

The Music of Vivian Fine

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The subject of this article could easily have had a career as a concert pianist, as I have recently heard her play—most brilliantly and beautifully. At the age of five she was given a scholarship to the Chicago Musical College. Later she studied with Djane Lavoie-Herz, who had been a pupil of Scriabin. Under her guidance she went through a huge repertoire, from Bach right on down, playing in her teens, as she says, “many of the works of Scriabin.” Evidently, as we shall see, the Scriabin influence was a determining factor in her creative work in spite of her conventional theoretical studies. These began at the age of thirteen with Ruth Crawford, with whom she had four years of harmony and composition, to be followed by counterpoint with Adolf Weidig. She moved to New York in 1931 and, beginning in 1934, studied counterpoint, composition and orchestration for several years with Roger Sessions, at the same time continuing her work at the piano with Abbey Whiteside, while finding time to appear occasionally in public.

But her early contact with Ruth Crawford had awakened the desire to create, and at the age of seventeen she already showed her mastery of dissonant counterpoint in her charming *Four Pieces for Two Flutes*.

All the works in this earlier period were atonal (i.e., devoid of diatonic tonality) at the same time with no suggestion of twelvetone writing.

Her second period, from 1937 to 1944, is characterized by a more diatonic style of writing and includes many fine works. *The Race of Life*, brilliantly scored for small orchestra, was written for Doris Humphrey and reveals an astonishing versatility. Its weakness is the weakness of all music written for a dance already composed choreographically, that of episodic treatment. It is to be hoped that the composer will do some surgical operations on the work (as I have had to do with the *New Dance*) to make it satisfactory as a concert number: the material is far too good to let fall by the wayside.

The third and last period to date is marked by a return to atonality, tempered occasionally by key impressions. One of the most successful numbers in this category is *A Guide to the Life Expectancy of a Rose*.

The idea of using such a prosy and factual theme for musical treatment came to her via the garden supplement of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, where there appeared an article bearing that title by a certain S.R. Tilley. This she set for two solo voices (soprano and tenor) plus five instruments—the pick, one might say, of the softer instruments. By the use of exaggerated stresses and clever prosody she has transformed the pedestrian seriousness of the words into something hilariously funny.

The music opens with a long six-measure phrase containing many melodic elements, more or less non-committal in character. One has the impression that this is merely the process of getting off the ground while the singers try to look interesting. The consequent phrase begins as a

repetition, but in the second measure decides to become an inversion. Presently the voice (tenor) begins in a recitative manner, marked “parlante”, which I take it, is a gentle hint that the words are important and have nothing to do with the German Sprechstimme. As can be seen, there is but one accompanying instrument (the ‘cello) for this stretch of eight measures, presumably to keep the singer from flattening.

As regards the prosody, the over-all plan seems to be the alternation between the rhythm of the spoken word and the exaggerated emphasis on the unimportant syllables, giving a more or less comical effect. Thus prosodical faithfulness is carefully plotted in note values until the high G flat. The stress on this note, however, seems to be from purely vocal considerations, the vowel being a good one. The next phrase, “and it is possible,” has been stretched out to five beats instead of a reasonable two; after that there is more of this subtle alternation.”

For some time now—well over a generation—the deliberate stressing of unimportant words and syllable has been quite a la mode, le dernier cri, the hallmark of emancipation, so to speak, in vocal writing, in which turn of affairs, alas, twelve-tonism has had its share. To our thinking this technique is justified only in comedy, as, for example, in the Mikado: “A source of innocent merriment, of innocent merriment.” The present work is another felicitous example.

To continue: following the exciting thought, “At the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens there are many that have been flowering for 25 years,” there are seven measures of agitation in the flute and clarinet.

Throughout the work there is plenty to intrigue the academic mind. There are recurring themes, or rather fragments, but seldom a direct repetition as such, thus heightening the disarming casualness of the music. At the close, lest one take it all too seriously, the “man” intones again and again the provocative thought, “And it is, and it is, . . .,” while the “woman” (the more talkative) has the complete sentence: “And it is impossible to quote any real statistics as to the longevity of a rosebush.”

