

Biographical Sketch

Although not well-known by contemporary audiences, the American Leo Sowerby (1895 – 1968) enjoyed a distinguished career as a composer, educator, and choir master. He received recognition and awards that acknowledged him as a master of the different genres he favored, notably symphonic works and, above all, choral and organ music. Best known are his tenures at St. James Episcopal Church in Chicago and, later as founder and head of the College of Church Musicians at the American Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The style of his most “public” works is traditional in form and written in a tonal language that is often quite extended by a prevalent use of chromaticism. A lesser-known facet of his compositional personality was his fondness of folk, jazz, and other types of music that at the time were deemed too colloquial for the concert stage. During his lifetime he was almost exclusively recognized for the former, and his reputation was thus sealed as that of an “academic” composer. American music changed rapidly during this time, both by Copland’s almost single-handedly reinventing the sound of American music, and later by the postwar influx of European composers that brought atonality as a new musical currency. Sowerby quickly went out of fashion then, easily labelled as too European by the emerging American voices, and most certainly too traditional and tonal by the immigrating avant-garde.

Leo Sowerby was born in Grand Rapids, MI, on May 1st of 1895 to foreign-born parents. His English father worked for the Postal Service, while his Canadian mother died early in his life. His father later married Mary Sowerby, who stimulated his musical talents by getting him piano, and later organ lessons. His interest in writing came from his own curiosity in harmony and counterpoint, which he learned on his own from texts he checked from a local library. Even much later as a professional, he still considered himself an autodidact composer.

Encouraged by Leo’s musical progress, in 1909 he was moved to Chicago for further instruction. There he studied organ with a leading church musician, as well as attending theoretical classes at Chicago’s American Conservatory. As early as 1913 the Chicago Symphony performed one of his works (a violin concerto that the composer himself went on to dismiss years later), first under the critic and empresario Glenn Diller Gunn, and then when attracting the attention of the CSO’s Music Director Frederick Stock. In the years leading up to WWI anti-German sentiment had moved Stock (who being German-born was perhaps eager to display his local patriotism) to become an avid supporter of American composers. Sowerby greatly benefited from this sponsorship, producing a number of symphonic works including a cello concerto in 1914, and a piano concerto in 1916. This first cello concerto is lost and only found in his catalog as “Cello Concerto in A.” Incidentally, the same catalog lists the later cello concerto as “Cello Concerto [No. 2] in E.” The No. 2 is only for the benefit of the catalog and the numbering is missing on the manuscript score, perhaps signaling that the composer had ignored the earlier one, just as he had his early violin concerto.

Around 1915 he met and befriended the Australian composer and piano virtuoso Percy Grainger, from whom he took piano lessons for a time. Grainger was a passionate collector of Saxon and Nordic folk tunes, which he would transcribe, orchestrate and often absorb as part of his own compositional style. This made quite an impact on Sowerby, who adapted this process for his set of piano variations (later orchestrated) on “The Irish Washerwoman,” his first published work in 1916. His relationship with the Chicago Symphony reached perhaps its apex with an All-Sowerby

concert in January of 1917. Besides the aforementioned early Cello Concerto and the “Irish Washerwoman” Variations, the program even included a Piano Concerto that Sowerby played himself. The critic Maurice Rosenfeld from *Musical America* was strict, if kind in his appreciation, perhaps considering the youth of the composer and the ambitious nature of the project. “These selections,” he wrote, “disclosed remarkable talent for instrumental combinations, a sense of unusual tonal coloring, and occasionally, a gift for melody.” And went on to say that there is nonetheless a “want of stern critical editing, a lack of melodic invention and of cohesiveness in development of ideas...”

During WWI Sowerby enlisted as a private, soon after being recognized for his musical achievements and appointed as bandmaster for the 332nd Field Artillery. After the war, Sowerby returned to Chicago where over the next couple of years much of his work was written for choirs or organ. There were also some notable chamber music pieces, including one commission from Liz Coolidge in 1919. In 1921 he was surprised with the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome; quite surprised indeed, as he had not applied for this honor. The award entitled a three-year residency in Rome for creative work and research at the Academy. His Roman sojourn proved quite productive, and over the next few years he produced a new violin sonata that was premiered in Europe, and his First Symphony (of an eventual five) that was performed at home in Chicago.

