

An Analytic Approach to the *Roman Sketches, Op. 7* by Charles T. Griffes

By

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## ABSTRACT

Charles Griffes (1884-1920) was one of the influential American composers in the early twentieth century who sought and experimented with new musical idioms. He was conscious of the newest trends within a rapid changing musical world, resulting in the development of his individual harmonic language. He was often called the American Impressionist by his contemporary critics and authors, but this title needs to be re-examined in light of new research and analysis of his music. He not only absorbed Claude Debussy (1862-1918)'s and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)'s impressionistic techniques, but also developed his own techniques to create his individual style. One of his well-known impressionistic works, the *Roman Sketches, op. 7* reveals how he treated impressionistic techniques and how he established his own style within them.

It is my intention to examine the *Roman Sketches* from a formal, harmonic and pianistic standpoint in order to show the ways that Griffes used Debussy's and Ravel's impressionistic techniques and to further show how he developed his own techniques into an individual style.

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## Introduction

Charles T. Griffes was one of several important composers born in America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is often known as the “American Impressionist” due to the fact that some of the best-known works fit into the category, Impressionism. This notion was cultivated by contemporary scholars, critics, and performers. However, this title is controversial.<sup>1</sup> Griffes always tried to seek and experiment with new musical idioms and was conscious of the newest trends within the rapidly changing musical world of the early twentieth century. Griffes did not stay long in one particular style, but his impressionistic period lasted the longest –seven years. In his last years he moved beyond impressionism. This last period lasted only three years due to his death; however, it would be his representative musical style if he had lived long enough to bring it to fruition.

Donna Anderson suggests that we should not categorize or name each period. Her statement reinforces my opinion that the title “American Impressionist”, for the musical style of Griffes, was not correct.<sup>2</sup> His music was never dominated by impressionistic style but only guided and inspired by it. Also, we have to be aware of the difference in style between his published and unpublished works when studying Griffes, even within a particular stylistic period.

I will describe and give musical examples of Griffes’ progressive musical tendencies by connecting his three different periods to the major events of his life.

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<sup>1</sup> Reginald Haché, “Charles Tomlinson Griffes Revisited: An Essay on the Music of Charles Griffes” (*The America Liszt Society Journal*, vol. 34, July-December, 1993), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Donna K. Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: an Annotated Bibliography- Discography*. (Detroit: Published for College Music Society by Information Coordinators, 1977), 9.

Furthermore, I will discuss the major characteristics of impressionism using the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) as examples to show the relationship between their style and that of Griffes. I will explain in detail that part of Griffes' compositional style in *Roman Sketches, op. 7* is indebted to impressionism.

The main focus of this paper is the analysis of his *Roman Sketches, op. 7*. The work will be analyzed and discussed in regards to form, harmony, rhythm, texture, phrase construction, and performance considerations, as well as his musical language and impressionistic features. I hope this study will contribute to a better understanding of the stature of Charles T. Griffes in the history of twentieth century American Music.

## Biography

Charles Tomlinson Griffes is inextricably linked to the history of American Music. He is one of the important musicians who contributed in the initial stage of American music after Edward MacDowell (1861-1908). Although his compositional output was small, he clearly made a step forward into new musical concepts and idioms. Griffes' life can be divided into three periods: year of youth (1884-1903), student years in Berlin (1903-1907), and years back to America (1907-1920). He showed a talent for several arts such as sketching, etching, painting and photography, as well as playing the piano in his youth.<sup>3,4</sup> During his studies at Germany, he displayed not only a remarkable ability in playing the piano but also a talent for composition. The comparatively short years in Berlin later became the cornerstone for his compositional years. After he returned to America, he kept seeking new and original musical ideas while serving as a teacher and a composer. He gave piano recitals regularly; however, he was never satisfied by his unchallenging position at the Hackley School at Tarrytown, New York. During Griffes' later years in America, he was not affluent enough to support a widow mother and sister by himself. Income from his compositions could not sustain the household, and his financial circumstances deteriorated rapidly. The responsibility and effort to overcome exhausted him, and he developed a severe illness.

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<sup>3</sup> A reproduction of an original etching by Charles T. Griffes appears in Marion Bauer. "Charles T. Griffes as I Remember Him" *The Musical Quarterly* vol. 29, no. 3 (1943): between pp. 358 and 359.

