

EUTERPE AND THE BIGOTS

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Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity. By MacDonald Smith Moore. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. 213 pages. \$29.50.

MOORE'S BOOK IS ABOUT RACISM AND ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE NEW ENGLAND musical establishment in the years before World War II. Such a study is clearly needed; bigotry was real and too soundly housed in respected institutions. Moore, moreover, is intelligent and—after some unpromising jargon in the first paragraph—writes smoothly. Given these facts, it is unpleasant to have to report that *Yankee Blues* is not fully coherent. Ill-organized, ineffective in stating its case, fumbling in its presentation of evidence, sometimes apparently under-informed, it succeeds in getting its topic out in the open. That, however, is a real contribution.

The argument apparently is that New England musicians hoped that a proper concert music would redeem the nation, but were defeated by the combined forces of modernism and racially alien musics. The dust jacket blurb says, "Moore describes the multifold efforts by the Yankee school of music to thwart the promotion, performance, and success of jazz and modernist music. . . . Moore demonstrates how the doyens of 'American' music directed their argument against Negro 'primitivism' and Jewish 'modernism.' Racism increasingly shaped the meta-language of this debate and struggle for the national consciousness. Thus, through metaphors of musical valuation, Americans struggled to define and rank key symbolic groups in their modern society: Yankees, Negroes, and Jews." Apparently Moore's prime examples of what he has to show are Charles Ives and Daniel Gregory Mason, for he devotes the first 63 (of 171) pages of his text to them, and frequently refers to the two thereafter. Mason is apparently to be his establishment example, and Ives the rebel; if what the blurb signals is accurate, the argument of the book will be strengthened: "If these things are true of both academic and maverick, they are obviously wide-spread."

Yet no such case is really developed; the two composers who are Exhibits A and B don't make that case. For one thing, writers who admire Ives billboard him as a pioneer modernist. Well, if he is not defending American culture against modernism, does he at least fight against jazz? Moore writes "Ives's composing career ended before the jazz boom; he wrote nothing on the

subject. . . . On the whole, Yankee composers appear to have been uninterested in jazz. . . . No longer young, men such as Ives and Mason were less susceptible to the attractions of popular music than when ragtime was current” (91). One has the right at this point—and at a number of other points in this volume—to ask, “If all that is true, why write a book about it, then?” The answer is that stupidity and bigotry should not be swept under the rug; better to look closely and honestly at the ugliness in our recent past.¹

Now, alas, I must speak to some of the book’s failings. In a number of places a reader wonders how many of the specific fields being compared—academic concert music, avant-garde concert music, jazz-influenced concert music, jazz itself, and, especially New England intellectual traditions—the author knows well. He rarely provides information about, descriptions, or evaluations of the music which forms the ostensible center of the debate. What comments he makes about Emersonian ideas seem unsound. It is misleading, for instance, to speak of Emerson extolling “an individualistic, boundless, and rootless progressivism” (6), for Emerson’s ideas on progress were complex. Though not unrelated, they are certainly different from the ideas of early twentieth-century “Progressives” to whom Moore tries to tie Ives and Mason.

In a book which deals with composers’ fears that audiences are being taken over by alien elements who will subvert redemptive Yankee values, some judgment of why music held or failed to hold the stage might have been useful. Nowhere does Moore help us understand whether Mason’s bitterness was in part because his music (as opposed to his musical journalism) was or was not winning.

Sometimes, of course, judgments are a matter of opinion. When Moore writes, for example, “The tepid critical reaction to the premiere of *The Celestial Country* may have been ‘one of the main reasons why Ives forsook music as a profession’” (28)—he is quoting Victor Fell Yellin—some readers would supply a context for the comment by adding that the reaction may have been tepid because the music was mediocre. Ives’ more conventional music strikes many as dreary, and makes some listeners suspicious of his “pioneering” works. Ives has been waved like a flag by generations of boosters of American music. The Russians may have been the first to get a man into space, but Ives was the first composer to _____ (and here you can fill in the blank; pick your “first”).

Moore is sometimes careless in his referents. When he says that like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington “and his men were genuine, if ambivalent, admirers of white jazz musicians” (113), the referent seems to be the Guy Lombardo band; he can’t mean that. We have wonderful explanations of how uncomfortable and ambiguous the life of a black jazz musician was, how unfairly the system worked, how many good black players there were, and how less well rewarded they were than the few white players who could approach their ability. Moore’s allusions to the situation are cumulatively worrisome, and

symptomatic, for on these and other important topics, Moore repeatedly fails to define precisely who said what and in what context. One cannot tell precisely who is the author of a quotation about a “wild-eyed mob of Jews and Irishmen” (14). About whom is he talking, at the end of a paragraph about Mason and Ives, and no women at all, when he writes “Various forms of psycho-somatic debilities, even paralysis, occasionally afflicted these otherwise healthy, genteel men and women” (15)? What women? None have been referred to.

