

Louis Gruenberg: A Forgotten Figure of American Music

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Forgotten by many long before his death on 9 June 1964, Louis Gruenberg was one of the most important American composers in this century. His significance and tragedy were summed up precisely by Claire Reis in a letter to *The New York Times*, written shortly after the composer's death:

To The Editor:

When Louis Gruenberg died a few weeks ago, a plan had just been launched to celebrate his 80th birthday on Aug. 3 by programing some of his earlier compositions. In one of his last letters he wrote:

"I'll have none of this 80-year old stuff! I was forgotten on my 70th, my 60th, my 50th birthdays (where in hell was everybody when I needed this kind of treatment), but now I don't need anybody. If my stuff is to be played, it will be because it is worthy of being played, and not because I am an old dog who is thrown a bone! Basta!"

. . . He helped to establish the League of Composers and he was a president of the United States Section of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Discouraged by the constant efforts required to retain the position of renown he had won, he withdrew from the New York scene to lead a solitary life, and for many years dedicated his entire time to his compositions. . . .¹

Gruenberg was one of the first innovators in the use of jazz in serious music. Although at times he composed in an Impressionistic style and often experimented with chromaticism, he developed a unique, personal, musical language, especially notable in his later works. Unpublished pieces include six symphonies, seven operas, and numerous chamber and vocal compositions. Unfortunately, his early works are rarely heard, and most of his later ones have yet to be performed.

Born in Brest-Litovsk, Russia, on 3 August 1884, the son of Abraham and Clara Gruenberg, he was brought to this country at the age of one. His strong musical talent was apparent quite early, and he began his studies with Adele Margulies. A gifted child, he was quickly put to work by his father and in the early 1890s was giving numerous recitals including appearances on the Keith Vaudeville Circuit.² Desiring to study in Europe, he gradually saved enough money and arrived in Berlin in 1905. Even though Gruenberg had written many compositions, his goal at this time was to study with Busoni and pursue a concert career. Unable to meet with the latter, however, he studied for a short time with Friedrich Koch but soon returned to New York because of financial problems. In December 1907 Gruenberg again returned to Europe and settled in Vienna. Here he made contact with Busoni and was accepted as one of the master's pupils. This started his long association with Busoni, first as a student and later as a friend.

Gruenberg remained in Europe for seven years and sustained himself through concert performances, composing, and occasional teaching. His success at this time is evidenced by a news item appearing in *Musical America* on 23 December 1911:

In the young American, L. T. Gruenberg, who gave a piano recital in the Harmonium Hall on Wednesday evening, we heard the possessor of talent far above the ordinary. . . . Where Mr. Gruenberg excels is in his really pronounced talent for constructing, for outlining a work. With the infallible judgment of the thorough musician, this pianist may be relied upon to bring out every effect contained in the composition. . . .³

In London when the World War started, Gruenberg made plans to return to the United States. He had left many of his manuscripts in Berlin, and much of this early work has never been recovered.

Describing his return to the United States in 1914, Gruenberg wrote the following entry in his notebook:

I soon found out that a European reputation alone did not guarantee a penniless musician a welcome reception. I am quite sure there wasn't a manager, publisher or even a piano firm whom I did not try to interest in my career, with unsuccessful results. During my three years stay I wrote continually—my own experiences, I would rather not enlarge on; they do not form very pleasant recollections.⁴

In 1919 Gruenberg's life took an upward turn. His composition *Hill of Dreams* won the \$1,000 Flagler prize, and with this success he decided to devote all his time to composition.

A strong leader and advocate of contemporary music, Gruenberg was, together with Varèse and Salzedo, a founding member of the International Composers Guild. At the first concert on 19 February 1922, he performed his piano work *Polychrome*.⁵ The most important of the early concerts of the Guild was the one in which the U.S. premiere of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* was given. Gruenberg was selected to conduct because he had attended the rehearsals and the concert conducted by Schoenberg the previous year. After twenty-two rehearsals the concert was given at the Klaw Theater in New York on 4 February 1923 with great success. It was soon after this that the Guild broke up and the League of Composers was formed, with Gruenberg as one of the leaders.

For many years Gruenberg was very much intrigued by the jazz idiom and in 1921 wrote:

A matter which has often interested me, and which always eluded practical application, has been the possibility of adapting the fresh and unspoiled rhythm, so-called jazz atmosphere to serious music.