<sup>4</sup> "Digital Gallery," *New York Public Library*  
<<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?keyword=Charles+Griffes>>, accessed Aug. 28, 2013.

Griffes was born on September 17, 1884 in Elmira, New York into a harmonious family with strong ties of fondness and warmth.<sup>5</sup> He had a remarkable interest and talent in both visual and musical Arts. At the age of 10, he was first introduced to the piano by his older sister Katharine. She was taking piano lessons from Mary Selena Broughton,<sup>6</sup> who became Charles' first piano teacher and mentor, and an extremely important and influential figure in Griffes' life. In 1899, he began to study piano with her. Miss Broughton provided him a musical foundation of German Romanticism, which dominated the musical world at that time. Griffes' desire to continue music study was supported by Miss Broughton, who encouraged him to study in Berlin, where she had studied years before.

The student years in Berlin were a valuable and significant time for him, and helped him decide what he would do for living. During his study at the Stern Konzervatorium, he learned both piano and composition from Ernest Jedliczka, Gottfried Galston and Philippe Bartholomé Rüfer. He spent a concentrated amount of time getting to know the musical culture of Germany by attending concerts, operas, plays and lectures. A letter dated March 19, 1906 gives an idea of his love of Germany:

I have been to the opera twice since my last letter, *Siegfried* and *Tannhäuser* (both Wagner) ... In some ways it is certainly a pity that I wasn't born to live in Germany instead of America, for I have become entirely converted to German ideas and ways of thinking in music ...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Donna K. Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, c1983), 1.

<sup>6</sup> The gifted and highly respected piano teacher at Elmira College.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes: The Life of an American composer*, "updated edition" (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1984), 81.



During his student years, he gradually gave up the desire of pursuing a career as a performer. In 1905, Griffes finally decided to change his concentration from piano to composition, mainly due to his small hands, which limited his technique. He looked for a composition teacher who was modern and stimulating. He left the school to take private lessons with Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921); but he had only a few lessons, due to the composer's busy schedule.

His father's death in 1907 forced Griffes to return to America. It was his responsibility to support the family, so he took a job at the Hackley School. His duties included teaching choir and piano and also serving as the school's organist. He held this position until his death in 1920. He found living and teaching in the country side was wearisome, and not inspiring to him as a composer. He always struggled to become an independent composer; however, he could not relinquish the job because of the responsibility for supporting his family. Fortunately, he was able to spend holidays in a rented home in New York City, sponsored by William Earl Brown, where he could practice and compose away from his teaching responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

His ability to earn money was insufficient to meet the demands of supporting his family. The year 1919 was extremely busy for Griffes: orchestral premieres including "*The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan*," and "*Poem for Solo Flute and Orchestra*" by the New York Symphony Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Philadelphia Orchestra.<sup>9</sup> Scores had to be copied and parts needed to be prepared and revised. His

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>9</sup> Donna K. Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life in Music* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 147.

financial situation was such that he could not hire a professional copyist, and thus, had to do the work himself. Due to fatigue from overwork, he developed a case of influenza from which he never recovered, causing his death at the early age of thirty-five.

His death was a great loss to American musical society. The following statement, signed by American musicians, artists and critics including Marion Bauer, John Alden Carpenter, Rudolph Ganz, Eva Gauthier and A. Walter Kramer illustrates this.

In the recent death of Charles T. Griffes, one of the most gifted of contemporary American composers, the music of America suffers a great loss. We who keenly feel this loss wish to express our sorrow while offering to the memory of the man and the composer this tribute of admiration and respect.<sup>10</sup>

This statement was probably a reaction and response to the success of the first performance of *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan*, *op. 8*, which took place a few months before his death.

Griffes' reputation was gradually neglected probably due to the rise of interest in Aaron Copland (1900-1990) who took center stage in American musical society. The name of Griffes had been isolated due to a misconception of him as an American Impressionist. Beginning in the 1950's, however, his revaluation has been encouraged by R. Ellsworth and Donna K. Anderson; for example, Ellsworth stated "He was one of our few truly great talents." in the journal of *Forgotten Americans* in 1957.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bauer, *Charles T. Griffes as I Remember Him*, 360-61.

<sup>11</sup> Pratt, Hoon Mo Kim, *The Complete Piano Works of Charles T. Griffes* (D. M. A. dissertation, Boston University, 1975), 12.

## Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Impressionism

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of growth in society at large. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, new artistic trends emerged in response to the developments in science and technology, but it took time for them to be accepted.

