

A Brit Who Fell for Jazz

BY JOSEPH SMITH

For diversion, in May of 1922, Constant Lambert, a seventeen-year-old composition student of Vaughan Williams at London's Royal College of Music, attended a revue called *Dover Street to Dixie*. Here, according to his pianist friend Angus Morrison, Lambert underwent "without doubt . . . one of the key experiences of his life." The "Dixie" portion featured the black singer Florence Mills with a jazz band led by Will Vodery. Lambert never forgot what Morrison eloquently described as the "irresistible blend of blatancy and sweetness" in this music.

A few years later, a commission from Serge Diaghilev established Lambert as one of Britain's most promising young composers. (Diaghilev cannot be described as simply the greatest ballet impresario of his time—possibly of any time; he was, in fact, the greatest cultural arbiter of his time—possibly of any time!) He was impressed with Lambert—and also impressed with the publicity value of presenting in England a ballet by a twenty-year-old unknown Briton. In May of 1926, Diaghilev's Russian Ballet premiered Lambert's *Romeo and Juliet*. Diaghilev's interference with the production—the man thrived on conflict—made this a maddening experience for the composer. A few months later, Florence Mills returned to London with *The Blackbirds*. (This was the first of a long series of *Blackbirds* revues, which brought attention to many great black performers.) The show enjoyed a mad success in London, and Mills's return was triumphant. In 1927, at the height of her fame, less than six months after Lambert saw her final London performance, Mills, weakened by overwork, died from an unsuccessful operation. The very same month, November, Lambert, who had been drawn to the show several times, produced his subtle, understated "Elegiac Blues" as his tribute to the performer who had so enchanted him. (Lambert loved women of all kinds, but he was particularly drawn to blacks and Asians—his obsession with film star Anna May Wong had inspired his songs to texts by Li Po. It seems likely that he was attracted to Mills's beauty and vulnerable persona as well as her singing.) Duke Ellington also composed a tribute to Mills, but whereas Lambert's piece mourns her, the Duke's gentle, bouncy "Black Beauty" (1928) evokes her persona.

Hearing jazz in the *Blackbirds* revue inspired Lambert to compose his most popular piece, *The Rio Grande*. Through some mysterious alchemy, the composer con-



Florence Mills on stage.

cocted a coherent fifteen-minute single-movement work from a strangely disparate assortment of elements. It is scored for full orchestra, mixed chorus, solo piano, and five busy percussionists. The text, by Sacheverell Sitwell (Edith's brother), has nothing whatsoever to do with jazz, but the strongly rhymed and metered text does evoke dancing and contains many aural images. The interaction between the smoothness and sweetness of the voices and the edgy, gritty sonorities of the piano and percussion always reminds me of a "Mexican" sundae (ice cream, chocolate syrup, and salted peanuts). Later, Lambert would

compose important works both with and without jazz influence (most notably, *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, a work of tremendous emotional range), but *The Rio Grande* boasts a special freshness and virile energy.

Lambert's one book, *Music Ho!* (1933), analyzes the trends of music of the twenties. This book is so lucid and free of technical jargon that even a non-musician can follow its arguments, and is so witty, passionate, and candidly informal that even the layman might want to read it. (WARNING: This book, like many from its era, contains racial generalizations that will repel today's reader.) The section on jazz is particularly prescient in its admiring and discerning discussion of the music of Duke Ellington. But even apart from the use of jazz by African-Americans, Lambert considers it to have become the musical lingua franca of the day—"It is internationally comprehensible, and yet provides a medium for national inflection . . ." For example, Milhaud's smoky *The Creation of the World* could be said to be Gallic in its emphasis on orchestral color, Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins* Germanic in its emphasis on what Lambert calls the "weariness and nostalgia" of jazz. Lambert never acknowledges his own contributions to "symphonic jazz," leaving us to observe that, in its brightness, clarity, and crisp exposition of verbal text, *The Rio Grande* is a piece in the best traditions of English music—one we could imagine Purcell composing, had he lived in the jazz age.

Though not a musician at all, Lambert's son, Kit nevertheless left a mark on music of the sixties—not classi-

continued on page 56

The Brit Who Fell *continued*

cal or jazz, but rock. Kit early recognized the potential of The Who, became its manager, and molded its image. (For readers who are not rock fans, members of this uninhibited band initiated the quaint tradition of smashing their instruments on stage.) It was Kit who convinced Pete Townshend, the group's composer, to attempt a "rock opera" with a coherent plot: *Tommy*. (Townshend has acknowledged that Kit "came up with rock opera," and was "much more involved in the overall concept . . . than people imagine.") Kit was filled with ambivalent feelings toward his famous father—and for good reason. Following his divorce from Kit's mother, Constant more or less abandoned his son. Furthermore, Kit felt that he had inherited from him a propensity for self-destructiveness—Constant was an alcoholic, and Kit abused both alcohol and drugs. Nevertheless, Kit, admiring his late father's achievements, often quoted him. He recognized that *Tommy*, in reconciling popular and "high" art, recalled Constant's jazz-inspired works. ■

See Constant Lambert's *Elegiac Blues* on page 17.

