

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

In considering Griffes's position in the history of music, and in that of art-song in particular, many critics find themselves compelled to discuss the place and position the young composer might have commanded had he lived to reach a solidly mature style. Since nothing can either be proved or gained by this conjecturing, such predictions are both unrealistic and unproductive. This concluding chapter, then, will deal with Griffes's actual achievements rather than what might have been had he lived longer.

Nor does this study attempt to trace the actual impact his songs have had on the growth of the American art song. Such a discussion would require almost as much background in the works of a myriad of other American composers as was necessary for Griffes's songs in this study.

It is necessary, however, to expose the diversified reactions to Griffes's works by critics and commentators of the music world. Their responses usually concern two overall aspects: specifically, the influences on his style from other sources, and, more generally, his status as a composer. How the study of Griffes's songs either refutes or substantiates these various responses is an essential concern which will be approached in hopes of reaching a realistic assessment of the legacy of Griffes's art-song style.

Although there is a basic consensus as to the most significant influences on the composer's style, there has been considerable disagreement among the critics concerning Griffes's relative dependence on those

influences. Most often mentioned as sources for his style are: late German romanticism, French impressionism, and the early twentieth century Russian school, identified particularly with Stravinsky and Prokofiev. The degree to which Griffes relied on these sources, or, conversely, his ability to extricate himself from dependency on these influences, is a point of contention. The response to this question varies across a wide spectrum. At opposite extremes are those who believe his work was either completely derivative or ultra-futuristic in concept. Those with more moderate opinions described the composer as struggling with more or less established styles for an individual expression.

It comes as no shock that Mr. Robinson would ally himself with the extreme which declares Griffes's work as totally dependent on others' styles. According to him this dependence prevented the emergence of an individual style:

. . .he was little more than a paraphraser of innumerable foreign styles, and as a result his own musical speech was stultified almost entirely.<sup>1</sup>

The author of "All-American Night" makes much the same conclusion, although he is also writing generally about American composers of Griffes's time:

Esthetic development has been the rock on which many a good American talent has foundered. It is there, surely, that poor Charles Griffes met ship-wreck.<sup>2</sup>

Other critics have preferred to stress the influence of a particular style, especially the impressionistic, on the composer's career rather than similarly conclude that thereby Griffes did not establish an individual

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Robinson, "The Life and Death of an American Composer," American Mercury, 30:346 (November, 1933).

<sup>2</sup>Paul Rosenfeld, "All-American Night," in his Musical Chronicle (1917-1923) (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), p. 263.

style. In her discussion of impressionist American composers, Bauer indicates that Griffes remained strongly influenced by impressionism up to his death:

Charles T. Griffes stands apart from these others because, dying in 1920, he was unable to step from his impressionistic period into a further development.<sup>3</sup>

At the other extreme are just as many critics who characterize the composer's career as one of striving for a style which foretold the future of music. The utter conflict between the two extremes can readily be seen by comparing Mr. Robinson's rather biting criticisms above with Mr. Howard's glowing description of Griffes as a composer-prophet:

Charles T. Griffes was one of those prophets who, in their quasi-mystical fashion, seek to tell us of the music of tomorrow; who know that art is not stagnant, and who experiment for us in new fields of expression, ever striving for new combinations of tones and colors which will adequately mirror our modern way of living and our modern way of thinking.<sup>4</sup>

The element of experimentation is frequently mentioned by those who consider Griffes's style individualistic. In comparing Griffes to other American song composers, Upton, hardly less enthusiastic than Howard in the previous example, implies that Griffes was

. . .continually experimenting, . . .dissatisfied with the present, tired of the old ways and means, looking for something different, rather impatient of those who seem too placidly content with things as they are.<sup>5</sup>

It is typical for critics of this extreme to emphasize not only Griffes's individuality but also his persistently uncompromising attitude

<sup>3</sup>Marion Bauer, "Impressionists in America," Modern Music, 4:19 (January-February, 1927).