In the field of visual art, new styles like Cubism, Fauvism, Expressionism, and Impressionism developed. Impressionism had the greatest influence on composers, creating a change of traditional musical features and giving birth to fresh, innovative musical trends. It helped to establish a completely different musical language for the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Both music and the visual arts embraced a new aesthetic around the turn of the century. Impressionism emerged first in the visual arts. The term Impressionism was first coined in 1874 by the art critic Louis Leroy (1812-1885) when he mockingly criticized Claude Monet (1840-1926)'s painting *Impression: Soleil levant*, which was in an exhibit of works by a group of French painters including Édouard Manet (1832-1883), Edgar Degas (1834-1917), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919).<sup>12</sup>

Impressionism in music simulated an atmosphere. Unlike “the dramatic dynamism of Beethoven, the heated atmosphere and pathetic exhibitionism of Wagner,” impressionistic music suggests “to hint rather than to state.”<sup>13</sup> Narrative, and dramatic elements were substituted with meditative and static ones. The elements that they usually

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<sup>12</sup> Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 361.

<sup>13</sup> Willi Apel, “Impressionism,” *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 350.

used were about a thing, a person or nature. The term Impressionism was first applied to Debussy's music in connection to the symphonic suite *Printemps*.<sup>14</sup>

Composers used several methods to evoke impressionism. They found harmonic freedom, even within the traditional diatonic scale, using pedal points that create the illusion of distance over harmonically unrelated chords. Chords escape their traditional harmonic functions and do not follow predictable patterns of resolution; this creates the unfinished, floating quality heard in this music. In addition, generous use of the damper pedal in piano works ties the harmonies together, layering them to create unexpected resonances and giving the sound a luminous quality. Furthermore, they often used modal, pentatonic, and the whole-tone scales to create an Oriental and exotic mood.

Extended chords were one of the significant methods to classify impressionistic works. Consecutive parallel chords and combining tonalities were ways of weakening a traditional tonality. These gestures created a tonal ambiguity and much use of polyrhythms created a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

Techniques Debussy and Ravel's approach to tonality demonstrated the difference between Romanticism and Impressionism. The pentatonic scale is applied for oriental mood found in measures 1-3 of "Pagodas" from Debussy's *Estampes*, and "La Vallée des Cloches" from Ravel's *Miroirs*, measures 1-2 (Examples 1 and 2).

Example 1 - Pentatonic scale in Debussy, "Pagodas" *Estampes*, mm. 1-3

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Impressionism in Music* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), 25.

Pentatonic Scale: B-C#-D#-F#-G#

*pp m.d.*

B F#

C# D# G#

Detailed description: This musical score is for Ravel's 'La Vallée des Cloches' from the album 'Miroirs'. It shows measures 1-3. The right hand (m.d.) features a pentatonic scale: B-C#-D#-F#-G#. The left hand (m.g.) plays chords: B and F# in the first measure, and a triad of C#, D#, and G# in the second measure. Dynamics include *pp* and *m.d.* (mezzo-dolce).

Example 2 - Pentatonic scale in Ravel, “La Vallée des Cloches” *Miroirs*, mm. 1-3

*Très lent* ♩ = 50

*pp*

*très doux et sans accentuation*

*pp*

Pentatonic Scale: B-C#-E-F#-G#

Detailed description: This musical score is for Debussy's 'Voiles'. It shows measures 1-9. The tempo is 'Très lent' with a quarter note equal to 50. The right hand (m.d.) features arpeggiated chords, with dynamics *pp* and *très doux et sans accentuation*. The left hand (m.g.) features a pentatonic scale: B-C#-E-F#-G#. Dynamics include *pp*.

Debussy's *Voiles*, measures 1-9 and Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, measure 6, employ whole-tone scales (Examples 3 and 4).

Example 3 - Whole-tone scale (C-series) in Debussy, *Voiles*, mm. 1-4

*p très doux*

*p*

*più p*

Whole-tone Scale: Ab-Bb-C-D-E-F#

Detailed description: This musical score is for Debussy's 'Voiles', measures 1-4. The right hand (m.d.) features a whole-tone scale: Ab-Bb-C-D-E-F#. Dynamics include *p très doux*, *p*, and *più p*.