Moore’s book is weakened also by the fact that Mason’s responses, which form so much of the substance of this text, aren’t really very remarkable, especially in the context of musical journalism. Bewilderment, puzzled hostility, or even incompetence are common enough in the writings of trained musical journalists, let alone in the copy produced by “just plain reporters” often sent out to cover concert topics. Such ineptness may have little to do with racism or other unpleasant deformities. My music historian colleagues all know that American music history and criticism were racist, anti-Semitic, and confused; one of the standard big surveys of our music history is recurrently ugly in its biases. I guess I just don’t understand why Moore didn’t simply gather examples, arrange them so as to document a narrative of critical musical events, and leave us with a convincing book.

Moore could have avoided many difficulties too if he had frankly stated that he was showing a general range of attitudes, contradictory, not very coherent, some based on turn-of-the-century pseudo-science, some on traditional racism or religious bigotry, and not all of them assignable to any particular figure. Then, perhaps, he could have systematically gone through the statements of a larger number of musical figures (Ives and Mason are the only ones discussed in detail) to show frequent, occasional, rare—whatever is appropriate—examples of the various ugly and frightened responses which form his main point. Because, really, the attitudes toward ethnicity which Moore describes were only two of a great number circulating in the musical world at that time. Some had exactly the opposite effect.

Moore explains that the Oklahoman Roy Harris, of all people, was touted—in these words—as the “Great White Hope” of American concert music; if not a New Englander, he was at least born in a log cabin. Yet Harris’ works were also taken to represent something very different: a nationalistic music which symbolized the triumphant cooperation of all our races, religions, and ethnicities. Moore would have had no way of knowing of a performance of Harris’ Third Symphony which was presented in exactly these Whitmanesque terms, and which the composer in his characteristic spread-eagle prose enthusiastically endorsed. Blacks and immigrants responded very powerfully to these aspects of Transcendentalism which were open, not closed, receptive, not frightened. Musical nationalism blossomed in the same romantic soil which nurtured the New England romantics: Emerson respected folkways, Thoreau said he had rural Irish friends, Whitman heard “America singing.” Moore

explains Mason's rage at the presumption of Jewish composers to write a "national" music, and says, quite accurately, that "Gershwin, Copland, and Bloch tried to write original, rootedly American music that various audiences would appreciate. As self-consciously as any Yankee, these Jews believed in the democratic potential of music" (70). Moore connects Mason to Concord, failing to see that immigrants and sons of immigrants have always known better than bigots what is best in native traditions, that they too looked to "The American Scholar," "The Poet," and "Nature."

The broad tradition of acceptance existed side-by-side with the contradictory narrowness of racism and bigotry; it would not have seemed absurd to Jews from New York to act as spokesmen for the nation any more than it seemed so to the Armenian-American writer William Saroyan or to the Jewish-American architect Dankmar Adler. (See, for instance, Saroyan's Whitmanesque "Seventy Thousand Assyrians" or Adler's explanations of Louis Sullivan's transcendental architectural aesthetics.) Copland and Gershwin are not very much alike, but they both made some use of jazz for the very best of value-reasons. Copland also made use of folk material from rural places. To my knowledge, he has never made use of the rich folk material available to him from Jewish sources, though Bloch did, and there are tiny hints of such things in Gershwin's concert music, too.

After a passage in which he discusses the response of critics who in one way or another professed an appreciation for jazz, Moore writes, "The transcendental 'mystery' of the New England errand seemed to have lost its hold on Americans if some of its foremost representatives could imagine that the culture of Negroes, the lowest 'deviant' rung on the social ladder, could represent the American spirit" (114). (Understand that Moore does not hold the racist attitudes implied in that quotation.) One wants, right at this point, an illustration, a New England musical voice corroborating what Moore summarizes. Otherwise one is left to wonder, in what way are the critics he discusses—people like Irving Kolodin, Winthrop Sargent, and B. H. Haggin—representative of New England? What's New England got to do with it, anyway?

