

Frank Warschauer, “Jazz: On Whiteman’s Berlin Concerts” (June 1926)

Abstract

Paul Whiteman’s jazz orchestra was one of the most popular dance bands in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1926, he toured Europe with his orchestra and gave several concerts in Berlin. This article about Whiteman’s Berlin concerts appeared in the liberal *Vossische Zeitung* in June 1926. The author is the journalist Frank Warschauer, who was primarily active as a literary, film and music critic. His text reflects the enthusiasm of the younger generations for jazz, which was dismissed by many conservative critics as an uncultured American mass phenomenon, but whose success in Germany and Europe was unstoppable.

Source

Jazz: On Whiteman’s Berlin Concerts

Jazz: the most entertaining and vital phenomenon in contemporary music. Moreover, the only musical mass movement. Not only in America but everywhere. This might be regretted by those who oppose it in principle, but it is not to be denied.

Whatever is current and vital just now often defines a new category. The old standards are not adequate to assess it. Thus it is with film and also with jazz (it is no accident that they have to be mentioned together). The same question always arises: whether it is art or could some day become art. Answer: the question either cannot be answered at all or at least not immediately. It is rather the last thing that can be determined. It bears repeating that the method usually applied in Germany is pernicious: to point a pistol at every new phenomenon with the demand that it reveal its ultimate aim and pass the test of whether it can be designated art!

In any case, Paul Whiteman, the most prominent figure in American jazz, tends quite clearly to take jazz into the sphere of its own established absolute values, that is, into the sphere of art. He is the first to have liberated jazz from its functional and utilitarian meaning. The external symbol of this change is that he has taken it out of hotels and dance halls and introduced it into concert halls. In the winter of 1924, Whiteman made this leap with the first great jazz concert, in New York at Aeolian Hall and then repeated in many other cities. His success, first in America and England, showed him that the presentation of jazz in the concert hall is capable of impressing a great many people who could not otherwise be reached.

Whiteman’s real creation is his orchestra. He has cultivated, refined, and expanded the jazz orchestra in a way unknown until now. To the familiar sound of a conventional dance orchestra he added a full-scale string ensemble, thereby paving the way for the development of jazz symphonic forms on the one hand and jazz operas and jazz ballets on the other. Such works have in fact been produced recently in America.

If the intention of forging a connection to prestigious European musical forms is evident here, it is also true that the figures primarily responsible for both the origins of jazz and the boldest departures within it (which are defined by their own internal laws and independent of prior models) are the American Negroes. They have an extraordinarily original sense of rhythm, anchored deep in their nature, but also, remarkably, of melody. This combination also stimulates formal development intensively, which proceeds in jazz from an angle altogether unfamiliar to the European: namely, the angle of rhythm instead of harmony and melody, the dual basis of all European musical forms for hundreds of years. To

appreciate this one must listen to a Negro orchestra; despite the presence of a strong reciprocal influence, Negroes and whites never play together—they remain strictly separated by American racial prejudices.

Jazz in America has become its own branch of music. There are a great many orchestras, some—a characteristic fact—under the directorship of amateurs. The number of saxophone players alone supposedly totals 400,000! There are also many schools and textbooks devoted to innovative musical techniques for playing jazz on every kind of appropriate instrument. Thus, for example, Zez Confrey, the composer of very important piano pieces (such as “Kitten on the Keys”), has defined in a textbook devoted to the characteristic forms of jazz piano the figurations making for embellishment and variation, the so-called breaks, the way bass strings should be played, and more; he also supplied an introduction to the corresponding variations. For this belongs among the most interesting facts of this new musical world: that it not only gives every individual musician a great deal of freedom, but actually demands ingenuity and creativity.

Whiteman once wrote that jazz is Henry Ford and the Ku Klux Klan and the skyscrapers and prohibition and *Babbitt*—the whole of contemporary American reality. It is more than that: it is a piece of the present of all countries and perhaps the one that is most characteristic. Jazz, filled with the youthful energy of America, is the pregnant outburst of a changed, untragic feel for life, and what it sings is a different *Lied von der Erde*, the song of a new generation.

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