Example 4 - Whole-tone scale (C-series) in Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, m. 6

Whole-Tone scale: D-E-F#-G#-A#-B#

Detailed description: This musical score is for Ravel's 'Jeux d'eau', measure 6. The right hand (m.d.) features a whole-tone scale: D-E-F#-G#-A#-B#. The left hand (m.g.) features chords.

Another impressionistic approach is found in the Debussy's *les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, in which the Lydian mode is used to weaken tonality (Example 5).

Example 5 - Lydian mode in Debussy, *les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, mm. 51-54

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 51-54 of Debussy's *les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. A box at the top left identifies the mode as 'Lydian mode on A : A-B-C#-D#-E-F#-G#'. The tempo marking 'Encore plus lointain et plus retenu' is written above the staff. The score features complex chordal textures with many non-chord tones and extended chords. The piano part includes a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure and a long pedal point in the bass line.

Non-chord tones create harmonic ambiguity by presenting consecutive chords with an added 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> note without resolution. Extended chords are also an effective way to blur tonality. These sometimes appear over a long pedal point, which creates a sense of bitonality. Debussy's *Feuilles Mortes* shows an example of the added and extended chords (Example 6).

Example 6 - Extended chords and non-chord tones in Debussy, *Feuilles Mortes*, mm. 6-9

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 6-9 of Debussy's *Feuilles Mortes*. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score features complex chordal textures with many non-chord tones and extended chords. Annotations include 'Added-Note tone' pointing to a specific chord and 'Extended Chord' pointing to another. The piano part includes a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure and a long pedal point in the bass line.

In addition to Debussy and Ravel, other composers who may be considered impressionists or whose works may have been influenced by impressionism include Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936); Issac Albeniz (1860-1909), and Charles Martin Loeffler (1861-1935).

In the early twentieth century, American composers explored a variety of new styles. In 1902, after a performance of Debussy's *L'Après midi d'un Faune* in Boston, American composers focused their attention on impressionism. Impressionism had distinctive and fresh features compared to the existing musical language and had a significant impact on music in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The impressionistic composers include John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951), Loeffler, Ernest Bloch (1880-1959), and of course Griffes.

## Essential elements of Griffes' style

Impressionism is a crucial part of Griffes' compositional style. He was, perhaps, the American composer most influenced by French Impressionism. Critics of his time said: "Griffes was the foremost American composer in the Impressionist genre"<sup>15</sup> and "his music seems to belong to an Impressionistic kind of music."<sup>16</sup> His reputation as "the" American impressionist rests mainly on his three piano sets: *Three Tone-Pictures, op. 5* (1910-1912), *the Fantasy Pieces, op. 6* (1912-1915) and *Roman Sketches, op. 7*. This music contains brilliant timbres, deep and intense sonorities, extensive use of the pedal and moods of a dreamy nature, which are all impressionistic qualities.<sup>17</sup>

However, Griffes' impressionism was not entirely imitative. Reginald Haché believes that Griffes was not completely captured by common impressionistic features like Debussy's style. Haché also stated that Griffes used long phrases and motivic melodies in a developmental way in contrast to Debussy, who used short motives and decorative melodic lines.<sup>18</sup> Griffes was definitely influenced by French Impressionism, but he also continued to explore and expand his German and Neo-Classic influences.

Beyond impressionism, Griffes was also influenced by other styles of visual art, poetry, and Eastern culture. Griffes' works were descriptive and picturesque evocations of landscapes and nature. He was also interested in anything yellow and orange, such as

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Slonimsky, "Griffes, Charles T." (*Baker's biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 7<sup>th</sup> edi. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988), 892.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, original source of review, cited in Maisel, *Charles T Griffes: The Life of an American composer*, 189.

<sup>17</sup> Haché, "Charles Tomlinson Griffes Revisited," 32-33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



sunset, yellow colored fruits, flowers, draperies, or porcelain.<sup>19</sup> His music was influenced by literature in his middle period, when most of pieces were a programmatic.

