

Excerpts from *Passport to Paris*

Vernon Duke

Editor's Note: Russian-born, naturalized American Vernon Duke (1903 – 1969) is best remembered for popular songs such as “April in Paris” (a sort of theme song and big instrumental hit for the Count Basie “Second Testament” band), “I Can’t Get Started,” and “Autumn in New York.” But he might not have been happy that his legacy turned out this way, for he was also a prolific composer of “serious” or “classical” music. Half of who Duke was as a musician never made the impact he hoped for; and the half that did reach the public was not always recognizable as a Duke creation.

Those Duke gems of the Great American Songbook and of the repertoire of a generation of American jazz musicians (an irony as Duke never much liked “real” jazz) are often attributed to some other songwriter. Most casual listeners assume that these songs were composed by Harry Warren, Irving Berlin, or Duke’s good friend, George Gershwin. Hipper listeners might mention Zelda Fitzgerald’s favorite composer, Vincent Youmans (of “Tea for Two” fame), or Harold Arlen (“Blues in the Night” and the songs from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*), or Burton Lane (“Old Devil Moon,” “How are Things in Glocca Mora,” and “On a Clear Day”).

But as his witty and insightful autobiography, *Passport to Paris* (1955), makes clear, Duke was a hard-working, ambitious composer not initially interested in writing popular music. He may never have pursued that course had he not been so enamored of Gershwin, or had there been greater commercial interest in his “serious” music. Yet there was some-

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thing about his divided self, or rather his self-awareness of his divided self, that also tended to work against his presence as a composer in either popular or art music. Duke perceived such a stark division between his popular tunesmith self and his serious composer self that he constructed two distinct professional personas. He opens *Passport to Paris* by explaining to readers how crucial this division was to his public reception and to his self-understanding as an artist:

According to Who's Who, I have spent my "entire career" (come, come, I'm still spending it) writing two kinds of music: the serious or unrewarding kind as Vladimir Dukelsky and the unserious but lucrative variety as Vernon Duke. Almost every interview I've ever had has brought some tired references to "the Jekyll and Hyde of Music," "the Two-Headed Janus of Music," etc. There have been quite a few cases of composers who successfully managed to write in both the high- and low-brow genre, but I am entirely unique in one respect. Gershwin always remained Gershwin whether he wrote *Porgy* or "I Got Rhythm"; Weill was easily recognizable as Weill whether he tackled *Mahagonny* or *One Touch of Venus*; and even Lennie Bernstein is his ingratiating self whether he tears into *Jeremiah* or *On the Town*; but Dukelsky in no way resembles Duke.

There isn't a note of jazz in my serious music, and there are no symphonic overtones to my musical-comedy output. I don't think that's anything to be proud of. . . . My versatility, far from being a boon, has in reality been infuriating to most musical people.

There is an uneasy humor about Duke's inability to bring together his warring creative halves, a lack of integration that he believed may have made him a weaker artist. In any case, *Passport to Paris* is a wonderfully evocative autobiography about a young, aristocratic Russian boy who de-

sires to be a serious composer; the wildly engaging, sometimes bizarre, highly egotistical and sycophantic cast of Russian and French musicians, dancers, and artists with whom he travels; his narrow escape from the fires of the Russian Revolution; his efforts to get his noncommercial compositions performed; his struggles performing in various bands at coffee shops and ersatz ethnic nightclubs (ethnicity was for sale long before diversity came along); and the encouragement he receives from Gershwin, who dubbed him "Duke," to write popular songs.

I hope that *Passport to Paris* will be reprinted one day. In the meantime, I have chosen two short excerpts from the book to reprint here. The first involves Duke's effort to keep himself and his family fed by taking a job in a "salon trio" in Constantinople, one of several stops after fleeing Russia. Paid three liras a night, he eventually ditches this job for employment playing piano accompaniments to silent films, as well as jobs playing pop tunes for British soldiers and seemingly unrehearsed recitals at the British embassy in Turkey. The second excerpt concerns his meeting Gershwin, as well as his internal struggle with being pulled toward writing popular music while also trying to make a career of serious composition. (Duke's career as a popular songwriter took off in the 1930s.)

