

PART II

INTIMATIONS OF YES

MUSIC IS INTERNATIONAL

W. H. AUDEN

Orchestras have so long been speaking
This universal language that the Greek
And the Barbarian have both mastered
Its enigmatic grammar which at last
Says all things well. But who is worthy?
What is sweet? What is sound? Much of the earth
Is austere, her temperate regions
Swarming with cops and robbers; germs besiege
The walled towns, and among the living
The captured outnumber the fugitive.
Where silence is coldest and darkest,
Among the staring blemishes that mark
War's havocking slot, it is easy
To guess what dream such vaulting cries release:
The unamerican survivor
Hears angels drinking fruit-juice with their wives
Or making money in an open
Unpoliced air. But what is our hope,
As with an ostentatious rightness
These gratuitous sounds like water and light
Bless the Republic? Do they sponsor
For us the mornes and motted mammelons,
The sharp streams and sottering springs of
A commuter's wish, where each frescade rings
With melodious boeing and hooing
As some natural lovejoy deigns to woo,
And nothing dreadful ever happened?
Probably yes. We are easy to trap,
Being Adam's children, as thirsty
For mere illusion still as when the first
Comfortable heresy crooned to
The proud flesh founded on the self-made wound,
And what we find rousing or touching

Tells us little and confuses us much.

As Shaw says; 'Music is the brandy
Of the damned'. It was from the good old grand

Composers the progressive kind of
Tyrant learned how to melt the legal mind

With a visceral a-ha; fill a

Dwarf's ears with sforzandos and the dwarf will

Believe he's a giant; the orchestral

Metaphor bamboozles the most oppressed;

As a trombone the clerk will bravely

Go oom-pah oom-pah to his minor grave:

So that today one recognizes

The Machiavell by the hair in his eyes,

His conductor's hands. Yet the jussive

Elohim are here too, asking for us

Through the noise. To forgive is not so

Simple as it is made to sound; a lot

Of time will be quite wasted, many

Promising days end badly, and again

We shall offend. But let us listen

To the song which seems to absorb all this.

For these halcyon structures are useful

As structures go—though not to be confused

With anything really important

Like feeding strays or looking pleased when caught

By a bore or a hideola.

Deserving nothing, the sensible soul

Will rejoice at the sudden mansion

Of any joy. Besides, there is a chance

We may someday need very much to

Remember when we were happy; one such

Future would be the exile's ending

With no graves to visit, no socks to mend,

Another, to be short of breath yet

Staying on to oblige, postponing death.

Listen! Even the dinner waltz in

Its formal way is a voice that assaults

International wrong, so quickly,

Completely delivering to the sick,

Sad, soiled prosopon of our ageing

Present the perdition of all her rage.

BEN SHAHN AND MORRIS GRAVES

JAMES THRALL SOBY

THERE is a dwindling tendency among Europeans to think of American artists either as expatriate stylists or as homespun realists: West, Whistler and Sargent as guiding stars in one category; Eakins and Homer in the other. The distinction has been made most often in England, and quite naturally, for with the exception of Mary Cassatt all our famous early exiles practised in London and contributed there to a worldly ambience for art, West through academic position, Whistler through personal flamboyance, Sargent by social manipulation, their promotional methods changing with the nature of patronage. There can be no doubt that the talents of these artists were profoundly affected by their residence abroad, though we may still argue in what final degree. Today, however, the gains and penalties of expatriation are beside the point in considering the living artists of our two countries, for no first-rate American painter now centres his career anywhere but at home, nor, I think, does any Englishman. Art has become so international in communication that it would be idle for a painter to live abroad merely to warm his wits; indeed, we may one day reach the stage where only the world capitals can harbour a limited provincialism within the insulating vigour of their own activity. Yet the actual genesis of painting and sculpture has perhaps become more national in very recent years, and it may be that we appreciate each other most when each speaks clearly his native language, instead of attempting a universal idiom.

A case in point is the favourable reception accorded two younger American artists at the Tate Gallery's 1946 exhibition of American painting. The artists are Ben Shahn (b. 1898) and Morris Graves (b. 1910). Both are decidedly American in identity; both are nourished by New World environment; and a fundamental difference between them is that Shahn looks outward for basic inspiration, while Graves looks inward.

Their childhoods were totally unlike. Shahn was born in Russia, came to America at the age of eight, and grew up in the poorer sections of Brooklyn. His art has never ceased to reflect the special atmosphere of life in an American metropolis. We cannot imagine him painting a landscape pure and simple, though urban