The ability to link literature and music is a significant strength of Griffes' composition. Additionally, each piece of *Three Tone-Pictures*, *op. 5*, *the Fantasy Pieces*, *op. 6*, and *Roman Sketches*, *op. 7* have a short excerpt of the poems by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), William Sharp (1855-1905) and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). His imagination was captured by the far-east. The following statement made by Griffes shows how fascinated he was in the oriental culture: "*I get much more inspiration from reading Oriental folk tales than I do from looking at a tree!*"<sup>20</sup> After 1917, Griffes' melodies and harmonies had a much stronger Oriental coloring. Several figures who strongly influenced him were Adolf Bolm (1884-1951)<sup>21</sup>, Michio Ito (1892-1961)<sup>22</sup> and the soprano Eva Gauthier (1885-1958).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bauer, "Charles T. Griffes as I Remember Him", 356.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Russian-born American ballet dancer

<sup>22</sup> The Japanese dancer, pantomimist, and an influential teacher of modern dance

<sup>23</sup> A soprano who spent several years in the orient; she gave Griffes some Japanese melodies that she had copied in Japan.

### Three Musical Periods

It is my observation that Griffes' life may be divided into three periods by musical styles: Early (1903-1911), Middle (1911-1917) and Late (1917-1919).

The early period includes his student years in Germany and the first few years after his return to America. He was strongly influenced by the styles of the late German Romantics such as Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), Richard Strauss (1864-1949), Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) and Richard Wagner (1813-1883).<sup>24</sup>

His works in this period include characteristics such as virtuosic techniques, dense textures, traditional sonata formats in structure and key relationships, large scale, and a mixture of homophonic and contrapuntal textures.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the works are a strongly tonal with an emphasis on beautiful, lyrical melodies, regular in rhythm and phrase structure, and sections clearly set off by cadences.<sup>26</sup> These features can be seen in the four unpublished sonatas.<sup>27</sup>

In the middle period, Griffes began to experiment with impressionism.<sup>28</sup> In Berlin, Griffes heard Rudolph Ganz (1877-1972)<sup>29</sup> play Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. This event greatly affected Griffes' musical language.

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<sup>24</sup> Bauer, "Charles T. Griffes as I Remember Him", 362.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 205.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life in Music*, 233.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 38

<sup>29</sup> A Swiss pianist who studied at the same school with Griffes. Dedications to him: Griffes' "The White Peacock," Ravel's "Scarbo" from *Gaspard de la nuit* and Busoni's *Sonatina no. 1*

He composed seventeen solo piano works in this period; ten were published during his lifetime and two posthumously.<sup>30</sup> In the works composed in this period, Griffes shares distinctive harmonic and rhythmic configurations with Debussy. The works are very colorful and descriptive. Impressionistic harmonies are revealed in various ways: augmented triads, non-chord tones, pedal point and whole-tone scales.

Some of Griffes' best-known works, such as the *Three Tone-Pictures, op. 5*, and the *Roman Sketches, op. 7*, were composed during this period and they contain impressionistic traits. This might be a reason that he was categorized as an impressionist. The *Fantasia Pieces, op. 6 (Barcarolle, Nocturno, and Scherzo)*, do not have descriptive titles even though they were written during this period. However, Griffes did introduce the set with poems by various authors.

In his last period, Griffes' output was more modern and experimental. He had a strong, individual perspective and explored a variety of approaches, ranging from Germanic post-Romanticism to pseudo-oriental exotica.<sup>31</sup> New features are evident in the last piano sonata (1917-1918) which was written without a descriptive title or poetic program.

He endeavoured to find original approaches and newer combinations of sound. He employed artificial scales by combining pre-existing ones, and through the prolongation of chromatic dissonances and non-chord tones. His harmonies were highly dissonant and included tritones and augmented seconds. The works reflect Griffes'

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<sup>30</sup> Opuses. 5, 6, and 7 were published by G. Schirmer, Inc. in 1915-1917; *Legend* and *De Profundis* were published by Charles Scribner's Sons and C. F. Peters Corp. in 1972 and 1978.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Stevenson, *All Music Guide to Classical Music: The Definitive Guide to Classical Music*, ed. by Woodstra, Chris (Backbeat Books, 2005), 532.

consideration of progressive musicians such as Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915), Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971).<sup>32</sup> His compositional characteristics in this period were a delicate synthesis of German, impressionistic, and Oriental culture successfully absorbed into his mature creative style. The representative works for piano which shows his new developed style are the *Sonata*, and *Three Preludes*.

The *Sonata* is the longest and largest in scope among his piano works. It contains three uninterrupted movements in a typical fast-slow-fast format. The tone center is in D but the use of new scales, dissonant harmonies and chromaticism disguise the key.

The *Three Preludes*, written in 1919, are the last complete compositions for piano; they were named and published by G. Schirmer in 1967.<sup>33</sup> Each prelude is in a different mood and there are no titles or markings for tempo or dynamics. His melodic and harmonic techniques verge on atonality.

