

CREATIVE AMERICANS

EDWARD MACDOWELL

MUSICIAN AND COMPOSER

BY HENRY T. FINCK



I N the summer of 1895 I spent a few days with Edward MacDowell in a hotel on the shore of Lake Geneva, near Vevey. He was at work on his "Indian Suite," which caused him so much trouble and perplexity that, as he confessed to me afterwards, he was sorely tempted to ask my advice about various details, but refrained for fear of breaking into my vacation. When this suite had its first performance in Boston, one of the critics, while praising it highly for its artistic workmanship, found fault with the composer for trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. That was rather a rude way of putting it—rude to the Indians—for the aboriginal Iroquois and Iowan songs which form its main themes are in themselves by no means without charm; yet it is undoubtedly true that MacDowell's own creative imagination would have easily yielded melodies more beautiful in themselves and more readily adapting themselves to the thematic elaboration and orchestral coloring.

It is significant that the experiment of blending red and white music was never repeated by him (except in a short piano piece, "From an Indian Lodge"—one of the "Woodland Sketches"—in which original and aboriginal strains are commingled). He never indorsed the view—of which Harvey Worthington Loomis and Arthur Farwell are at present the most eloquent exponents—that a great American Temple of Music might and will be built with Indian songs as the foundation-stones. Nor has he ever

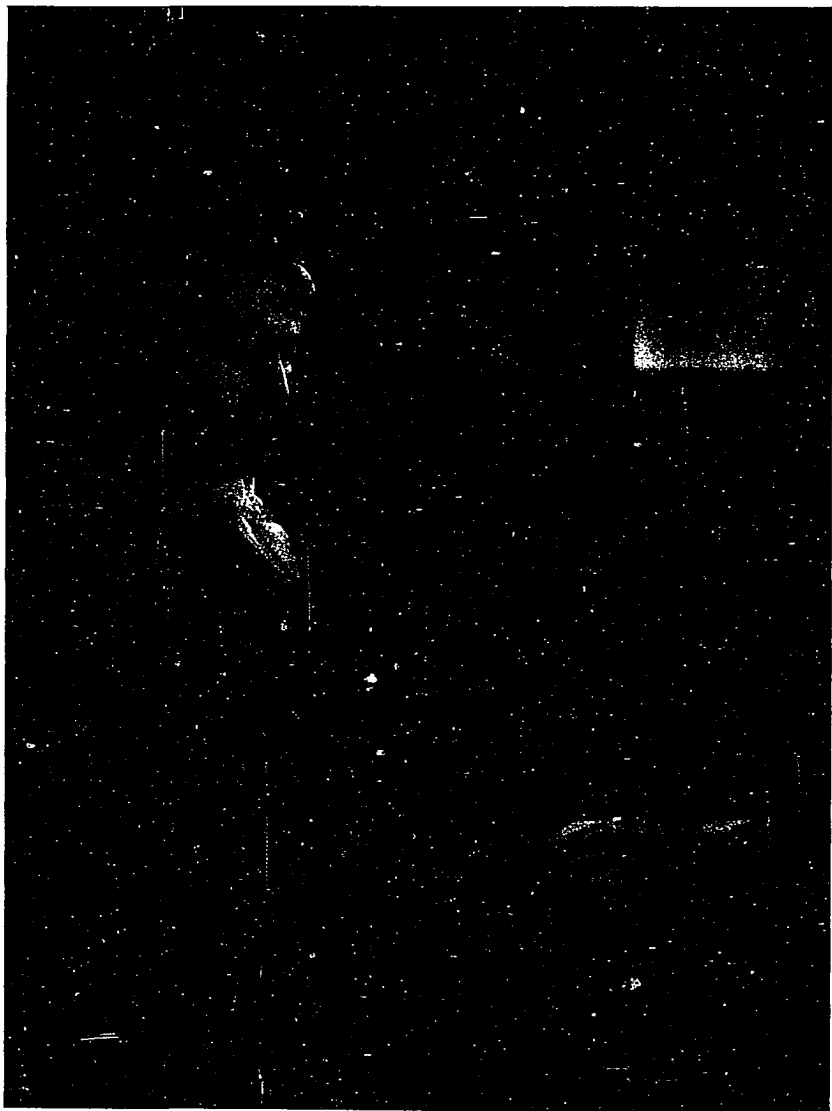
countenanced the widely prevalent opinion that negro melodies form the only other possible basis of a distinctively American school of music. Dr. Dvořák adopted this view when he first came to New York as Director of the National Conservatory; but subsequently he abandoned it. It is unquestionable that the negro has received credit for things that are not his. What is really unique in his music is an inheritance from Africa, wherefore it cannot be made the basis of an *American* school of music; while the rest of what is usually regarded as negro or plantation song is partly a crazy-quilt made up of patches of tune from the stores of European nations (for the negro is as imitative and quick as a mocking-bird), and partly the voice, or the echo, of the individual genius of Stephen Foster, a writer of true American folk-songs, the best of which are equal to any German, Italian, French, Irish, or Russian folk-music.