Earl Wild *continued*

that theirs was the worst kind of pianism. Yet he has drawn inspiration from many pianists of the last century. He points, for example, to Josef Hofmann's clarity and the logic and beauty of his ideas. "From observing his playing," says Wild, "I was exorcised from the fear of musical experimentation and exploration which had been instilled in me by my early training." As a result, he tells current students to avoid technical exercises. "Scales don't mean a thing," he asserts. "If you have the feeling and then practice whatever is in the music, it will come out well."

Instead, the drills he recommends have more to do with opening up one's ears. "I tell people that it's wonderful to play in different keys in the right and left hand simultaneously. At first it's jarring. But as time goes by, what is ugly becomes pretty. We're in an age now where things are moving so quickly, all the pretty combinations have been exhausted. So we are waiting for more sour combinations. Yet, there's not really such a thing as sour, it's a matter of what you are used to. Look at Stravinsky—at first he was considered bizarre. Now I find his music sort of sweet."

He demonstrated his quirky bitonal experimentation at the Mannes recital. The next day, at the master class, Earl Wild was at his humorous, insightful, effusive, casually bawdy best, instructing one young student to stop expressing the music through body language ("the only place that will get you anywhere is at the YMCA"), another to be more generous with the pedal ("keep it down, otherwise it's like staring at bad wallpaper in a cheap motel"), and another to deal more carefully with the architecture of a piece ("you're tearing it apart with emotion").

It was good, solid advice, from a 90-year-old master who just now seems to be hitting his prime. At the end, pianist Jerome Rose, who directs the Mannes Festival, announced that he had signed a contract to insure that Earl Wild would return continually for the next ninety years. Meanwhile, I can't wait for the 100th birthday celebration. Who knows what new insights he will have gained by then? ■

See the excerpt of Earl Wild's transcription of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* in this issue's Music section!

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See this issue's Rare Finds feature for more on Constant Lambert and this piece. This work can be purchased from Music Sales Limited, Distribution Centre, Newmarket Road, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 3YB, United Kingdom or from the website www.musicroom.com (Catalogue No. CT02164).

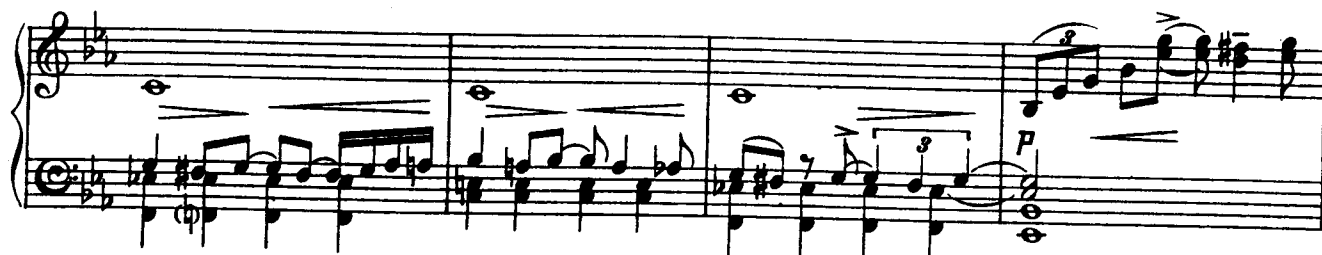
ELEGIAC BLUES

CONSTANT LAMBERT
(1905-1951)

Lugubre ma con moto



il canto sempre poco marcato. l'accompagnamento sempre pochissimo arpeggiando.



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First system of musical notation. The right hand features a melodic line with triplets and slurs. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. A *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking is present in the right hand.

Second system of musical notation. The right hand continues the melodic development. A *cresc.* (crescendo) marking is indicated in the right hand.

Third system of musical notation. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. A *p* (piano) dynamic marking is in the left hand, and a *p cresc.* (piano crescendo) marking is in the right hand.

Fourth system of musical notation. The right hand features a melodic line with triplets. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. A *con Ped.* (con pedale) marking is in the left hand, and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking is in the right hand.

Fifth system of musical notation. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. A *marcato* (marcato) marking is in the left hand, and a *ff* (fortissimo) marking is in the right hand. The system concludes with a *pesante* (pesante) marking.

First system of musical notation. The right hand features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *dim.* (diminuendo). The left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes.

Second system of musical notation. The right hand continues the melodic development with a triplet. The left hand has a dynamic marking of *pp lontano* (pianissimo, distant) and consists of sparse, widely spaced notes.

Third system of musical notation. Both hands feature triplet markings. The right hand has a melodic line with a triplet, and the left hand has a more active accompaniment with a triplet.

Fourth system of musical notation. The right hand has a melodic line with a triplet. The left hand has a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) and features a triplet of eighth notes.

Fifth system of musical notation. The right hand has a melodic line with a triplet. The left hand has a dynamic marking of *mf* (mezzo-forte) and features a triplet. The system concludes with a *f* (forte) dynamic marking, a *quasi pizz.* (quasi pizzicato) instruction, and a *diminuendo - - - aniente* (diminuendo to nothing) instruction.