These three periods are only a general overview of Griffes' career; most of works in each period fit neatly into these periods, but not for all. For example, his life could be divided into two periods: his years in Berlin and those in the United States, as the musical knowledge he collected during Berlin years helped to produce his own musical language.<sup>34</sup> Undoubtly his history of stylistic exploration reveals a logical growth, and the last period might be the one he had intended to pursue. His final works are quite

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Machlis, *American Composers of Our Time* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968), 35.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 213.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

different from his earlier compositions. In short, Griffes had a firmly-held individual aesthetic created by fusing Eastern and Western timbres.

Music critics including William Treat Upton (1951- ) complained about Griffes' rhythmic complexity and experimental pieces such as the *Sonata*, and *Phantoms* (for voice and piano, 1912). For *Phantoms*, the critic wrote that "farfetched, difficult out of all proportion to its value, [and] it seems-at least to me- a vertable tonal nightmare"<sup>35</sup> These melodic and harmonic dissonances and experimental gestures were the materials to create Griffes' originality. Griffes' compositions show his continuous creative imagination. Griffes stated, "Nobody understands what I'm doing now."<sup>36</sup> His music had been gradually accepted and understood by contemporaries. Anderson insists that Griffes must be judged not on what he might have produced but on what he did produce.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Garry E. Clarke, *Essays on American Music* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 95-98.

<sup>36</sup> Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 233.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life in Music*, 184.

## *Roman Sketches, Op. 7*

*The Roman Sketches* is a set of four piano works: “The White Peacock,” “Nightfall,” “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola,” and “Clouds,” which were composed between 1915 and 1916 and published in 1917. The set is perhaps the most well-known of Griffes’ piano compositions. Each sketch carries a quotation from a poem by the late-romantic English poet and novelist William Sharp.<sup>38</sup> The title, *Roman Sketches*, comes from a collection of poems by Sharp, *Sospiri di Roma*<sup>39</sup> (Signs of Rome), written in 1891. The mood of each movement is suggested by the quotation placed before each movement. Griffes chose the poem first and then composed the music, except in the case of “Nightfall,”<sup>40</sup> whose poem was determined after he finished the composition.

The pieces are representative of Griffes’ excellent treatment of impressionism: descriptive titles, ambiguous rhythms, extended harmonies, various mixed scales, and extensive use of the pedal. David Burge states: “the Roman sketches (1916), especially “The White Peacock” and “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola,” show that Griffes’ understood better than most of his contemporaries what Debussy and Ravel were accomplishing in Europe.”<sup>41</sup> Griffes’ impressionistic traits are similar to Debussy’s and Ravel’s, in terms of the use of modal, whole tone and pentatonic scales and parallelism. Griffes’ formal technique is more akin to Ravel’s. In the *Roman Sketches*, the last published work of the middle period, Griffes’ harmonic language became more personal. Donna Anderson comments: “Harmonically, he now seems totally comfortable

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<sup>38</sup> The same arrangement occurs in Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1908); each piece is prefaced by a poem by Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841).

<sup>39</sup> It contains 33 poems, including *De profundis*.

<sup>40</sup> Sharp’s original Italian title is “Al far della note.”

<sup>41</sup> David Burge, *Twentieth-century Piano Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 68.

manipulating whole-tone material, modality, bitonality, extensive nonharmonic chromaticism, etc.”<sup>42</sup>

Griffes’ forms are not as complex as his harmonic language. He follows the standard form of the character piece, ABA; however, he applies modifications, such as expanding and developing motives. The sections are apparent due to the appearance of a new theme, a tempo or meter change, or a textural change rather than a clear harmonic cadence. The following table shows a diagram of each piece (Example 7).

The reprise of “The White Peacock” and “Nightfall” appears in an untraditional way. In measure 35 of “The White Peacock,” the introductory material comes back but it is used to develop the music to its climax. In “Nightfall,” Griffes arranged the sections in a palindromic way. A return of A section begins with a second theme of A section which is followed by the first theme. The palindromic form appears again in “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola.”

