

WILLIAM SCHUMAN

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William Schuman was, and is one of the greatest American composer, if not the greatest. In his lifetime, he acquired two academic degrees and 23 honorary degrees as well as twelve other honours and awards. He had many illustrious affiliations and was admired and respected everywhere.

He was the second child of Jewish parents, Samuel and Rachel and was born in New York City on 4 August 1910. Music did not play an important part in his young years, although there were Sunday evenings around the piano singing what might be called light music such as Romberg and Victor Herbert. They would sometimes listen to Caruso or Efrem Zimberlist on the phonograph.

William's passion was baseball. At school, Speyer Experimental Junior High School, he was good at English but did not like mathematics and the sciences. His admiration for English led to a secret love of poetry mainly the Romantics but, later, he embraced Carl Sandberg and Robert Frost and especially Walt Whitman. This secret love would not endear him to his sports friends.

He enjoyed summer camps at Maine but, in 1925, he and other boys travelled to France and he took some violin lessons which were not to be enjoyed. He wrote a play, *College Chums*, which contrasted an athlete and a bookworm. He also staged other plays and, in 1926, he wrote his first musical work, a tango called *Fate*. With Edward Marks he presented shows such as *Black and White Minstrel Shows* and wrote tunes to Marks' lyrics.

He was now at George Washington High School and popular music took up his time. He formed a jazz band called *Billy Schuman and his Alamo Society Orchestra* in which he played the violin, banjo and sang, but not at the same time ! He gave up Latin to take up the double bass in the school orchestra and he had a lot to learn about orchestration and notation.

He left school in February 1928 and set out to have a career in commerce and enrolled in New York's University of Commerce. He began to collaborate with Frank Loesser in musicals such as *Guys and Dolls* and *How to Succeed in Business without really trying*. They wrote about 40 songs together, Loesser writing the words. Some were produced on Broadway but achieved no real success.

Loesser wanted Schuman to go to Hollywood with him but, fortunately, something was to happen to change Schuman's life and take him out of the world of lesser music and set him on the road to quality music that made him great.

Without any enthusiasm, he went with his sister Audrey to Carnegie hall to see Toscanini conduct. This was 4 April 1930. He was captivated with the *Funeral Music* from *Götterdämmerung*, Kodaly's *Summer Evening* and Schumann's *Symphony no 3*. Thereafter, he knew he had to study and compose serious music. He immediately left New York University and on a long walk home saw a sign *Malkin Conservatory of Music*. After speaking to the receptionist, he was advised to take harmony lessons with Max Persin who was well known in New York and had been a pupil of Arensky.

Schuman kept in touch with Loesser but continued to discover great music by his now regular visits to Carnegie Hall. The Schuman family holidayed throughout Europe in 1931 and, on returning to the USA, William took lessons in theory from Charles Haubiel who was a composer and oboist. Schuman also attended summer schools in 1932 and 1933 and had lessons with Bernard Wagenaar and lessons in orchestration with Adolf Schmid. His interest in popular music and musical shows waned but, in 1934, he wrote the words and music for a musical comedy, *Fair Enough*, while he was a counsellor at a camp for boys.

He considered becoming a teacher to maintain a regular income and enrolled at The Teachers College at Columbia University. Two years later, he received his bachelors degree but he had doubts about teaching. He said that What to teach was more important than How to teach.

He had composed several works:

Potpourri for orchestra 1932

Two Pastorales for small ensemble 1934

Canon and Fugue for piano trio 1934

Choreographic Poem for seven instruments (1934)

Chorale Canons 1932-33, later called Four Canonic Choruses, which are still performed.

But he needed a job and income and so he searched for a teaching post and eventually came across Sarah Lawrence College which was exclusively for girls and began this job in the autumn of 1935. He accepted a scholarship in conducting at the Mozarteum in Salzburg where he attended concerts and rehearsals by Bruno Walter, Felix Weingarten and Toscanini. At that time, he was working on his Symphony no. 1 scored for a chamber orchestra

In 1939, he became the director of the Sarah Lawrence College. He felt able to marry Frances Prince whom he had known since 1931. They had two children, Anthony William born on 22 December 1943 and Andrea Frances, born 30 April 1949.

But to backtrack to the mid 1930s, Schuman submitted his Symphony no 1 to Columbia University and the chairman, Daniel Gregory Mason, said it was experimental and modernistic. Impressed by Roy Harris's Symphony 1933, Schuman sought his opinion. Harris said it was flawed but that it showed obvious talent and Schuman was admitted to Harris's summer schools at the Juilliard School of Music. During this time, Schumann composed a Prelude and Fugue for orchestra, a setting of Walt Whitman entitled Pioneers for chorus, a Prelude for women's voices to a text by Thomas Wolfe, the Symphony no 2 and the String Quartet no 2. The Quartet no 1 was withdrawn.