Foster's songs are unmistakably American—unlike any European folk-songs. If an unknown one from his pen should come to light, say, in a remote Turkish village, an expert would say to himself, "That's American, that's Foster." If, therefore, an American composer feels inclined to write a symphony or a suite based on melodies borrowed from Stephen Foster, he is of course at liberty to do so. But he will show himself a greater master by creating his own melodies; and his music will be none the less American, provided he is himself sufficiently *individual* to be able—as Foster was—to write melodies different from those of Europeans.

It is time to drop the ludicrous notion that a truly national art can be built up

only on folk-songs. All that we need for the making of an American branch of music is *individuals* of real creative power. In the music of Wagner there

they differ radically from Wagner and from each other. Even the nationalists among the great masters—Haydn, Chopin, Grieg, Dvořák—owe their posi-



PHOTOGRAPH, COPYRIGHT, 1908, BY E. HUNTINGTON HUGGINS

EDWARD A. MACDOWELL

is hardly a trace of German folk-song, yet it is great and it is German because he was a great German *individual*. Mendelssohn and Schumann are real Germans, too, in their music, though

tion in the musical world much less to what they imbibed from the folk-music of their countries than to their pre-eminent *individualities*.

In searching for such individualities

in our own country we find at least two concerning whom there can be no dispute—Stephen Foster and Edward MacDowell, the latter representing our art music as Foster represents the folk-music. I would recognize a new piece of MacDowell's anywhere, as I would the face of a typical American girl in any part of Europe. It is unlike the music of any European master, and it has on every page the stamp of his individuality as unmistakably as every two-cent stamp has the face of Washington. To be sure, there are European influences perceptible in it—the influence, particularly, of Grieg, Liszt, and Wagner, representing Norwegian, Hungarian, and German art. But the foreign influence in his compositions is less pronounced than it is, for instance, in the works of Handel, Gluck, and Mozart, who nevertheless remain Germans. What constitutes nationality, musically speaking, is very difficult to say. There is an impression that melody is the Italian element in music, harmony the German. But the greatest melodists that ever lived were Schubert and Wagner, and the greatest harmonists, apart from Bach, Wagner, and Schubert, are the Polish Chopin, the Hungarian Liszt, and the Norwegian Grieg.

Individuality is somewhat easier to describe, and when we examine the individuality of Edward MacDowell we find something that any American may feel proud to discover in a compatriot. To his friends his droll and truly American gift of humor has always seemed one of his most charming traits. In a letter to me he once recurred to his student days at the Paris Conservatoire. Life in Paris seemed to him "a huge but rather ghastly joke." His fellow-students "never seemed to miss the absence of the word 'home' in their language. Most of them looked as if they had been up ever since they were born. They seemed to live on cigarettes, odd carafons of wine, and an occasional shave."

That "occasional shave" is delightfully characteristic of MacDowell's wit. In his conversation he always kept the listener amused with such unexpected turns—as he does in his music. Scherzo is Italian for 'joke, and it is in his scherzo

movements that we often hear him at his best. His famous teacher, the Venezuelan pianist, Teresa Carreño, hardly ever plays his second pianoforte concerto without being compelled to repeat the *presto giocoso*.

Another of his traits was revealed during his Conservatoire days. Though but fifteen years old, he soon discovered that it was not the right place for him. There was too much striving for effect for its own sake, and not sufficient reverence for the masters, to suit this American lad. Famous professors like Marmontel, Mathias, and Ambroise Thomas did not hesitate to mutilate a composition or to insert measures of their own to make it what they deemed effective. He packed his trunk and went to Stuttgart. Here there was no lack of reverence for genius, but there was what throughout his life he hated quite as much—pedantry; so, after six weeks, he moved on again, a real American, in quest of the best wherever it may be found, and bound to find it.