I am grateful to Duke's widow, Kay Duke Ingalls, for giving us permission to publish these excerpts.

– Gerald Early

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A [sic] English colonel visited the restaurant where I held forth with my violin and cello partners, and engaged me on the spot for a concert in his barracks. The pay was good but I had no notion of what was expected of me. On arriving, I found masses of enlisted men, roaring drunk on Turkish beer, who greeted my entrance with hoarse shouts and demands for songs like "K-K-K-Katy," "Tipperary" and "For Me and My Gal," which I knew by heart; after a successful start, I was urged to play various English folk ballads totally unknown to me. Here I was seated at the rickety piano, bewildered by the singing, shouting Tommies, who demanded encore after encore. God alone knows what I played and how the Tommies were able to follow me, or I them, but at the end of the evening, the tall cockney sergeant shook his head and handed me five liras, adding, "'Ere's yer money, chum, even if you ain't much good as a pianoforte player."

I always had the enviable ability to talk about a flop as though it were a hit (it proved most helpful in later years), and told awed friends of having conquered the British. A young Greek decided that I was ripe for the British Embassy and arranged for a recital there with a portly Russian baritone. For this I was to collect ten liras, and of course we joyously accepted; on the day of the concert it was pointed out to me that we were to dress, meaning white tie. I don't think I owned a necktie in 1920, white or colored, and as for tails, they were associated in my mind with the Russian Imperial Court or the films. The possibility of my getting into one of those things never entered my mind. Yet here it was – tails or no ten liras. In despair, I ran to the kind little Greek, who was short and somewhat crippled and produced a morning coat and striped trousers from his own wardrobe. His tails were at the tailor's, but the

morning coat was certainly formal as hell, so no one could say I was not "correct."

I played my accompaniments looking as if my clothes had been shrunk in a rainstorm, and at the end of the concert, after warmly congratulating the baritone, the ambassador dismissed me with a cool nod. I did get the ten liras, for which I would happily have dressed in a barrel.

That first winter out of Russia I began to function (unofficially and unprofitably) as Dukelsky and Duke. I disliked popular songs, owing, no doubt, to such exponents as Nyegin, and I loathed the "arty" sex-serenades of the industrious Vertinsky, who was always popping up unexpectedly. One afternoon after lunch, I saw the original Moscow Pierrot lolling dandiacally in the *Mayak* salon, all the "well-born" waitresses (ex-gentlewomen, naturally) worshipping at his impeccably shod feet. The master was at his most affable and was reciting his latest sexotic, as Walter Winchell would have it, roundelay. He then distributed engraved cards bearing the legend *The Black Rose, Cabaret Artistique*. The Moscow Pierrot had found himself some well-heeled Armenian Harlequins, and they had provided him with his own *boîte*. I was too young and too poor to frequent such dens, but I heard a few months later that the authorities staged a raid in the place and unearthed quantities of cocaine and 100 per cent syphilis among the lady servants and entertainers. No more Black Rose.

But the Rose of Jazz, healthy and blooming, was by now firmly planted on the European shore of the Bosphorus. *Mayak* patrons began to request "Hindustan," "Tell Me" and "Till We Meet Again." I promptly purchased all three, also Irving Berlin's earlier successes and a thing mysteriously entitled "Swanee" by a man improbably styled Geo. Gershwin. The Berlins were good in their way, but the Gershwin sent me into ecstasies. The

bold sweep of the tune, its rhythmic freshness and, especially, its syncopated gait, hit me hard and I became an “early-jazz” fiend. That’s not quite what I mean, because (shudder, ye New Orleans purists!) the “real” New Orleans jazz and the true-blue blues impressed me considerably less. “What can you expect from a long hair” did I hear you say? Perhaps I can explain it best by admitting my admiration for the “musicality” and a composer’s inventiveness in young Gershwin, which was (and is) missing from the “real” thing, largely a collectively produced mood, anonymous and crude.

[...]