<sup>4</sup>John Tasker Howard, Charles Tomlinson Griffes (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1923), pp. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup>William Treat Upton, "Some Representative American Song-Composers," Musical Quarterly, 11:408 (1925).

towards external pressures. In a letter written to Griffes's mother shortly after her son's death, Mr. Sonneck eulogized:

Your son was an artist who held steadfast to his ideals and never allowed himself to follow the lines of least resistance in reaching out for his artistic goal.<sup>6</sup>

Although Howard does mention possible sources for Griffes's style, he singles out the more recent forward-looking developments of the expressionist and Russian schools instead of the by-then more established impressionists. Even so he stresses Griffes's individuality in observing these sources:

In a somewhat remote sense the later Griffes is akin to the later Schonberg--,. . . Schonberg the intellectualist. . . . Griffes has taken what he evidently learned from Schonberg, and more particularly from Stravinsky, and utilized the lesson learned in his own way, and for his own purposes.<sup>7</sup>

Between these two extremes are those critics who recognize the impact made by various sources on Griffes's style yet insist these sources were a springboard rather than a crutch for his own artistic development. After mentioning the style influences most crucial to Griffes's development, the English critic Peterkin then states the typical moderate position:

Unlike some of his younger American confrères, however he was never enslaved by these influences, but was able to extract from them precisely those elements he needed to set free, and express his own personality.<sup>8</sup>

A similar view is stated by a much later writer in "A Tribute to Elmira College." Although he opens by listing the composers Debussy,

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<sup>6</sup>Marion Bauer, "Charles T. Griffes As I Remember Him," Musical Quarterly, 29:361 (1943).

<sup>7</sup>Howard, Charles T. Griffes, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>Norman Peterkin, "Charles T. Griffes," The Chesterian, n.s. 30-162 (March, 1923).

Stravinsky, Ravel, and Schoenberg as having considerable impact on the developing Griffes style, his conclusion tends to emphasize more independence in Griffes's relation to such composers:

I should probably say, more accurately, since all of these men were composing more or less at the same time, that Griffes noted their innovations and assimilated those which could contribute to his own personal idiom.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Anderson expresses the moderate's careful evaluation of the particular relationship between influences and individuality:

Griffes was, in the last analysis, a self-made artist. He was neither decisively shaped nor permanently influenced by any one person or any one prevailing musical style--inspired, yes; guided, of course; but never artistically dominated. Griffes' artistic credo was uniquely his own.<sup>10</sup>

What this type of evaluation implies concerning Griffes's position in music history is indicated in Boda's doctoral dissertation. His conclusion maintains the theory that while Griffes's works were not totally independent of strong influences from the past, they were indicative of future musical developments:

In the realm of American music, the compositions of Griffes have created a link between the romantic music of the American composers of a generation earlier, and the modern music of present day composers.<sup>11</sup>

Despite such conflicting evaluations concerning the impact of other styles on Griffes's composing, almost all critics are in agreement on one point--the one influence to which Griffes did not succumb in his

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<sup>9</sup>Frederick C. St. Aubyn, "Griffes, Son of Elmira," Music Journal, 23:31 (March, 1965).

<sup>10</sup>Donna K. Anderson, "The Works of Charles T. Griffes: A Descriptive Catalogue" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1966), pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup>Daniel Boda, "The Music of Charles T. Griffes" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University, 1962), p. lll.

songs was that of Americanism. During the years encompassing Griffes's career, American musicians were extremely conscious of the numerous influences which were not simply available to them but whose power seemed to engulf them and prevent the growth of a uniquely American style. The situation is well described by Mason in his aptly titled "The Dilemma of American Music":

American composers are bewildered by the multiplicity of the traditions which with us subsist side by side, mutually diluting, confusing, or even cancelling one another.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of this predicament, most American composers, including Griffes, illustrate a vacillation between styles, as though the question, "Which style next?", had to be answered for each composition. Another result of this situation was the movement towards the use of "native" American themes or tendencies, such as Indian themes, folk tunes, and jazz rhythms. This composing was very selfconscious, since composers were painfully aware of their dependence on foreign styles and sought to infuse American music with elements of indigenous styles so as to distinguish the American style from the rest of the world's music. In other words, the nationalist tendencies had spread to the United States, where American composers sought to prove their worth on their own merits rather than to borrow constantly from styles of other countries.

Griffes was quite an exception to this nationalist tendency, since in his songs he obviously did not feel the compulsion to become an "American" composer by relying on American themes. Though this avoidance of Americanism by Griffes is generally accepted as fact by music historians,

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<sup>12</sup>Daniel Gregory Mason, "The Dilemma of American Music," in his The Dilemma of American Music and Other Essays (New York: Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 2.

their interpretations of this phenomenon again vary widely. His avoidance of this tendency caused on one hand the criticism that he was therefore not a true "American" composer. Again it is Robinson who assumes the most critical position:

Though he is generally thought to have been one of the most significant American composers, actually--and to a remarkable degree--he drew his inspiration from every country but the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Proponents of the opposing interpretation imply that just such an avoidance of influences, which might limit his perspective rather than widen it, was crucial to Griffes's acceptance on more than a national scale. It was his open-mindedness to trends in the world-wide musical arena which enabled commentators such as Hans Nathan to state the following:

Griffes was the first American-born composer of consequence whose work was closely linked to the international scene of his time.<sup>14</sup>

Just as there is widespread disagreement among critics concerning the strength of influences on Griffes, there is a parallel variety of opinions with respect to Griffes's position in the history of American art song. And yet, while the full spectrum of response is again evident, there is much more weight given to the extreme which considers his work significant than to the opposite extreme.