Example 7 - Charles Griffes, *Roman Sketches*, diagram of each movement

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| The White Peacock | <p>m. 0      7      18      27      35      47      50      60      66</p> <p>A      B      A'</p> <p>[ Intro (a) -- b ----- ] [ c ----- d ----- a' ----- a'' ] [ b' ----- Coda ]</p>                                      |
| Nightfall         | <p>m. 1      14      29      35      49      62      78      84      92      97      109</p> <p>A      B      A'</p> <p>[ a ----- b ----- bridge -- c ---- ] [ d ----- d' ----- bridge ] [ b' ----- a' ----- Coda -- ]</p> |

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 208.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>The Fountain<br/>of the Acqua<br/>Paola</p> | <p>m. 1            13            21 23    29            42 44            53            65 70</p> |
| <p>Clouds</p>                                  | <p>m. 1            10            15            24            31    35            42</p>          |

“The White Peacock”

“The White Peacock” (1915) is perhaps Griffes’ most well-known work.<sup>43</sup> It was premiered by the English pianist Winifred Christie<sup>44</sup> in 1916 at the Punch and Judy Theatre in New York City.<sup>45</sup> Due to its popularity, Griffes orchestrated it in 1919.

In this piece, Griffes shows his skill for developing short motives. The music in the first four measures introduces four motives, which occurs many times for the rest of the work (Example 8).

Example 8 - “White Peacock,” mm. 1-3

<sup>43</sup> Stevenson, *All Music Guide to Classical Music*, 532.

<sup>44</sup> *Nightfall* was dedicated to her.

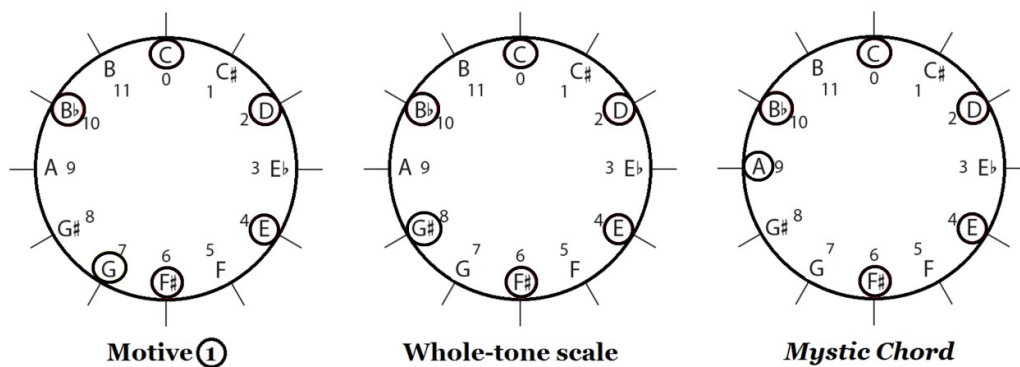
<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: an annotated bibliography*, 19.



Motive ① is an ascending and descending arpeggio of the extended F sharp chord, a secondary dominant flat nine chord with augmented and diminished fifth; motive ② is a descending chromatic scale in dotted rhythm; motive ③ is B-Major ninth chord in a slower dotted rhythm; and motive ④ is falling, B-Major ninth block chords in quarter notes.

Motive ① is in the same set class as Scriabin's *Mystic Chord*: 6-34. Moreover, motive ① and *Mystic Chord* have a kinship with the whole-tone scale; in each, five notes of the six are in a whole-tone scale and the sixth note is a half-step away from the note that would complete the whole-tone scale. In an article by Clifton Callender, he labeled this relationship as " $P^1$ -relations, correspond to altering a single pitch class by a half-step "up" or "down"."<sup>46</sup> The following diagram, Example 9 illustrates this relationship.

Example 9



The first theme in measures 7-9 is related to motive ① in as ascending and descending shapes and motive ③ in the dotted rhythm (Example 10).

<sup>46</sup> Clifton Callender, "Voice-leading Parsimony in the Music of Alexander Scriabin" (*Journal of Music Theory*, vol. 42, no. 2, Autumn, 1998), 220.

Example 10 - "White Peacock," mm. 7-9



The piece ends in the manner as it opened. There are three statements of motive ①. The third statement is extended by one note, E in the upper voice and the lower voice moves downward in tritones to a low F sharp. The final sound is altered dominant chord which never resolves, but just vanishes into the air (Example 11).

Example 11 - "White Peacock," mm. 60-66



The motive ② is mainly used for a tool to build to the climax. It is introduced at the tritone in measure 35, followed by motive ③; the two motives are combined to raise tension, and E-flat is emphasized on every appearance of motive ② in measures 38-40. Motive ③ usually follows motive ② as melodically as an example 12 in measures 35 and 36. At measure 38, they are combined contrapuntally. As it builds toward the climax, the slower dotted rhythm is extended for three measures and covers a wider range (Example 12).