Madame Gautier mastered my songs – even provided English translations – and sang them at the next Guild concert. The audience reception was indicative of other such receptions traditionally accorded new, but not *too* new, music – the sort of reception where the hopeful composer asks his best friend, “Well, how did it go?” and gets this answer: “Pretty well, I thought, how did *you* think it went?” The critics said nothing much and nobody “hailed” me – except a swarthy young man named George Gershwin, whom I first knew as *Geo.* Gershwin, the creator of “Swanee,” the copy of which was by now gathering dust on the big piano in the Russian *Mayak* in far-off Constantinople.

Gershwin impressed me as a superbly equipped and highly skilled composer – not just a concocter of commercial jingles. His extraordinary left hand performed miracles in counter-rhythms, shrewd canonic devices, and unexpected harmonic shifts. “Where did you study?” I asked, after listening to him play. George laughed, a cigar stuck between his white teeth. “Oh, I didn’t study much – some piano and harmony with a man called

Charlie Hambitzer, some lessons from Rubin Goldmark – but on the whole I guess I’m just a natural-born composer.”

When I informed him of my years with Reinhold Glière, the difficulty I had had mastering counterpoint and orchestration at fifteen, he was vaguely impressed. “Gee, it must be great to know so much,” he said, eyeing me with curiosity. “But now that you’ve learned it all – what are you doing with it?” By way of reply I played an extremely cerebral piano sonata. Gershwin listened, rather impatiently, I thought, and then shook his head. “There’s no money in that kind of stuff,” he said, “no heart in it, either. Try to write some real popular tunes – and don’t be scared about going lowbrow. They will open you up!”

This rather startling remark of George’s – “they will open you up” – stayed with me through all the years that we were friends. Too many people have climbed on the bandwagon of George’s posthumous glory. Yet, together with two or three others, I was as close to him as a friend can be. This friendship lasted until his last trip to Hollywood, which brought about his tragic and untimely death at the age of thirty-eight.

I doubt that Gershwin, then just beginning to “hit it,” liked the strange little songs I wrote. As he expressed it to me later, he was surprised by the fact that so young a man (I was five years his junior) should write such dry and intellectual stuff. Eva Gautier sang three of George’s songs at her own recital (composer at the piano) and the audience literally shouted the place down with approval. A few months later, Marguerite d’Alvarez, then at the height of her fame, “stopped the show” with more composer-accompanied Gershwin. Odd that some of our present-day recitalists don’t hire Duke Ellington (or the other Duke – Vernon – for that matter) to inject a little much-needed life into their Town Hall appearances.

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I was now branching out in all directions. Greta Torpadie, the Norwegian, sang three more songs of mine. Marie Kiekhoefer, then an executive of the Wolfsohn Musical Bureau, took me in hand following the Guild initiation and suggested I write an orchestral piece. I had always wanted to write an overture to the Russian acmeist-poet Gumilev’s “Gondla” – a high-flown post-romantic tale of Iceland in beautiful marblelike verse. I went to work happily and completed the job in little over a week. The overture, which I orchestrated hesitantly, was shown to Dirk Foch (the father of film actress Nina Foch), the colorful Dutch musician who had just formed the short-lived New York City Symphony, and that courageous man accepted it for performance. This was quite a jump from the intermezzo of my short-pants debut, and I sat in a blissful haze through the two rehearsals, and bowed from a box after the Carnegie Hall performance just before the more than meager applause died down. H. E. Krehbiel, the then all-powerful *New York Tribune* critic, called my “Gondla” a “farrago of atrocious noises,” and most of the others dismissed it facetiously, but it was a start, and playing the misunderstood genius at so early an age was good fun.

The Foch, Gautier and Torpadie “breaks” gave me my first taste of the contemporary composer’s plight; he gets a performance – then, perhaps, another performance – then a seemingly interminable lull. Thirty years ago most of us had the same trouble – performances led to *nothing* because the new-music market, as today, was extremely limited and there was far too much supply and far too little demand.

