

Young America

Stephen Vincent Benet has given more than the closing quatrain to Young America. "Hark the Homeland" is modeled on the opening pages of John Brown's Body, and is my homage to this neglected master. I wrote the text of "Heather Mary" on safari five years ago, and of "Daughter of Asheville" and "Hark the Homeland" a few months later. "My Uncle's House" goes back to my college days. I began writing the music for all but "Daughter of Asheville" a few days before the September 11 atrocities, and finished within three weeks while also putting in full days at the office. Busy times.

Poetry is meant to be cryptic. If you understand everything, I have failed. "Heather Mary" is the best I can do. Where that song is a poem set to music, "Daughter of Asheville" is a lyric set to a tune I thought up years before. Both the words and the music of the latter are meant to sound as if they might have come from the Civil War. What can we guess of Janet Alicia and her dancing partner? I think he is telling us that he died in the Battle of the Wilderness, with her name on his lips. I would conjecture that she died generations later, in a world of motorcars and relativity, surrounded by their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, with his ring on her finger. Now they dance, with the merry and brave, seeing only each other, into a dawn past reach.

Benet's great miniature reverses the time line, and takes us back to the forest primeval in which "Hark the Homeland" began. What an ear! The unexpected spondee in "all lost wild America," and the warmth and wit of the whole, make the piece a prize in any company. All a composer need do with such a text is to get out of its way.

Gordon Getty