Back in the US in 1924 he accepted a position teaching at the American Conservatory in Chicago, which formally began his lengthy and distinguished academic career. Now firmly established as an “institutional” composer, Sowerby nonetheless dedicated a great deal of time to his “non-mainstream” projects, most notably two works for the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in New York. Whiteman had recently achieved spectacular success by commissioning George Gershwin his “Rhapsody in Blue,” and so he asked that Sowerby utilized jazz and classical idioms for his new works. “Synconata” and “Monotony” were thereafter referred to as his “classic-jazz” compositions.

1927 was a watershed moment for Sowerby as he accepted the position of organist and music director at the historical St. James Episcopal Church in Chicago. Understandably, the following years saw an increased production of liturgical music, with no fewer than six settings of Anglican canticles, a Benedictus and Jubilate, and other sacred works. Parallel to this, Sowerby continued, albeit with diminished time, his interest in Symphonic forms and *Americana* topics. His Second Symphony was premiered by Stock and the CSO in 1929, and later on the same year he finished his *Prairie*, a symphonic poem on texts of Carl Sandburg. First performed at the National Music Camp at Interlochen, MI (where Sowerby taught for several summers), *Prairie* depicts without being didactic, and is accessible without falling on populism. The folk elements are dressed in the wrappings of academia, even if the “advanced” part of language seems more antiquated than progressive. In a manner that would eventually seem telling of Sowerby’s entire output, the conservatives found it willfully abstract, and the progressives decried it as passé and derivative.

Still to this day, his most often-performed pieces are the organ works that fall between his church duties and his symphonic interests. Purely abstract in form and lacking text of any sacred reference, his Symphony in G for Organ (1930), and the later Organ Concerto of 1937 are perhaps the best examples of this genre. The latter concerto was premiered by E. Power Biggs with the Boston Symphony conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. The Symphony in G for Organ is a massive, three-

movement form that encapsulates Sowerby's mature style, as well as underlining his predilection for the organ and the church references that are inescapable in this genre. The first movement is a lengthy Sonata-Allegro form, where the first theme is a clear enunciation in stark parallel movement between two unaccompanied lines. Counteracting the clarity of this gesture, this melody is then presented in various modulations, and in such increasing degrees of chromaticism that sometimes it is only recognizable by its distinct rhythmic contour. This Brahmsian, woolly texture of permanent shifting is clarified at the arrival of the soft and calming secondary theme in E-flat major. The development section moves freely through many key centers, aided by thick and prevalent chromaticism (in fact, the score notes no key signature for this section). Occasional pedal points signal major structural landmarks, as it happens for the unmistakable recapitulation which regains the G Major key signature in the score. The recapitulation proceeds quite traditionally, with the secondary theme predictably enjoying a new home in the tonic key of G. The rather broad coda includes a new passage that seems to combine aspects of both previous main melodies. The movement that follows is a sort of *Scherzo* in character, but formally a Rondo (with the marking of "Fast and Sinister") and with the modern update of a 5/4 meter to its dance-like tilt. The last movement is a Passacaglia theme, followed by some thirty-three variations.

It is meaningful that the form of each movement in this work should be iconic in each of the genres that he favored. The traditional use of Sonata and Rondo in the first two movements are part of the accepted cultural literacy of Sowerby's school. His mastering of these forms, therefore, could not be said to be a "reference" to European instrumental and symphonic forms but, rather, are displayed as his compositional "default." The final Passacaglia is a rendering of the baroque form of variations on an established bass pattern, and it pays homage to the gothic origins of organ music. In both structure and content, this work lives between the two worlds that Sowerby frequented at the time: instrumental music of European models, and church organ music. Notably absent from any of the melodic material is any kind of folk or *Americana* reference, which is the one element added to the contemporary Cello Concerto discussed below.