He found it at last at Frankfort, where there was a pianist, Carl Heymann, who "dared play the classics as if they had actually been written by men with blood in their veins." Under his fingers "a sonata was a poem." The eminent composer Raff was director of the Frankfort conservatory. By him MacDowell was confirmed in his tendency toward writing music with a pictorial or poetic background. The death of Raff revealed the emotional nature of the American youth. His first pupil, Miss Marian Nevins, who became his wife two years later, says regarding this tragic event:

"He came to me at the hour for my lesson, looking so white and ill that I was frightened. His voice broke as he said only the words, 'Raff is dead.' There was a sweet hero-worship of a shy boy for an almost equally shy man, and for months after Raff's death he was in a morbid condition. He gave me eighteen marks—all he had at the time—and said, 'as I knew more about flowers than he did, would I get some for him to send?' So I bought a mass of roses, and, what was unusual for Germany, had them sent not even bound together; and these were put about Raff, nearer than

the grand beautiful floral things sent by the dozen."

Like all students of the pianoforte, MacDowell always adored the personality and the works of Liszt, to whom his first concerto is dedicated. Following the advice of Raff, he had visited Weimar, where he was greatly encouraged by the cordial praise Liszt bestowed both on his playing and his compositions, and by the invitation to play his first piano suite at the next convention of the Allgemeine Musik-Verein, over which Liszt presided. There was, to be sure, more honor than profit in this. A man cannot live on compliments and applause, and MacDowell, like most other musicians, found it extremely hard to make a living in Germany unless he used up all his vitality in teaching, leaving none for creative work. Luckily, his wife had a little money, so they took the daring risk of dropping everything but composition and settling down to a quiet life in and near Wiesbaden. It was here that MacDowell wrote the compositions from opus 23 to opus 35.

Those were idyllic days. "The one dark spot," Mrs. MacDowell writes, "was a long and severe illness of mine brought on by over-anxiety and trying to do work which I was not well used to; but in spite of it all, we were very happy. The six Idylls, op. 28, of which I am very fond, I associate with our little flat in the Jahnstrasse. I had been ill a long time, and felt Edward was neglecting his work in his care of me. So I made him promise he would write a daily sketch for a week, and these six were the result of this promise. I in bed, and he writing music in the next room! Of course he changed and 'fixed' them later on, but the actual music was written in these six days."

After nearly four years of Wiesbaden it became imperative to replenish the exchequer, and an attempt was made to secure a position as local examiner for the London Royal Academy of Music. MacDowell had been specially recommended for this position, and the matter really rested in the hands of Lady Macfarren. She was a nice old lady, and things seemed certain until she suddenly said: "I hope you have no leaning

toward the school of that wild man Liszt." The American had to confess sorrowfully that he had; and when he got home he found a note saying the place was not suited for him! It was not the first time, and far from the last, that devotion to an ideal cost him a worldly advantage.

He now resolved to try his luck in America, and he chose Boston instead of New York (his native city), partly because in 1880 Boston was still reputed the musical center of America, and partly because Paris had inspired him with an aversion to very large cities. He was soon in great demand as a teacher. His technical studies, in several volumes, which are not so well known as they will be by and by, reveal him as one of the most practical and successful pedagogues of all time. In the preface to Vol. I. of his "Technical Exercises" he says: "In my opinion, physical development and music are two different things, and although musical talent is a *sine qua non* in pianoforte playing, it cannot reach its full expression without a thorough command of the muscles of the hand, wrist, and arm. I have found it advisable to keep the purely physical part of piano-playing entirely separate from its musical side, as this allows a concentration of the mind not otherwise practical. I therefore beg the student who may use these exercises to consider them from a purely 'athletic' standpoint."

When he accepted the professorship of music at Columbia University in 1896, little time was left for private instruction, and he could take only the most advanced students—pupils who were better suited with exercises like those in his "Twelve Virtuoso Studies," in which, as in his two concertos and in the Etudes of Chopin and Liszt, brilliant virtuosity is allied with poetic thoughts and moods. He had no use for pupils who had more money than talent; \$12 a lesson would not tempt him to take such a one, while he would devote himself to others who could not adequately remunerate him. Once a week, indeed, for years, he gave a day to his free class; and when his mental collapse became imminent, he kept this class longest of all, despite the protests of friends and relatives. His

pupils addressed him for his kindly interest, his helpful hints, his illuminating remarks, his generosity and self-sacrifice.