It was this interest that produced a series of pieces with such titles as *Jazz-berries*, *Jazzettes*, *Jazz Suite*, and *Daniel Jazz*.⁶ Along with this interest in jazz, Gruenberg had a very strong love for the Negro spiritual. In 1926, after

much research on his part, Universal-Edition brought out four volumes of spirituals which he had transcribed.

Culminating this period was Gruenberg's most famous work, the opera *Emperor Jones*, based on the play by Eugene O'Neill. Gruenberg spent two years of negotiations with O'Neill before finally securing his permission to convert the play into an opera. Without doubt one of the most important operas in American musical history, it enjoyed ten performances with the Metropolitan in the 1932–33 and 1933–34 seasons. In his *Memories of the Opera*, Giulio Gatti-Casazza wrote:

This work was in every sense an American achievement. It was a drama on an American theme by one of the finest playwrights of America. It was set to music by an American. The chief protagonist was an American. And I must add a word for the striking and effective sets designed and painted by still another American, Jo Mielziner.⁷

It was soon after the success of this work that Gruenberg made a decision to leave the New York scene. He was invited by Rudolf Ganz to become head of the composition department at the Chicago Musical College. He stayed there for two years, but his desire to compose would not permit him to remain a teacher. He described his state as follows:

The gradual feeling of drudgery, the hopelessly incompetent pupils, the meaninglessness of this kind of life, the severe winters, full of ills and worries, the over-animation and stimulation of the morning's work and the afternoon's teaching—making it almost impossible to sleep. *Helena* creeping along slowly, too slowly, already 3 years for a one-act opera.⁸

Gruenberg decided to move to California in 1937 and support his family primarily through his compositions. Always concerned and dejected because composers had to struggle so hard for their existence, he attempted to start an organization called the Composers Society of America. Its purpose would be to provide the means through which composers could have their music performed and published. He called a meeting and invited the leading composers in Los Angeles at that time. These included Achron, Copland, Antheil, Weil, Toch, Schoenberg, and Hansen. In his notebook he made the following comment:

They all came with the exception of Schoenberg who insisted to be made president before the society started. Oscar Levant came along with Copland and he kept disrupting any serious talk. It was a successful tea party, but nothing else followed.

His own work continued to meet with success in the closing years of the 1930s. His Quintet won the Lake Placid Prize in 1937, and in the same year his radio opera, *Green Mansions*, was successfully broadcast by CBS.

But these successes at this stage in his life (he was now fifty-three) had the opposite effect from what one would have expected. They prompted

his movement toward greater isolation and bitterness. Certainly, financial gain was not of the utmost importance to him; the utter frustration which he felt after a work was received with great praise and then put aside to gather dust made him turn more and more away from the public and his fellow composers. His attitude was expressed clearly in a speech he gave at the Berkshire Festival in September 1938, an event which he attended because his Second String Quartet, written under commission of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, was being performed. Referring to “the appalling lack of practical help to the creative writer of music in America,” he had this to say:

I don't know how many of you are aware of what will happen to the works you have heard tonight and which Mrs. Coolidge brought to life through her commission. Well, this is exactly what will happen, nothing.

It was immediately after this, in 1939, that Gruenberg accepted his first job to compose for films. His first important film composition was his score for Pare Lorentz's documentary *Fight for Life* (1940). The film received wide critical acclaim, and Gruenberg stressed the importance of his score in an article in *The New York Times*:

It is generally accepted that serious music today has no place in the scheme of screen plays. In this case I have made no attempt to write down to the level of usual screen music. The film itself is of such importance that anything trivial or light would be completely out of place. Therefore I have written as good music as I am capable of writing and can find no difference in its quality from either my symphonic or operatic compositions.⁹

Although involved with film music from 1939–49, Gruenberg continued writing his concert music and completed his Second,¹⁰ Third, and Fourth Symphonies and the *Americana Suite* for orchestra. One of his most important works, the Violin Concerto, was commissioned by Jascha Heifetz and completed in 1944. The piece is one of the few compositions by Gruenberg still played (although only irregularly).¹¹ Utilizing Negro spirituals and the sounds of a hillbilly fiddle, the concerto marks a returning interest to the so-called American music style. Gruenberg documents this return in his notes:

Regarding the *Americana Suite* written in 1945, this was one of a series of compositions which started in about 1923, with *Daniel Jazz*, in which I endeavored to create an ‘American Idiom’ in music completely dissociated from European influences. This period concluded with *Emperor Jones* in 1933. When Jascha Heifetz approached me for a Violin Concerto with a request to be in an American manner the old flame was revitalized and in quick order the Concerto, *Americana*, and finally the Fourth Symphony in 1948 were finished.