I remember sitting idly on a Central Park bench after the first and last performance of “Gondla,” pondering my fate. There wasn’t much pondering to do, really. It all amounted to the same thing: I must make music pay – but how? The pudgy

little man with a glistening checkbook who runs up to you after a brilliant *première*, wrings your hand and shouts, “Great! You’ve got what it takes – I’ll give you ten thousand a year and here’s five on account; just sit tight and write music,” doesn’t pop up these days, and I suspect he wasn’t accessible in the days gone by – not unless his name was Ludwig of Bavaria and yours Wagner. So, back to synthetic gypsies I went, as accompanist to one of the tribe in a pseudo-Russian midtown night spot.

The first clash between the embryo Duke, the wage earner, and Dukelsky, would-be composer, occurred there and then: one evening when I was about to charge into the obnoxious “Otchi Tchornya,” who should walk in but the impeccably clad Karol Szymanowski, a half-dozen composers in tow. This, as I presently learned, was to be a banquet tendered the Pole by his admiring colleagues – Alfredo Casella, Emerson Whithorne, Aaron Baron, Lazare Saminsky and several others. Words cannot describe my despair and mortification. Here were my senior contemporaries, proudly practicing their craft – nay, *my* craft! – and here was I, a young fellow composer, about to prostitute myself publicly. I closed my eyes, raced through the hateful “Otchi” at breakneck speed, causing the gypsy diva intense discomfort and annoyance, then excused myself and buttonholed Saminsky. “I’m so sorry,” I stammered miserably. “Try and understand why I’m doing this.” Saminsky shrugged his shoulders philosophically. “Don’t worry, I understand perfectly. One must eat, mustn’t one?” Nothing was more obvious than this truth, but Oh! how it hurt at the time.

The next morning, I had a long talk with Mother. I told her that the hellish humiliation of my lower-than-lowbrow jobs was not justifiable in view of the pitiabilities I received for them, that I would

seek and obtain something more remunerative and that I would forever renounce the *métier* of an eatery piano player. Dear Mother agreed completely, as she always did when my music and my musical progress were at stake. The “Otchi Tchornya” interlude proved to be an epilogue, and never again did I have to don a red silk blouse and black dress trousers (part of a dinner suit, purchased on Eighth Avenue for seven dollars) to entertain hiccuping customers. I called up Gershwin and asked him whether he would listen to some freshly written tunes of mine. George said he sure would and I was off to West 103rd Street, a new hope in my heart.

When not playing ping-pong on the ground floor with brothers Ira or Arthur, George could be found at his piano, playing tirelessly for hours, never practicing in the Czerny sense, just racing through new tunes, adding new tricks, harmonies, “first and second endings” and changing keys after each chorus. He was a born *improvisatore* yet never changed tempo, nor played rubato, the relentless 4/4 beat carrying him along – it was physically difficult for him to stop. This was just what he was doing when I walked in and sat down to listen. George’s sister, Frankie, a chubby chestnut-haired flapper, ran in, and after singing a chorus in a husky little voice, with “gestures,” ran out again. George then switched to a blues, closed his eyes and, pushing out his lips in an oddly Negroid manner, began intoning Ira’s lyrics. There was the “feel” of an incantation in George’s “vocals,” and no subsequent performer of his songs has ever invested them with such arresting fervor. Chorus No. 3 became a duet with mild, bespectacled Ira, who sang “harmony” to George’s lead and provoked his brother’s ire by screwing up an especially juicy passage. The music stopped, a heated argument ensued; this was my chance

and, by breaking up the argument, I hastily
slid onto the piano stool. Vernon
Duke

“O.K., Dukie, let’s have it,” said George, baring his teeth and lighting a pipe. The Brothers Gershwin called me Dukie long before George baptized me Duke. The first two tunes were shrugged off politely, but on hearing the third, George’s attitude changed. He took the pipe out of his mouth and ordered me to repeat the chorus. “That’s a funny chord you got in the second bar,” George said reflectively. “It’s good, though. It’s so good that I’ll tell you what I’ll do – take you to Max Dreyfus.” Max Dreyfus, as most everybody knew, was the musical-comedy potentate publisher. This was the real article at last.

– From Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 76–77, 90–93; reprinted with permission from Kay Duke Ingalls.