

Group 31CANDIDATES IN MUSICAL COMPOSITIONComments by William Grant Still

Last night we went over the music very carefully, and I honestly wish I were able to report that something proved to be outstanding, but I can't. At the moment it appears to me that last year's candidates, on the whole, seemed more promising than these.

I rate this year's candidates in the following order:

1. Edward Margetson (Negro)
2. Herbert Mells "
3. Jessie Fitzgerald "
4. James Price Johnson "

If the music you sent from Margetson represents what he has turned out during 1942 under his fellowship, then I would say that he has done a great deal of work and has used his fellowship well. Outside of that, there is nothing that I could say about him other than what I said last year. He is still writing in his own consonant, academic style.

(In 1942 Mr. Still said the following regarding Mr. Margetson: Mr. Margetson is a very competent composer. I liked the things he wrote a great deal. His melodies are good, and the compositions are tastefully and intelligently written. My only reason for ranking him after Mr. Kay and Mr. Kerr is that I feel that he has consciously limited himself to an academic - at times almost ecclesiastical - style. This is only a comment, not a criticism, for I found nothing wrong with his work. He has a great deal of talent.)

As for Mr. Mells: I liked his arrangement of the Spiritual. It is a good melody, and he has made a nice arrangement of it. I did not care especially for his piano pieces (although at first I thought they might have possibilities) because in many respects they were reminiscent of Chopin and

Liszt, and once of Debussy and French Impressionism. The piano pieces did not appear to show melodic invention of a superior sort, for they leaned too much toward excessive embellishments. They were overly florid, and contained more decorations than meat.

Miss Fitzgerald gave me a problem to consider, inasmuch as she sent a symphonic score which was composed with limitations imposed on the composer, which of course would make it lack originality since it had to imitate the style of a certain period; and she sent arrangements of folk tunes. Frankly, I can't think of an arranger in the same way that I think of a creative musician. Very often good arrangers are not good composers. I regret that she did not send some original compositions on which to pass judgment. As for the song arrangements themselves, I would consider them well done and capable, but not outstanding or original.

James Price Johnson, whom I know as Jimmie Johnson, is the last on my list. He is a writer of musical comedies which have been successful. It would seem that he should have known better than to send only the orchestrations of his compositions, since in order to pass judgment on them I would have to go over the entire scores and reconstruct them, a job that would take me several weeks. He should have sent some sort of conductor's score. Therefore I can't give an opinion on the two works he sent. However, I can tell you that I have known him in the past as a popular song writer. As a matter of fact, I orchestrated some of his things in years gone by. Lately he has been stepping out of his field into that of serious music, but I have not been impressed by anything he has done. Of course I have heard only some of his compositions, not all of them.