The Symphony no 2 was badly received. Some actually despised the work claiming it was objectionable. Bernstein said it was a joy. I can think of symphonies, including some English ones, that are certainly objectionable but this one is not. Koussevitsky said, "This was not a success with the audience but with me it was a success." Koussevitsky had performed it in Boston.

Around 1939, Schuman had composed his Quartet for four bassoons, his Prologue for voices and orchestra and a revision of the Prelude for voices. Most significant was the String Quartet no 3 premiered in February 1940, and the work promised for Koussevitsky, the American Festival Overture first performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra on 6 October 1939 under Koussevitsky, which has been described as his break from Harris.

The first major success was his excellent Symphony no 3 completed in January 1941 at Schuman's home in Larchmont, New York. On 17 October that year, Koussevitsky gave the premiere and the work as well received throughout the world. It has been acclaimed as America's greatest symphony and the finest symphony of the whole of the western world.

It is a masterpiece.

The word masterpiece has two basic meanings :

1. A work that is given critical praise because of its greatness
2. The best work of a composer.

In many writings on the subject, there are several works called masterpieces including:

Blue Danube waltz
Elgar's Dream of Gerontius
Paderewski's Minuet in G

I submit that none of these works are masterpieces.

Schuman's Symphony no 4 was premiered in January 1942 by Arthur Rodzinski and the Cleveland Orchestra. The first of the three movements is quite acceptable but the remaining two are not. The Symphony no 3 was awarded the Music Critics Circle Award whereas the Symphony no 4 has never been popular.

Other works of this time were successful such as Newsreel for band of 1941, the Piano Concerto and the secular cantata A Free Song for chorus and orchestra which won the first Pulitzer prize in 1943. This prize was introduced in 1943. It is a stunning piece for chorus and orchestra with some gorgeous harmonies and a magnificent sound.

In February 1943, the great Fritz Reiner premiered Prayer 1943 which was later retitled Prayer in Time of War but it was the Symphony no 5 (Symphony for strings) premiered by Koussevitsky on 12 November 1943 that drew attention to this composer and probably remains his most performed work.

In January 1943, there was an all-Schuman concert including the Piano Concerto with Rosalyn Tureck as soloist and the Holiday Song.

The year 1944 saw a projected film score for a propaganda film called Steeltown. Schuman wrote two pieces for this film Firstly, a piece called Side Show later changed to Circus Overture premiered by Maurice Abravanel in Philadelphia, and later by Reiner and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, in the full orchestral version rather than the earlier theatre orchestra version. A hopeful compilation of music for Shakespeare's Henry VIII had two numbers composed by Schuman, a Te Deum for mixed chorus and the song Orpheus with his Lute. The Symphony no 5 inspired the choreographer Antony Tudor to commission a new ballet and so Schuman composed Undertow premiered in April 1945 at the Metropolitan Opera House. It was a successful score full of an impressive sense of tragedy.

Schuman had grown tired of teaching at Sarah Lawrence and left in June 1945. He was now an advisor to Schirmer the publishers and he promoted composers such as Samuel Barber, Bernstein and Roger Sessions.

The Juilliard School was seeking a new president and Schuman's name was put forward. He was not at ease about this possibility as there were things that needed change at the School which might not have approval, but he accepted the presidency and set about the essential changes and the deteriorations that happened during the war. He brought into the faculty many outstanding musicians including William Bergma, Giannini, Peter Mennin, Persichetti, Robert Starer and Robert Ward.

What little time Schuman had resulted in the short ballad, Truth Shall Deliver. of 1946 and the ballet, Night Journey, of 1947. The following year came the Symphony no 6 often described as his most impressive score yet, but it does not hang together and is often rather episodic. It also introduced an intensity of style which makes the work sound austere. This style is also apparent in his next ballet, Judith, written for Martha Graham. It was very successful from its premiere in 1950.

Schuman was brilliant at writing band music which never sounds common or predictable as evidenced in George Washington Bridge of 1950, the Chester Overture of 1956 and the moving When Jesus Wept of 1958.

A work that was deeply impressive was his String Quartet no 4 of 1959 commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and premiered by the Hungarian Quartet on 28 October 1950. Aaron Copland wrote with considerable praise of this work saying that it proved that Schuman was a top rank composer and stating how well written it was in every way.

The years 1951 to 1953 was spent on his opera, The Mighty Casey, which showed his love for baseball. It is rather light in style and certainly not grand opera. It was premiered in August 1953.