To sum up. It is true that we are gradually overcoming our provincial attitude in regard to adulation of anything from abroad at the expense of the American product. Recognition, long overdue, of Vivian Fine’s contribution would be another step in this direction.

Here are the views of some others who got there before me:

“In Line with the unusual instrumental combination in Miss Crawford’s Three Songs is a group of four songs by Vivian Fine, published in 1933: “The lover in winter plaineth for the spring” (sixteenth century), for voice and viola; “Comfort to a youth that had lost his love” (Robert Herrick), for voice, violin and viola; “She weeps over Ragoon” and “Tilly” (both by James Joyce), the first for voice and string quartet; the second, for voice, two violins and ‘cello. It becomes increasingly evident that at last American song writers are beginning to adopt the procedure of their foreign colleagues, and are making use of other than the formerly invariable piano accompaniment for their songs, thus opening up a field of new and almost limitless possibilities.

“As we are to give later and detailed examination to one of these songs, we content ourselves for the present with noting some distinctive effects in the last song “Tilly.” First of all, the composer, in the first four measures of this song, proves to us once again the accuracy of the equation:

$$6/8 + 9/8 + 3/4 + 3/8 = 6/8 \times 4$$

And this is far more than an interesting mathematical formula for it testifies to the composer’s meticulous care in handling her declamation—an unfailing virtue in Miss Fine’s song writing. In this song, too, our composer shows that she is not unmindful of her classic studies, for she introduces a true canon. It has to be admitted, however, that while the voice is, perhaps the voice of Bach, the hands are indeed the hands of Schönberg.

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“Turning now to the song by Vivian Fine (“Comfort to a youth that has lost his love”) we behold the ancient mold shattered to fragments, and song emerging as a purely instrument form....The voice part here, considered as an atonal melody, is well conceived. Indeed its first phase, from the viewpoint of Schönbergian atonality, is well nigh perfect, for in its fourteen tones it makes but one repetition and omits no single tone of the duo-decuple scale....The declamation is extraordinarily well handled. Could anything be more natural in its rhythmical nuances than the setting of the first phrase, ‘What needs complaints, when she has a place with the race of saints?’ The rhythmic alertness and spontaneity (almost that of the spoken words) is one of the outstanding excellences of the composition....Here we have the ‘new vocal line’ and such a nice balance between the vocal and the instrumental lines that, taken together, the three form a homogeneous whole: a skillful interweaving of equal strands.”

“...As a miniature chamber work, and as a composition representing atonality in one of its peculiarly individual phases, this composition is eminently successful.”

(excerpt from A Supplement to Art-Song in America, 1930-1938, by William Treat Upton. Published by the Oliver Ditson Co., 1938)

Lamar Saminsky, writing in the Musical Courier on American Composers said: “Vivian Fine is a creator of music of fine substance and outstanding mastery....In her Concertante for Piano and Orchestra it is a delight to follow the novel diatonic flow. Even more impressive are her splendid songs—beautiful in emotional depth and a masterly mirroring of an amazingly potent, fine intellect.”

At the start of her career Henry Cowell wrote in “Musicalia,” a Cuban musical review: “Among the composers in the central part of the United States the most interesting figure is Vivian Fine....Her work possesses a good sense of form, and reveals a restless and agile talent.”

More recently, Mr. Cowell wrote: “When I first met Vivian Fine she was a Chicago girl of seventeen, writing in the grimmest of dissonant styles. She had developed a technique for elimination of concord that gave her work an angular, unladylike manner, which, however was

quite consistent. She had an extraordinary native gift, good conventional training and the ability to apply known principles of writing to new media, which she handled logically and uncompromisingly.

“In the course of her development since those earlier times there have been many superficial changes—dissonance has been tempered with consonance and the form has become more all-embracing, but the inner qualities are the same—native gift technique and a rigid lack of compromise with anything less than her very best.”