His next decade of musical output is among the most prolific and celebrated of his career, even if these works are not as performed today as some of his earlier "novelties." His subsequent Symphonies were premiered in Chicago and Boston (where Koussevitzky became a champion after Stock's passing). The British organ virtuoso E. Power Biggs often performed his works, both in the US and Europe. He even commissioned the *Poem* for viola and organ which he premiered alongside the equally renowned violist William Primrose in 1942. Biggs recorded Sowerby's aforementioned Symphony in G for Victor (later RCA), becoming the first organ work by an American composer to receive such mainstream dissemination. Having become a national authority on the topic, Sowerby was selected a lay member of the Joint Commission on the Revision of the Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church. By 1940 their report had presented a book of texts that was soon adopted as a new Hymnal. Meaningfully, the honors and awards he received during this time only confirmed his institutional "insider" status. He was elected to the national Institute of Arts and Letters in 1935, the year after receiving an Honorary Doctorate from the Eastman School of Music, which at the time was led by Howard Hanson, the "American Sibelius" and the foremost patron of a traditionalist school of American composition. This tendency was perhaps best summoned by Copland who, writing an article in 1936 for the journal "Modern Music" declared that "Hanson and Sowerby[']s... sympathies and natural proclivities make them the heirs of older men such as Hadley and Shepherd. Their facility in writing and their

eclectic style [!] produces a kind of palatable music.” Sowerby’s *Canticle of the Sun* of 1942 (based on the St. Francis hymn) was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1945, and honored with the Pulitzer Prize for Composition the year after. Interestingly, Copland’s epoch-making *Appalachian Spring* follows much the same timeline, being first produced in 1944 and awarded the Pulitzer in 1945

The main controversy regarding American music at the time was the opposition between “conservative” and “progressive” aesthetics. This is truly the “boy meets girl” of musicological plot lines, as each of the sides adapts to a banner or “ism” to contrast its antagonist. The tendencies change, and yet the “young against the old” perdures. At the time, these tendencies would be most exemplified by those that sought to prolong the older European (some might say Victorian) traditions into American music, such as classical forms, melodic lyricism. The less structural, more “American,” composers relied on program music and local topics for inspiration. We should remember that prior to the massive intellectual immigration that followed the end of WWII, this controversy would still not include the tonal versus atonal language controversy. At this time, for *all* American composers, basic tonality was still *lingua franca*. To be sure, there are many instances where Sowerby might seem more linked to the “locally-sourced” composers, especially in his Tone Poems that rely on depictions of local landscapes and narratives. However, his connection to the establishment of church and academia, as well as his fluent and persistent use of traditional symphonic forms in his most “public” of works have secured him the easy labelling of “old guard.” In one of his many books of memoirs, his student Ned Rorem would much later recall him as “unglamorous and non-mysterious, likable with a perpetual worried frown, overweight, and wearing rimless glasses, earthly, practical, interested in others even when they were talentless, a stickler for basic training. Sowerby was the first composer I ever knew, and the last a composer was supposed to resemble.” A perfect description of “The Man” as a composer, if there ever was one. Copland’s contemporary *Appalachian Spring* was the opposite. Modern in rhythm, and open in harmony and instrumentation, it nonetheless celebrated a topic, a kind of dancing, and a new frugality, that no European composer would have dared. It became the American *Rite of Spring* and it soon, like many an *infant terrible*, forced a reevaluation of established priorities and values. Sowerby’s fate was sealed as archaic.

Through the 1950s, Sowerby’s output trickled down to almost exclusively church works for choir or organ. By the time he retired in 1962 from his duties in Chicago he was broadly acknowledged as the “Dean of American church music” (a naming I have been unable to ascribe to anyone, but that seems too much a truism to contradict). That same year he was appointed a founding director of the new College of Church Musicians at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., a position he held until his death in 1968. Ever the dedicated teacher, he died in Port Clinton, OH, in July, while teaching summer camp there at the Camp Wa-Li-Ro.