

COMMENTS BY WILLIAM GRANT STILL
ON CANDIDATES IN MUSICAL COMPOSITION

Rating:

1. Ulysses Kay and Thomas H. Kerr
2. Edward Margetson
3. James E. Dorsey
4. Emanuel Middleton
5. Walter Anderson

1. Ulysses Kay (Group 3)

Mr. Kay seems to have a great deal of talent and to be worthy of being given assistance. I don't think he would misuse a fellowship - and as a basis for this opinion I might call your attention to the tremendous amount of work he turned out, neatly and intelligently, to send for examination. That alone says to me that he has two qualifications for success: industry and perseverance. He handles his orchestra well, and has a good technical foundation. His talent, however, is definitely in the formative period. He hasn't risen above the influence of his teacher. Personally, I don't care for his melodies - or rather, his lack of melody - but on studying his scores I have come to the conclusion that this is not caused by an absence of melodic gift, but rather that this melodic gift has been suppressed. He has evidently been surrounded by teachers or associates who have over-emphasized the modern idiom. I hope that his project is such that it will enable him to rise above modernity and to use it as it suits him, not to become the tool of modernity. He should be able to use or discard it as necessary.

The study of racial music might be a good antidote for this tendency. I am making this suggestion for the simple reason that the period through which he is evidently passing now is one that I also had to undergo when I was acquiring the tools of my trade, and I recognize the symptoms. But there is undoubtedly great talent, sincerity, and application to work in Mr. Kay. He is thorough and conscientious and is building on a solid foundation.

Thomas H. Kerr (Group 70)

My reasons for ranking Mr. Kay and Mr. Kerr as equals are as follows: though Kerr shows a broader horizon in that he is able to use both the modern and the academic mediums intelligently, and though he displays more melodic gift, Mr. Kay has written in the larger forms as well as the small, and has also written for orchestra, for piano, for voice, and for solo instruments, thus displaying a versatility that (judging by the compositions submitted) is not at once apparent in Mr. Kerr's work.

My first impression of Mr. Kerr was that he is more clever than inspired, that he is what may be termed an exhibitionist. I know very well that mere cleverness is not lasting. However, on studying his work more carefully, I came to the conclusion that he has a genuine talent, good taste and technic (especially as concerns the piano), and that he may develop into someone musically worth while. I hope so.

2. Edward Margetson (Group 70)

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.

3. James E. Dorsey (Group 70)

Mr. Dorsey has evidently studied hard and worked well, but in every way he seems to have been influenced by European music and European ideals, despite the fact that I note that he has had as teacher one of America's foremost and most capable composers, Harl McDonald. It appears to me that Mr. Dorsey hasn't yet risen above the classroom. Perhaps in the future he will, and at that time perhaps he will display a little more originality and questing spirit.

4. Emanuel Middleton (Group 20)

Mr. Middleton's compositions seem to me mediocre. They are adequate and sincere, perhaps, but are lacking in imagination. I am able to say a little more about Mr. Middleton than about Mr. Anderson, whose work I would put in the same class. Mr. Middleton delivered his scores to me; we had time for a talk, and I also went to hear his orchestra in a public rehearsal.

Incidentally, a Negro symphony orchestra is much needed. This has been one of my pet desires for a long time. I will admit that I was surprised to hear Middleton's orchestra play. I had expected something quite bad, and was pleasantly surprised to find that it was not so poor as I had thought it would be. Mr. Middleton, who is evidently an energetic and good organizer, had discovered instrumentalists here in Los Angeles that I didn't know existed, and had persuaded them to rehearse with

him, apparently just for the love of the work. As a conductor, he obviously needs more training, and he modestly says he wishes to work and to get this training. He seems to be sincere, and I take it for granted that he really will work to get his training. Somehow I don't feel that he is top-notch, but perhaps I am mistaken in this view. It very often happens that people who don't seem to have greatness within themselves can be so industrious that they work up to a position of attainment.

One other thing that I must mention: I question the validity of his judgment in musical matters. He was talking at length on American music and said some very sensible things about it. Later I discovered that he and I were thinking of American music in different terms: he thinks of it as "swing" and music of the more popular type, like that written by Ferdie Grofe, and of course my view is different. I think American culture is rapidly becoming much more serious than that, and feel that his placing it in the "popular" field brings it down to a level lower than it should be. Middleton's preferences definitely run toward the "popular" and in some instances he classed compositions well-known to me in that vein, when they actually belong among serious American symphonic works.

5. Walter Anderson (Group 3)

Mr. Anderson's compositions appeal to me as being mediocre. Like Mr. Middleton's, they are adequate and sincere, perhaps, but they seem to me to be lacking in imagination.

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