As a matter of fact, of the critics surveyed, only Robinson is bold enough to state that he considered Griffes's work "really an error." After describing the materials Griffes had chosen as neither "vital" nor "appropriate," Robinson implies that Griffes's "drooping spirit," from his isolation and rootlessness, finally forced him to "relinquish the struggle."

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<sup>13</sup>Robinson, "American Composer," p. 345.

<sup>14</sup>Hans Nathan, "United States of America," in A History of Song, ed. Denis Stevens (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1960), pp. 427-8.

As to the worth of Griffes's compositions, Robinson unhesitatingly concludes that "his music was useless, and there was really no reason why anyone should bother about it."<sup>15</sup>

The most contrasting assessment of Griffes's position comes from his biographer, Edward Maisel. His superlative comments represent the extreme consisting of those critics whose estimation of Griffes places him as one of America's greatest composers:

Probably never again in American will there arise his equal as a composer of art songs.<sup>16</sup>

The composer's innovative spirit is specifically mentioned by another commentator, who again uses a superlative qualifier in describing Griffes:

Discriminating ears had already found in him the freshest voice in American music of his time.<sup>17</sup>

Several critics number Griffes among the most significant American composers. John T. Howard extends this judgment to the international music world:

Today Griffes is recognized as one of the most important figures in American music, his work is accepted as a worthy contribution to the contemporary musical literature of all nations.<sup>18</sup>

Another admirer of the composer, William Upton, in his comparison of American art song composers judged Griffes as holding "first place" among composers of the "modernist group."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Robinson, "American Composer," p. 348.

<sup>16</sup>Edward M. Maisel, Charles T. Griffes: The Life of an American Composer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 335.

<sup>17</sup>"In Memory of Griffes," Newsweek, 39:106 (April 21, 1952).

<sup>18</sup>Howard, Charles T. Griffes, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Upton, "Some Representative," p. 409.

While the number of such enthusiastic proponents of Griffes's greatness is considerable, an even more common response by critics is more tentative and is qualified by conjectures arising from the composer's rather short career. Adherents of this more moderate position either temper their evaluation of the composer's legacy with predictions of what might have been or assume a more noncommittal stance towards the composer's possible greatness. Typical of the former mode of assessment is Mr. Peterkin's conclusion in the Chesterian shortly after Griffes's death:

One feels that if his development had been allowed to proceed apace, he would certainly have ranked with the best of the younger European composers.<sup>20</sup>

The more noncommittal assessment is usually accompanied by a qualifying phrase which bears a tentative connotation. In Carman's more recent "Song Cycle" series, the qualifying words are "perhaps" and "promising."

Charles T. Griffes was perhaps the most talented and promising of the composers who worked in the first two decades of this century.<sup>21</sup>

This is a common description for the young composer, as it recurs in slightly varied format in Our American Music:

The death of Charles T. Griffes was a cruel loss to American music, for it took away one of our most promising talents.<sup>22</sup>

At times this more tentative position is implied rather than directly stated by music critics. In his work on the vocal repertoire,

<sup>20</sup>Peterkin, "Charles T. Griffes," p. 162.

<sup>21</sup>Judith Elaine Carman, "The Song Cycle in the United States: 1900-1970, Part 1, "NATS Bulletin, 33:24 (October, 1976)

<sup>22</sup>John Tasker Howard, Our American Music: Three Hundred Years of It (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1931), p. 485.

Mr. Kagen gives the familiar qualifying adjective in his introductory statement for Griffes's songs when he calls the composer "perhaps one of America's outstanding composers." But it is the implication from a later statement which truly reveals Mr. Kagen's opinion of the composer's importance. In recommending the composer's works to vocalists, he states that "no American singer can afford to neglect Griffes."<sup>23</sup> This is the more moderate assessment of the composer's impact on the performer's repertoire; thorough study of Griffes's works is not imperative, as with some composers, but an acquaintance with his works is necessary.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from Berton Coffin's compilation, Singer's Repertoire. Many of Griffes's songs are included throughout the volumes devoted to each of the four major singers' ranges, particularly those dealing with soprano and mezzo-soprano ranges. However, no Griffes song appears in Coffin's last volume, Program Notes, which includes commentary on important vocal works.<sup>24</sup> The implication here is that Griffes may be important as an American composer--his songs should appear on the American portion of vocalists' recitals--but he is not really significant to the international musical scene.

