



Griffes, Charles Tomlinson (1884-1920)

by Thomas L. Riis

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American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes responded avidly to the emerging musical styles of his day to create works characterized by refined construction, subtle gestures, and rhythmic sensitivity.

The third of five children, Griffes was born September 17, 1884 in Elmira, New York. He grew up in a comfortable middle-class household and took his first piano lessons from his sister, Katharine. At the age of fifteen, he began to study with Mary Selena Broughton, a well-trained English spinster and an instructor at Elmira College, who strongly guided his musical development and financially supported his piano studies in Germany beginning in 1903.

Besides benefiting from some of the best musical instruction available in piano, counterpoint, and composition during his stay in Europe, Griffes also became aware of the emerging homophile movement in Germany and the work of such pioneer figures as Magnus Hirschfeld. He also read the works of Oscar Wilde, André Gide, and Edward Carpenter.

Through exposure to the relatively liberal and nurturing atmosphere of musical circles in Europe, he acquired a sense of comfort with his own sexuality while still young. However, he never divulged his orientation to straight friends or associates.

During his first year abroad, Griffes formed a strong, possibly sexual, attachment to a 28-year-old fellow student, Emil Joel, who guided his artistic development, procured concert tickets for the young man, and introduced him to such prominent musical figures as Richard Strauss, Enrico Caruso, Ferruccio Busoni, and Engelbert Humperdinck, with whom he briefly studied.

Griffes returned to the United States in 1907 to assume the directorship of music at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, a post he held until his death in 1920 of an abscessed lung. His job held no special prestige, but the school's location just up the Hudson River from New York City gave him opportunities to promote his music there and to pursue an active sexual life in the relative anonymity of Manhattan.

Griffes kept a diary in German in which he reported on his various forays to bathhouses and other favorite gay-friendly haunts. He also enjoyed the company of men outside the public sex spaces and often visited new-found friends in their homes.

New York also provided the ideal environment in which to become familiar with the most progressive artistic trends in the country. With his gay companions, Griffes took full advantage of the rich menu of New York's cultural life. He enjoyed not only the city's musical offerings but also its theater and visual art. He was especially interested in watercolors and photography.

Because of his cosmopolitan experience, catholic taste, and solid training, Griffes avidly approached the modern art music styles emerging in his day more quickly than any other young American except Charles Ives (1874-1954).

While barely out of his teens, he had left the German Romantic sound of his first works to experiment with the French impressionistic techniques now associated with Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. *The White Peacock* (1915) is probably his best known piano work in this impressionistic style. (It was later arranged for orchestra.)

Griffes, like his contemporaries Debussy and Gustav Mahler, was struck by the fashion for Asian art subjects, especially those prints and paintings characterized by simple clear lines and empty space. He befriended the Ballets Russes dancer Adolf Bolm, who commissioned a one-act pantomime from him that resulted in *Sho-Jo* (1917), which featured the Japanese dancer, Michio Ito, accompanied by a spare chamber ensemble of wind and percussion instruments.

Griffes' final pieces, especially his *Piano Sonata* of 1919, press into even more progressive territory and mark him as a bold experimenter, unafraid to use highly jagged melodies and stinging chord clashes in pursuit of a distinctive individual style.

At the time of his death he was working on a festival drama based on the poetry of Walt Whitman, *Salut au monde*.

All told, Griffes composed seven sets of songs, five groups of piano pieces, ten works for orchestra, and a handful of works for chamber ensembles, the latter often written to accompany stage plays. He enjoyed critical success in his lifetime, but evinced almost no interest in the nationalist debates of the day, arguments often characterized by a patriarchal and stridently patriotic tone. He took a thoroughly modern view, free of any nativist sentiment.

Griffes' reportedly modest, shy, unpretentious, and witty personality is mirrored in his music: works recognized for their refined construction, subtle gestures depicting texts and moods, rhythmic sensitivity, and a marked melodic gift.

No man of his time and position could have been completely "out" without public disgrace, but clearly Griffes was able to express both his art and sexuality, even if he was not able to integrate them as fully as he might have wished.

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