CENTURY AGO COMPOSERS AND MUSICOLOGISTS set out to collect and preserve the folk music of Europe. Janáček wrote down the songs and dances of Moravia and found in them inspiration for his own brand of speech-melody; Cecil Sharp collected in pubs and fairs the tunes that were to generate the modal harmonies and plangent melodies of the Vaughan Williams symphonies, while beneath the fake dance rhythms and creamy chords of “salon gypsy” music, Kodaly and Bartók discerned polytonal and polyrhythmic structures that miraculously coincided with their own stylistic innovations. All over Europe the music of the people was being discovered by serious composers and used to give a kind of democratic endorsement to their modernist experiments. Stravinsky, Szymanowski, Canteloube, Albeniz, Respighi—composers from every European country joined in the rush. It was as though the past of European music was being discovered precisely in order to break with it. For no sooner was our folk music captured on the page, dusted off, and universally admired for its melodic invention than it died. Those performers heard by Janáček, Sharp, and Bartók were already old, and no young person could be prevailed upon to sing with them.

The explanation is simple: Europe had been conquered by America. The musical idiom that had poked its head through a window in Dvořák’s New World Symphony had now stormed through the door. Not jazz only, but the entire tradition, from the Negro spiritual, via the blues and the minstrel shows, to the Music Hall and beyond. Europeans had begun to be captivated by that “Great American Songbook” which has recently been so expertly assembled by Terry Teachout in his poignant articles in Commentary. There has never been anything in the world like this—a tradition of song which is open at every point to outside influence, which absorbs every competing idiom into itself so that it is in effect without competition, a great “yeah-saying” to the modern world and everything in it, which is also a day-to-day reminder of the human heart.

It is through music that America has had the farthest-reaching influence on other cultures; it is through music that the country came to self-knowl-
edge and it is still part of the American character to fill every silence with a song. Scholars like Gunther Schuller have devoted many volumes to the mystery of jazz—how this unprecedented idiom emerged from African drum music, from the fusion of the pentatonic and diatonic scales, and from the four-square harmonies of the Baptist hymnal. But the synthesis didn’t stop with jazz. One after another the rival musics of the world were absorbed: the Shaker hymns and Afro-American field hollers, the marching bands of Central Europe, the fiddles and spoons of the Celtic dances, the Spanish guitar, and the Anglican organ. The classical orchestra too was conscripted, diverted by Hollywood into the great river of popular sentiment and half-aware kitsch. Korngold brought the harmonies of Richard Strauss and the colors of Mahler; Gershwin added Stravinsky while Thelonius Monk and Art Tatum provided touches of Debussy and Ravel.

The influence went rapidly in the opposite direction as well. The Central European cafés where Janáček and Bartók had collected folk songs were soon filled with the sound of jazz, and when the voice of the people is heard in the music of Martínů it is not in the style of a Moravian folk song, but in the idiom of New Orleans. The new music of America was democratic and global, able to defeat any rival simply by its refusal to believe in rivalry, happily appropriating every sound that could be reissued as a song. From Ives, through Gershwin and Copland to Bernstein, American music has shown how to mix the idiom of popular music with the large-scale structures of the concert hall.

The great days of American popular music may now be past: rock and roll changed the blues from a lyrical confession to a Dionysian display, and the long-term effects are now being felt.

Like everything typical of America, this musical culture issues from the spontaneous interchanges of ordinary people. The American song exists because people have enjoyed it and asked for more. It is the musical expression of consumer sovereignty. And like everything typical of America it gets up the intellectual nose. Coming to America as a refugee from Nazism, the philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno took it upon himself to pour scorn on the music of Hollywood. For Adorno this disgusting sound, riddled with cliché and kitsch, was not art but ideology—the sweet pill of false consciousness which numbs the senses of the working class. The American song, Adorno argued, be it by Gershwin or Berlin, by Jerome Kern or Cole Porter, is an instrument of capitalist exploitation. It is not the consumer or the producer that is sovereign in this debased musical culture, but the “owners of the means of communication,” namely the capitalist class. Under socialism, Adorno implied, all this fetishism would be blown away and the emancipated proletariat would be whistling the ideology-free music of Webern and Schoenberg in the streets.