On the whole, he probably enjoyed his teaching, as he did his composing, more than he did playing in public. His diverse other duties made it impossible for him to practice six or more hours a day, like the professional virtuosi, and this made him nervous in view of possible technical slips. He was always handicapped, too, by an excessive diffidence, a lack of faith in himself as pianist and as composer. When he came on the stage and sat at the piano, he looked like a school-boy who has been sent to the blackboard on exhibition day and doesn't feel quite sure of himself. But soon, especially if he found the audience sympathetic, he warmed to his task and played as only a composer can play. He has had his superiors in those things in which a piano-player excels all pianists—brilliancy of execution—but none in the higher sphere of art. As regards beauty and variety of tone color, artistic phrasing, poetic feeling, dramatic grandeur in a climax, he was the greatest pianist this country has produced—an American peer of Paderewski.

It was doubtless a mistake—in which, I am sorry to say, I encouraged him—to accept the Columbia professorship. Although he soon gathered large classes of devoted students about him, making music one of the most popular and prosperous of the university departments, few of the students were sufficiently advanced to need the instruction of a man of genius. In other words, most of his duties were such as a lesser man might have done, and they left him no time or energy for composing, except in summer, when, in view of his high-strung organization and tendency to headaches and insomnia, he should have rested absolutely. Had he but accepted Mr. Hamlin Garland's repeated and urgent invitations to spend a summer with him among the Indians in the Far West, he might have been saved. But the impulse to compose was irresistible, and the opportunity to rest was lost.

The time came when it was felt necessary for him to give up the arduous professorial duties or else sacrifice the

higher mission of his life. After seven years of service he left, the more eagerly because the authorities hesitated to accept his plan of uniting literature and the fine arts in one faculty, or school, and possibly making some of the courses compulsory for every student in the college, in the hope of turning out fewer "barbarians" than the universities do at present. It was about the time that Professor Woodberry also left Columbia; there was some acrimonious discussion, which aggravated MacDowell's insomnia and hastened his breakdown. But the germs of his mental disease were busy long before that. More than a decade previously he would say and do strange things when in the throes of composition. I have elsewhere commented on the striking similarity of his case to Schumann's. But while Schumann hastened his collapse by intemperance (beer and cigars), MacDowell was intemperate in one thing only—his passion for work.

His career came to a close before he reached his forty-fourth year; yet he has written enough to place himself at the head of American composers. As a writer for orchestra the late Professor Paine may dispute the first place with him, and Paine also wrote a grand opera; but neither he nor any other American can for a moment contest his supremacy as a writer of songs and of pianoforte sonatas and short pieces. In these—particularly the songs—he ranks with the great masters of Europe—with Schubert, Franz, Grieg, Chopin, Schumann. Anton Seidl ranked him in point of originality above Brahms, while the eminent French composer Jules Massenet has exclaimed: "How I love the works of this young American composer, MacDowell! What a musician! He is sincere and individual—what a poet! What exquisite harmonies!"

MacDowell was not a juvenile prodigy. He was not like Schubert and Mendelssohn, who wrote some of their most mature things before they were out of their teens; but rather like Beethoven and Wagner, in so far as his genius matured slowly. Of his orchestral works only one belongs to the period when his genius had fully ripened—"The Indian Suite"—"one of the noblest composi-

tions of modern times," as Mr. Philip Hale has aptly called it. Of the others, one, "Lamia," has never been printed or played; the remaining ones—"Hamlet and Ophelia," "Lancelot and Elaine," "The Saracens and Lovely Alda," and the "First Suite"—are all distinguished by exquisite orchestral coloring and artistic workmanship, but thematically they are less individual than his later works. It is this evolution of his real self, this gradual maturing of his genius, that makes his early collapse the greater a calamity.

In the early pianoforte list there is much that is dainty, brilliant, and fascinating (among others, the two concertos, "The Eagle," "Clair de lune," "Dance of the Gnomes"). Most of these pieces, however, might have been written by other men; but with opus 45, the "Sonata Tragica," MacDowell's individuality begins to assert itself so strongly that thenceforth no expert could fail to recognize his seal on every page. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he always put melody in the first place, refusing to write unless he had a new melodic curve to guide his harmonies. In the German days he had many a dispute with his friend Templeton Strong as to the relative importance of harmony and melody. Yet his harmonies are no less original than his melodies; and for young composers he is a much better model than Richard Strauss and the other modern Germans who make dissonance an end instead of a means. MacDowell had a strong aversion to these cacophonists, who ladle out tabasco sauce with a soup-spoon. He used a much finer brand, and a few drops supplied to give each of his pieces that agreeable but not too strong "bite" which the modern palate demands.