The piano music of Schuman is not of the highest quality and, in 1953, he composed his most ambitious piano work, Voyage which has five movements and was later transcribed as Voyage for a Theatre which was intended as a ballet but this was withdrawn. The United States Government commissioned a musical work which commission was forwarded to Schuman. He responded with Credendum for orchestra also known as Article of Faith. It is a truly impressive score with vigorous outer movements often of breath-taking power and a glowing middle movement. This is music to treasure.

In 1956, he composed the New England Triptych which explored the works of the 18th century composer William Billings which included Chester, When Jesus Wept and Be Glad then, America.

The Lord has a Child of 1956 is a brief song and Five Rounds on Famous Words also appeared. Three Piano Moods and Carols of Death with texts by Walt Whitman also appeared which is an important work and has an appealing dramatic intensity.

The sumptuous Violin Concerto had its origins in 1947, was revised in 1956 and the final version was in 1959. The first two versions were premiered by Isaac Stern and the final version by the under rated Roman Totenberg. It is gloriously romantic and a work of great difficulty and so few play it. It is arguably the best American violin concerto. As many have said, It is everything a violin concerto should be. Others have said that there is not a British violin concerto anywhere near as good as the Schuman and, sadly, that is right.

The Symphony no 7 followed and was written for the 75th Anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It uses some material from Schumann's documentary film The Earth is Born of 1959 and, in the third movement, an expansive part of the second piece in Three Moods for piano. The symphony was premiered on 21 October 1960 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch. It contains a chord of all the twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

The next major work was A Song of Orpheus for cello and orchestra a set of variations on his song Orpheus with His Lute. It was commissioned by the Ford Foundation and the subject was suggested by Vincent Persichetti. It is meditative work. Schuman was working on his Symphony no 8 at the time which was not completed until 1962.

For some years, New York had been considering a new music house needed by the Metropolitan Opera and because Carnegie Hall was to be demolished. And so the Lincoln Centre was envisaged with museums and libraries and a home for the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, known as Philharmonic Hall, the ballet and recital rooms. The Opera House was opened on 16 September 1966.

Schuman was elected president of the Centre and the Institution was beset with many problems and the hard work, financial subsidies and major administration problems were so great that Schuman

had a mild heart attack in April 1968 which led him to leave and his resignation became effective on 31 December 1968 although he was designated President Emeritus.

The Symphony no 8 is somewhat intense and uncompromising. Two of its movements are reworkings of movements from his String Quartet no 4 the second time he had incorporated some earlier works in a new work. He orchestrated Charles Ives Variations on America which is both brilliant and popular.

The year 1964 saw a commission from the Coolidge Foundation with Amaryllis for string trio, a set of variations also uncompromising. He composed another ballet for Martha Graham, The Witch of Endor but withdrew it. The Symphony no 9 followed and was subtitled The Ardeatine Caves suggested by the Nazi murders in 1944 of 335 innocent Italian men, women and children and was further inspired by seeing the graves in these caves. The work is very powerful and emotional without being slushy.

His next orchestral work, To Thee Old Cause, was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic in their 125th anniversary season and was influenced by the deaths of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. It is scored for oboe, brass, timpani, piano and string orchestra and was premiered on 3 October 1968 by Harold Gomberg and the New York Philharmonic under his friend, Leonard Bernstein.

Another death affected Schumann. This was the death of the artist Ben Shahn which work was completed in 1969 and premiered by the New York Philharmonic in January 1970. It is another work which shows brilliant orchestration and incredible fast music at times.

The Concerto on Old English Rounds of 1973 looks back to the song Amaryllis and the rounds are Great Tom is Cast, Who'll Buy Mi Roses and Come, Follow me. Some have called it a viola concerto but it is not really. The first and last movements were arranged for string orchestra and premiered by Andre Kostelanetz. The rounds were also used for a choral fantasy To Thy love while the Prelude for a Great Occasion was used in the Symphony no 10 written for the American Bicentennial and subtitled American Muse. It is often festive and of a strong stature. 2707

The Young Dead Soldiers is scored for soprano, horn, eight woodwinds and nine strings, being settings of words by Alexander MacLeish. It is a somewhat bleak work premiered by Antal Dorati and the National Symphony Orchestra on 6 April 1976. In his Sweet Music of 1978, he returned to his 1944 song Orpheus with his Lute and this new work is scored for voice, flute, doubling piccolo, viola and harp.

His later works, which I have not heard, include American Hymn (1980), Showcase a short display (1986), String Quartet no 5 (1987), and a second opera A Question of Time based on Roald Dahl (1989).

As with all composers, including the great Beethoven, not all of Schuman's works are great. Some I do not respond to but others are pieces I could not do without.

He died in New York on 15 February 1992. He was 81.

There is little doubt that he was, and remains America's finest composer, and we should all be glad that he turned away from light music to greater music.

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