffin, Repertoire, 1:127.

<sup>11</sup>Coffin, Repertoire, 2:108.

<sup>12</sup>Marion Bauer, "Charles T. Griffes As I Remember Him," Musical Quarterly, 29:363 (1943).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>14</sup>Donna K. Anderson, "The Works of Charles T. Griffes: A Descriptive Catalogue" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1966), p. 88.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

compositional skill are still evident even in these more public-oriented songs.

### Mainstream Songs

With the mainstream songs, Griffes isolated himself the most from the demands of both performer and audience. It is here more than in any other group that the composer adhered to his ideal of seeking the most suitable textual expression, apart from either stylistic requirements or preferences of performer and public.

The technical difficulty of the songs of this group is often mentioned by critics analyzing or describing Griffes's songs. Yet, as with rhythmic complexity, this quality increased gradually in a chronological sequence. No particularly taxing requirements are set for the singer or pianist in "The First Snowfall" or "The Half-Ring Moon," yet both songs insist on good control of expressive singing.

By the time of his Four Impressions, the degree of musicianship implied has increased considerably, not simply in the more intricate accompaniments but also in the intensification of the vocal line, through metric variations and angular melodic phrases. Griffes showed his predilection for the high soprano tessitura in these songs again, though the highest pitches are reserved basically for the climaxes. In "Le Réveillon" the composer indicated that he was not unaware of the need to take vocal considerations into account. According to Anderson, he has changed the word on the high b<sup>b</sup> from "streaked" to "flushed" in his search for an easier vowel to sing at that pitch (Example 51).<sup>16</sup>

With his Op. 9 the standard of musicianship required reaches even

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

higher levels. Not only does rhythmic complexity make "Waikiki" and especially "Phantoms" more difficult than his earlier songs, but vocal lines now include more unusual melodic leaps and lack the support of doubling in the accompaniment. In many ways "Phantoms" is Griffes's most difficult song, for in addition to the supreme technical demands, the performer also must somehow create an expressive coherence from this rather disconnected song.

Yet the "Sorrow of Mydath" and the last three songs (Op. 11) have aroused most reaction to Griffes's uncompromising requirements of both singer and pianist. That a mastery of the vocal art is necessary to successfully interpret these songs has been evident since the song's first performance:

Three songs followed in which a splendid interpreter was furnished in Marcia Van Dresser. The finest of these, "The Lament of Ian the Proud," was forceful, while the other two, "Thy Dark Eyes to Mine," and "The Rose of the Night," with their extremely difficult intervals tried sorely Mm. Van Dresser's intonation.<sup>17</sup>

The level of pianistic ability required in these songs is equally prohibitive to the average accompanist. In his descriptive list of vocal music, Sergius Kagen remarks for each of these songs that an accomplished pianist is demanded. For "The Rose of the Night" he emphasizes that the musical and interpretive difficulties require an "excellent pianist."<sup>18</sup> In this last song the composer has even been accused of being unable to "resist the temptation to show off his pianistic abilities."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>"Applaud Griffes Works," Musical America, 29:45 (April 12, 1919).

<sup>18</sup>Sergius Kagen, Music for the Voice: A Descriptive List of Concert and Teaching Material, rev. ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 495-6.

<sup>19</sup>George Arnold Conrey, "The Published Songs of Charles Tomlinson Griffes: A Stylistic Examination" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Chicago Musical College, 1955), p. 132.



Griffes made as few concessions to the expectations and preferences of audiences as he did to his performers. In contrast to several of the divergent songs, popularity or "audience appeal" is never an influential factor in his mainstream compositions. Perhaps the borderline song, "An Old Song Re-Sung," most nearly approximates an appeal for audience popularity. Admittedly it "is in the tradition of the American he-man song, though it is musically far superior to most of its type."<sup>20</sup> This song maintains its identity with the other mainstream songs particularly through its rather complicated piano accompaniment and through the increased complexity and more irregular melodic patterns of the third strophe.

While Griffes set his artistic standards high, this does not mean that his later songs were unaccepted by his audiences. Not all responded with the criticism that these songs were too ultra-modern or experimental. Some found the emotional intensity and artistic integrity of his Op. 11 very appealing, as did one reviewer after the premiere of this opus:

. . .in "The Lament of Ian the Proud" and "Thy Dark Eyes to Mine" he has sounded a human note. That is the way, Mr. Griffes: don't depart from it, if you would hold our interest as you have in these three songs.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between the three groups concerning Griffes's relation to his public is suggestive of the contrasts between the groups in purpose also. There is no doubt that Griffes chose the late romantic style for his earliest songs not only to master the style of his predecessors but also because this traditional vocabulary formed the backbone

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<sup>20</sup>Philip L. Miller, "A Label Comes Back: Griffes on EMS," American Record Guide, 29:451 (February, 1963).

<sup>21</sup>"Three Poems by Fiona MacLeod," Musical America, 30:40 (May 10, 1919).

of the vocal repertoire of his day. Both publisher and performer found little that was objectionable in songs of this style by genuinely talented composers.

Yet Griffes realized that this was not his individual vocabulary. Unfortunately, the public, and the publishers in particular, were not so quick to accept his more experimental efforts. Many of the songs in the divergent group may have resulted from Griffes's desire to "get one or two real big successes for Schirmer" so that his more adventuresome works might be "risked." Others of the divergent songs resulted from a strong attraction to contrasting, interesting vocabularies--the oriental and the modal in particular. All the while, one has the impression that Griffes has his eye on the public response much more frequently in his divergent songs than in the other two groups.

Of course Griffes desired audience approval of his mainstream songs as well, but in this desire he was unwilling to restructure his personal standards to better suit the expectations of the audience or performer. As has been remarked, Griffes intended in these songs to satisfy only himself. To do so, he insisted on musical integrity, the avoidance of clichés, and the close observance of textual expression. These songs fulfill the composer's need to free himself from the barriers of preconceptions, to struggle with the materials of music in a personal process, and to expand his vision towards creating a truly musical vocabulary.