A trait which distinguishes MacDowell's pieces is the frequent alternation of exquisite feminine tenderness with outbursts of robust, overwhelming virility. "Tenderly" is the expression-mark that occurs perhaps most frequently on his pages; and, like a true American, he writes his expression-marks in English, which means so much more to us than the worn old Italian stencils. Of his sturdy, manly spirit the four pianoforte

sonatas afford the most numerous instances. Just to read the directions for the playing of one of his movements—say, the last of the "Keltic" sonata—"very swift and fierce;" "very emphatic;" "gradually increasing in violence and intensity;" "with tragic pathos"—makes one eager to witness this musical affray. To another frequent characteristic of his pianoforte music attention is called by the London Times's comments on the "Tragica:" "The difficulties of the sonata are prodigious, for the music is orchestral. The ideas are big, but they seem to call for an orchestra to make themselves fully felt. Yet with all this the tragic note resounds with ten times the force of Draeseke's Tragic Symphony."

Apart from Liszt, no other composer has written at times so orchestrally for the piano, yet—and here lies the marvel and the paradox—so idiomatically at the same time. His shorter pieces are equally euphonious, and these, fortunately, are usually much easier—fit pabulum for amateurs. Pianists who wish to become familiar with MacDowell's genius should begin with his "Woodland Sketches" and add to these the "Sea Pieces," "New England Idyls," and "Fireside Tales"—collections of short pieces with those poetic titles and superscriptions that are so characteristic of their composer. The verses are usually his own; they have the concise, pictorial suggestiveness of Japanese poems. A specimen: "From a Wandering Iceberg" has these lines prefixed:

"An errant princess of the North,
A virgin, snowy white,
Sails adown the summer seas
To realms of burning light."

In conversation with William Armstrong Edward MacDowell once said: "A song, if at all dramatic, should have climax, form, and plot, as does a play. Words to me seem so paramount, and, as it were, apart in value from the musical setting, that, while I cannot recall the melodies of many of those songs that I have written, the words of them are indelibly impressed upon my mind." It stands to reason that, in view of this, and of the fidelity of the music to the prefixed verses in the pianoforte pieces, his songs must be characterized by a

thorough blending of the words and the music; and this is indeed, apart from their spontaneous and individual melody, their most striking trait; it is admirably illustrated in what are perhaps his best five songs: the romantic "The Sea," the melancholy "Menie," the lovely Scotch "My Jean," the exquisitely poetic "Idyl" (opus 33), and the ravishing "The Swan Bent Low to the Lily," which is almost his own swan song (opus 60). Those who would know the best that America has produced in art song should get his opus 33, opus 60, and, above all, the "Eight Songs," opus 47, every one of which is worth its weight in radium.

The best of MacDowell's songs and pianoforte pieces were composed in a log cabin buried in the woods near his hillcrest home at Peterboro, New Hampshire, facing Mount Monadnock. Here, before his illness, he was visited daily, in his dreams, by fairies, nymphs of the woods, and the other idyllic creatures of the romantic world about whom he tells us such strange stories in his compositions. He was taken up to Peterboro last May because he was so impatient to get there. All summer, however, he did not comprehend that he was there; and when I last saw him, on October 4, he did not know it; yet he asked me if I had been in the log cabin! I never before realized so vividly what a myste-

rious, inexplicable organ the brain is—dead in some parts, alive in others. A framed photograph of myself was hanging on the wall, and Mrs. MacDowell told me that for a long time he had spoken daily with an air of distress of how uncomfortable it must be for me in that position. The day before we arrived he suddenly declared his conviction that it was, after all, not myself, but only my picture. When told of this, I said to him: "Don't worry, Edward, about my being stuck up on the wall, for you know I always was stuck up;" whereat he laughed in his hearty, boyish manner. He always enjoyed a pun, the worse the better, and was himself an inveterate punster. It is consoling to think that his sense of humor still remains to entertain him, although at times his mind is almost a blank. His face retains its unearthly beauty—the disease is not mirrored in it—and his eyes still have the light of genius in them. He seldom refers to his music now, but takes great comfort in a copy of his own poems, printed a few years ago. From this he reads daily to his wife and his nurse. To us he read the lines prefixed to the piece "From a Log Cabin," which sum up the whole tragedy of his life and the loss to American music:

"A house of dreams untold,
It looks out over the whispering tree-tops,
And faces the setting sun."