In 1947 Gruenberg was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. However, this honor did not change the fact that none of his music had been published since *Emperor Jones* in 1933. His thoughts and feelings are summed up in the following statement which he wrote later:

I am working constantly, passionately and carefully, and I firmly believe that I am doing my best work now. . . . I could use a publisher, a record company; but the world of yesterday seems to have forgotten me and the world of today does not know me.

The 1950s were very fertile years and, no longer working on films, he was able to devote all of his energy to composition. Among his more important works were the operas *Volpone* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The latter he considered his finest opera. Another major work of this period was *A Song of Faith*. Begun in 1951 and completed eight years later, the score shows Gruenberg reaffirming his own belief in mankind. Dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, the preface reads:

The theme of this work is to reveal the underlying oneness of all religions, the universality of God. Its purpose, therefore, is not the glorification of a particular religion, but of all religions, its goals are the unification of men of all faiths under the Author of all their beliefs.

Gruenberg tried to attain this universality of religions by using texts from all the important faiths of the world. The work can be classed as an oratorio for chorus, soloists, orchestra, narrator, and dance groups.

Though the 1950s were years of important creative achievements, they were also years of disappointment. *Emperor Jones*, after its opening success at the Metropolitan Opera, ran into trouble continually. In 1950 NBC announced plans for presenting the opera with William Warfield in the lead role. But in November of that year Gruenberg received a note stating that it was best not to perform the work at that time because of the probable reaction of the average Black.¹² The critic Olin Downes later wrote:

It is hard to perceive the logic in this objective especially in view of the history of the drama. . . . Let us hope that the opera, which in its conception and dramatic technique is by far the most mature and adult of any American work for the lyric theatre which appeared up to 1933, will find a proper and effective place in the television opera schedule.¹³

Nonetheless, the opera was never given, and this disappointment, which began the last phase of Gruenberg's life, continued until his death in 1964.¹⁴

Despite the neglect his music faced in his last years, Gruenberg maintained an optimism and love for life which is to be envied. His own words best summarize this feeling:

Why do I write so much music? Is it for posterity? Well, what will posterity do for me? I write because nothing else, and really nothing else gives me a sense of joy, of power, when I succeed; of frustration when I fail; beauty when I am inspired, of all the elements of human

emotion that exist; and when I take pains, I can create in my brain and in my heart all things the world has to offer. Where else can I get all this just sitting at my desk?

NOTES

¹ 5 July 1964, sec. 2, p. 9, col. 3.

² Madeleine Goss, *Modern Music-Makers* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952), p. 93. This is also discussed in Gruenberg's personal notes.

³ Vol. 15, p. 27.

⁴ All statements attributed to Gruenberg, unless otherwise noted, are taken from his unpublished notebooks in the possession of Irma Gruenberg, his widow, and are used with her kind permission.

⁵ Published as *Polychromatics* (Vienna: Universal-Edition, 1924). This work was recently recorded by Zola Shaulis and is available on Composers Recordings, CR1 S-295.

⁶ *Daniel Jazz*, as performed by the Kohan Ensemble with William Lewis, tenor, is scheduled for release by Amrex Records.

⁷ New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, p. 224.

⁸ Opera after Philip Moeller's play, *Helena's Husband*.

⁹ 14 April 1940, sec. 9, p. 5, col. 3.

¹⁰ The Second Symphony was taped by the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra for a broadcast by the Bayerische Rundfunk, Munich, on 10 October 1965.

¹¹ It can be obtained through RCA's Personal Music Service Catalog under the "Vault Treasure Label," LVT-1017.

¹² *The New York Times*, 26 November 1950, sec. 2, p. 11, col. 6.

¹³ *The New York Times*, 9 August 1953, sec. 2, p. 5, col. 1.

¹⁴ Ironically, just before Gruenberg's death the opera was considered by the National Company of the Metropolitan Opera Association but was rejected again for the same reasons.