The response to jazz connects to the response to innovative new music because, as Moore says, some writers thought the two spiritually or technically connected. Thus Mason felt that Stravinsky "secreted the essence of jazz," sneaking it "like a Trojan Horse, into the hallowed precinct of the concert hall" (119). Jazz was dangerous for splendidly contradictory reasons: it stood for both "the devolutionary forces of sensual blackness" and as "the antimusic of robots and riveting machines, the technology of urban civilization" (108). (Here again Moore seems not to know his Emerson, whose attitudes toward technology and machines were far more sophisticated than those of the frightened writers Moore says were Emerson's followers.)

Moore ties these paradoxes to "schizophrenic" aspects of the Harlem Renaissance, showing that creating a "primitivist" image of the Negro and

marketing it as a means to salvation for a white culture which was too effete, involved racial stereotypes as strong as those in the anti-Negro propaganda of the period. Thus Carl Van Vechten in portraying "Harlem as an 'erotic utopia'" (99) was being unintentionally insulting, as thoughtful black critics like W. E. B. Dubois recognized.

As complicated as Moore's explanation of the situation is, it still oversimplifies the interplay among the academic and the purely musical spokesmen, the European avant-garde, jazz, and the American ethnic situation. The subtle and dynamic structure of our concert audience is generally ignored, as are a number of other variables and interconnections. No study, of course, can cover all of these things, but Moore's is inadequately delimited; he doesn't stake out his claims or even protect himself by naming areas which he is not going to discuss. For example, in a confused chapter on the European response to jazz and the national response to modernist composers, he writes, "Modern composers such as Stravinsky intoxicated the 'moronic radicals,' as Mason called them, who pushed their way into concert halls in increasing numbers" (119), but then fails to provide a social context. The audience for "the new" has been studied; a word about its behavior and values would bring the question into focus.

And yet, having grouched about all these things, I want to add that I learned from *Yankee Blues*, that it should have been written, and that Moore is very intelligent. Music history and criticism in America have in fact been shot through with ugly racism, and even when attitudes have been much more friendly, too often the results have been at best condescending or comical. Moreover, Moore sometimes tries to connect his material with good American Studies work. His opening chapter, "New England's Musical Mission," is a commendable effort in that direction, though it comes out, somehow, terribly square.

Disorganized and unsatisfactory as it is, *Yankee Blues* is worth reading because it is unlikely that one knows all of its materials. Any reader interested in a related field might be able to learn from it. For example, although I had long been aware of the importance of John Hammond as a promoter and recorder of jazz, and even had one brief conversation with him (before I knew exactly who he was), I did not know much about him. I appreciated learning about his family connections to the Vanderbilts and to Benny Goodman, about his own drastic racial blind spots, and that beyond promoting and recording he did so much to introduce concert critics to jazz.

Another useful passage in *Yankee Blues* deals with petticoat tyranny. I never really understood before why a defender of Ruggles called his music "manly." Yankee composers "thought that American classical music was tied to the apron strings of a female, amateur patronage" (16) from which, Moore argues, they struggled to liberate themselves. Although Ann Douglas² fails to turn up in Moore's bibliography, Moore performs a service by transposing the idea she

developed into a musical context; the complaint of musicians is like that of the literary men of fifty years earlier about the stifling power of the "scribbling women."

Moreover, though Moore is never able to show the relationships one expects to see illustrated, he is not making up attitudes. He quotes Mason: "The Jew and the Yankee stand in human temperament at polar points; where one thrives, the other is bound to languish." Mason continues: "And our whole contemporary aesthetic attitude toward instrumental music, especially in New York, is dominated by Jewish tastes and standards, with their Oriental extravagance, their sensuous brilliancy and intellectual facility and superficiality, their general tendency to exaggeration and disproportion" (145). It is important to get all this poison out into the open, to let the sun get at it. Moore deserves our gratitude for doing the job. Nor should my criticism imply in any way that *Yankee Blues* is narrow-minded; quite the contrary. Its closing words are, "Metaphors are our handles on reality; they permit us to deal with our waking dreams and nightmares. But unexamined metaphors become mere tools of rhetoric, instruments with which we oppress others and ourselves" (171). Moore is always generous and fair-minded.

NOTES

¹There is another answer as well: J. Bunker Clark informs me that Moore probably fails to develop his extensive but seemingly pointless discussion of Mason and Ives because he has in mind reacting to a very good lecture on those two figures that Frank Rossiter delivered several times "about 15 years ago." We guess that Moore simply failed to realize that readers who did not have Rossiter's framework in mind could have no inkling of what amounts to an (innocent) hidden agenda. See Frank Rossiter, *Charles Ives and His America* (New York: Liveright, 1975).

²Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977).