There are of course those commentators who adopt the moderate assessment of Griffes's position not through the tentative approach but from a realistic survey of the composer's career and legacy. Because this more objective view has been possible only with the assistance of hindsight, it has been accepted particularly by musical scholars of more recent

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<sup>23</sup>Sergius Kagen, Music for the Voice: A Descriptive List of Concert and Teaching Material, rev. ed. (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 494.

<sup>24</sup>Berton Coffin, Singer's Repertoire, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1960).

times. Some credence must be given to the theory proclaimed by Ellsworth that the assessment of Griffes has swung in pendulum fashion from one extreme to another since his death:

. After his death, Griffes was overpraised, credited with being America's first, real "modern" composer, ranked with Prokofiev, Ravel, and Stravinsky. Since the emergence of Charles Ives and the waning of the impressionistic movement, he has been underpraised. He was not "America's first modern composer," but he was one of them. He was not a composer of the first rank, but he very well might have been.<sup>25</sup>

The extremes suggested here have been obvious in the preceding discussion of critics' remarks concerning influences and significance. And although Ellsworth does indulge in the ever-tempting "might have been" remark, he does point to the more careful evaluation of Griffes's legacy which has emerged with most recent scholarship.

Yet critics often have difficulty with phrasing this conclusion. While they agree that his position is neither one of superlative greatness nor total insignificance, there is indecision as to how best this middle ground should be characterized. What often results is a description rather incongruous with Griffes's work, as found in "A Tribute to Elmira College":

Abram Chasins. . .described Griffes' place in American music as a simple place, not grandiose, but filled with harmonious serenity.<sup>26</sup>

Probably the most accurate evaluation of Griffes's work comes from Dr. Anderson, who has made an extensive study of the composer's works. Her acceptance of the more moderate status of the composer is the result of careful scholarship rather than tentative conjecturing. For this reason she realistically admits that Griffes's status is not supreme but empha-

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<sup>25</sup>Ray Ellsworth, "In Memory of a Forgotten American," American Record Guide, 24:8 (September, 1957).

<sup>26</sup>"Tribute to Elmira College," Music Journal, 23:29 (March, 1965).

sizes that it is nonetheless important:

Since that time (Griffes's death) his music has gained critical prestige and has won a small but significant position in the orchestral and solo repertoire of the concert stage as well as in the teaching studio.

She then concludes that Griffes was able to emerge "as one of America's most significant composers."<sup>27</sup>

This variety of response to the work of Charles T. Griffes is understandable and may be due in large part to the tremendous variation in style evident in his career, as emphasized in the preceding analysis of his songs. There are acute differences between the formative, divergent, and mainstream songs with respect to not only the basic elements but also the basic premises on which the styles of the songs are based.

As has been shown, the songs of both the formative and divergent groups are derivative in nature. There is no question in either the composer's or the listener's mind that some established style provides the basic framework for these songs. While the songs of these groups may illustrate the composer's technical skill and an occasional personal ingredient displaying individuality, for the most part the composer is dependent upon the structure of some borrowed style.

Had only the songs of these two groups survived, then many of the criticisms leveled against Griffes could be accepted. The influences of post-romanticism and exotic styles, for example, are quite strong, and his inability to separate himself from their power cannot be denied. Yet it must be emphasized that Griffes consciously borrowed these styles. For various reasons, whether for his education in the genre or for experimentation's sake from attraction to an exotic timbre, the composer chose

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<sup>27</sup>Anderson, "The Works of Charles T. Griffes," pp. 2-4.

to work from these established styles.

But the existence of the songs of the mainstream group changes this picture dramatically. Although various influences, especially impressionistic for the earlier songs, may be more or less evident at times, what really emerges in these songs is a composer's struggle for a vocabulary which is not only personal but is also independent from the pressures and demands of styles of the past. In these songs the composer illustrates not only his technical skill but also his decision to avoid established styles in search of his individual statement in the genre of art song.

It is the mainstream group of songs, then, which allows the present-day music historian to assume a moderate position in the evaluation of Griffes's song-composing status. Admittedly Griffes does not and cannot command a position in the forefront of American composers; his work is too limited and too embryonic in development for an assessment tending towards superlative greatness. Yet the quality of his work, and the direction of his later songs, assures Griffes a respectable position among the most talented American composers of the early twentieth century.