



John Alden Carpenter: A CHICAGO COMPOSER (Music in American Life)

Howard Pollack

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With this generous biography, Howard Pollack restores to the public eye a prolific and gifted artist whom Walter Damrosch called 'the most American of our composers'. Well respected and widely performed during his lifetime, John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951) was one of the first American composers to be influenced by Debussy and Stravinsky and one of the first composers anywhere to incorporate elements of popular song and jazz into concert music. His highly original yet refined orchestral music was championed by Bruno Walter, Fritz Reiner, Otto Klemperer, Serge Koussevitzky, and other celebrated conductors, and his sensitive songs were performed by such legendary singers as Alma Gluck and Kirsten Flagstad. Avidly interested in vernacular culture and receptive to a wide range of musical influences, Carpenter set verses by American poets including Langston Hughes and Vachel Lindsay and created a ballet score based on George Herriman's celebrated comic strip Krazy Kat. His whimsical suite Adventures in a Perambulator was on the docket for Walt Disney's planned sequel to Fantasia, and his ballet Skyscrapers, which enjoyed successful mountings in New York and Munich, was the only American work commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes. Pollack skillfully balances Carpenter's personal and musical lives, covering his interactions with musicians of every stripe, his high profile in the Chicago Renaissance cultural scene, and his two marriages (first to the designer and art collector Rue Winterbotham and then, following a protracted affair, to the Chicago socialite Ellen Borden). In this expansive, fair-minded biography, Pollack explains the factors that pulled Carpenter out of the spotlight and argues persuasively for Carpenter's continuing importance.

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