It is no doubt because American liberals are co-genitally disposed to endorse all expressions of anti-American sentiment that Adorno’s ludicrous writings remain canonical in American academic musicology, with only Richard Taruskin prepared to administer to this censorious charlatan the well-deserved kick in the butt. Far more human among the Marxist refugees was Kurt Weill who, unlike Adorno (whose compositions are as constipated as
his prose), gave to the world an abundance of lyrical masterpieces. Weill immediately understood that, if there is an idiom that conveys the meaning of modern life as it is lived by ordinary people, it is that of the American popular song. The works that resulted from Weill’s conversion culminate in *The Seven Deadly Sins*—a set of tableaux to words by Brecht, in which the deeply nostalgic, all-American music wars with the anti-American sentiment of Brecht’s malicious verse.

The case of Weill versus Adorno is of enduring significance. There is an undeniable streak of toe-curling kitsch in American popular music. For it is music that has escaped from the paddock of good taste into the open plains of common sentiment. This does not mean that it is morally corrupt, as Adorno thought, or that it is bent to the task of falsifying social realities. It means the opposite. This is music that incorporates the pains and joys of modern life. If it sounds so different from all the music that has gone before then, this is because modern life—the life made in America—is also different from the life that has gone before.

Where a traditional folksong like “Waley Waley” tells us of the inconsolable wretchedness of a woman betrayed, the American songbook provides us with the gentle remedies of modern life, as when Judy Garland sings of “The Man That Got Away.” Such a song says goodbye to one man, by way of preparing the heart for the next, using the Big Band chorus in order to cheer the victim on. The small devices whereby ordinary people cope with ordinary disappointments are honored in this music, which seldom if ever adopts a tragic tone of voice. Its attitude to rupture is typified by Hoagy Carmichael’s nostalgic “I Get Along Without You Very Well”; it uses homely images to normalize the excitement of falling in love—“If I Were a Bell” as sung by Blossom Dearie, or Irving Berlin’s “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket.” It refuses to take a tragic attitude to unrequited desire (Rodgers and Hart’s “Glad to Be Unhappy”), and it cuts down all experiences, whether of joy or sorrow, of embarrassment or humor, to a manageable size, making it clear that either they are within reach of us all or within reach of no one.

*If this music invokes* the higher forms of passion, therefore, it also projects them into the background. The insinuating softness with which Peggy Lee sings of “the days of wine and roses” and “the door marked nevermore” is like the candlelit supper and the folded napkins—a way of invoking the unobtainable, and imbuing it with a fairy-tale glow. This is not for you, the music says; but only because it is not for anyone. Meanwhile, let’s pretend. From Frank Sinatra to Barbra Streisand, America has produced a continuous stream of singers who know exactly how to represent in their tone of voice the ordinary American heart in its ordinary heartbeat, while adding just enough exaltation to make the heart miss a beat or two. Looked at in this way, the American song has prepared mankind for the modern world of transitory attachments and temporary griefs far more effectively than has any other cultural innovation.

But while American popular music normalizes those sentiments it also moralizes them. While exploring the heartbreaks of infidelity and the excitement of seduction, it points gently in the direction of marriage, family, and the future. Unlike the tragic ballads of old Europe it aims for the “happy ending,” as boy and girl become man and wife. You may have fallen by the wayside, it says, but you can get back on the happiness train. The musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein projected this American idea of available happiness across the world, and it is to the American tradition of popular song that people all over the world still turn when they wish to recapture their ordinary hopes.

Ponder this fact and you too will hope. A world that turns naturally to the American songbook whenever it wishes to remind itself of its joys is a world that is friendly to America. In the contest between Weill and Adorno, the world is on the side of Weill.

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