Example 12 - "White Peacock," mm. 35-40

The musical score for Example 12 consists of three systems of piano music. The first system (measures 35-36) features a treble clef with a melodic line starting on a high note, marked with a forte *p* dynamic and an accent (>). The bass clef has a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with a *mf pp* dynamic and several groups of seven notes marked with a '7'. The second system (measures 37-38) continues the melodic line in the treble, marked with a *p* dynamic, while the bass clef accompaniment remains. The third system (measures 39-40) shows the melodic line in the treble with a *cresc.* marking, and the bass clef accompaniment with a *mf* dynamic.

Finally, the motive (4), the falling chords, are seen in measure 16 of the closing part of section A as a cadence. Compared to the earlier motive (4), measure 16 is extended with altered chords (Example 13). This similar figure can also be seen in the climax in measure 43 (Example 14).

Example 13 - "White Peacock," mm. 16-17

The musical score for Example 13 shows two measures of piano music. The treble clef part consists of a series of falling chords, with a *p* dynamic marking at the end of the second measure. The bass clef part features a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with a *p* dynamic marking.

Example 14 - "White Peacock," mm. 43-44



“Nightfall”

“Nightfall” (1916) begins in a dark and mysterious key of G sharp minor. Formally, there are three large sections, each built on a pedal point of G sharp (A flat,) which defines the key center. Griffes utilizes bitonality, cross-rhythms, non-chord tones, and modes. Anderson describes this work as “a gentle rhythmic ostinato to create a perfect impression of the “dust and silence of day’s end.””<sup>47</sup>

The piece begins with repeated syncopated octaves. Similar figures can be found in “Le Gibet” from *Gaspard de la Nuit* by Ravel and “the Lake at Evening” from *Three Tone-pictures* by Griffes (Examples 15, 15.1, and 15.2).

Example 15- opening of “Nightfall,” mm. 1-5



<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 208.

Example 15.1 - Ravel, "Le Gibet," mm. 1-3

Musical score for Example 15.1, Ravel's "Le Gibet," measures 1-3. The score is in 4/4 time and features a piano (*pp*) texture. The right hand plays a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. A dynamic marking *un peu marqué* is present in the right hand.

Example 15.2 - Griffes, "The Lake at Evening," mm. 1-5

Musical score for Example 15.2, Griffes' "The Lake at Evening," measures 1-5. The score is in 3/4 time and features a piano (*pp*) texture. The right hand plays a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. Dynamic markings include *pp ma espressivo* and *una corda*.

Griffes employed several ways to make the harmony ambiguous. The second theme is in 6/8 time. The syncopated D sharp octave continues in a similar pattern (Example 16). A pentatonic melody (F sharp-G sharp-B-C sharp-D sharp) follows in measures 22-23. The phrase ends with a return to the original 4/4 meter with a cadence of altered chords, bringing the piece back to the home key (Example 17).

Example 16 - "Nightfall," mm. 14-17

Musical score for Example 16, "Nightfall," measures 14-17. The score is in 6/8 time and features a piano (*p*) texture. The right hand plays a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. Dynamic markings include *p espressivo* and *mf*.

Example 17 - "Nightfall," mm. 22-25



In contrast to a steady pulsation of repeated, syncopated octaves up to this point, flexible rhythmic figures are introduced in measure 30. The piece becomes more complex harmonically and rhythmically by a use of parallel dissonances such as French sixths in measure 31. This section leads to a new theme by introducing an upcoming important harmonic idea in advance (Example 18).

Example 18 - "Nightfall," mm. 30-32



A new theme, introduced in measure 35, continues to the climax. The theme has the quality of G sharp Phrygian mode with a flatted second degree (A natural) (Example 19). An accompaniment of diminished note-value creates a sense of increasing tempo and creates a mood of excitement (Example 20).

Example 19 - "Nightfall," mm. 36-40



Example 20 - "Nightfall," mm. 35-48



These materials build up the climax which is made up of a glissando and tremolo in measures 47-48. A very similar passage can be found in measure 48 of Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* (Examples 21 and 22).

Example 21 - Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, m. 48



Example 22 - "Nightfall," mm. 47-48



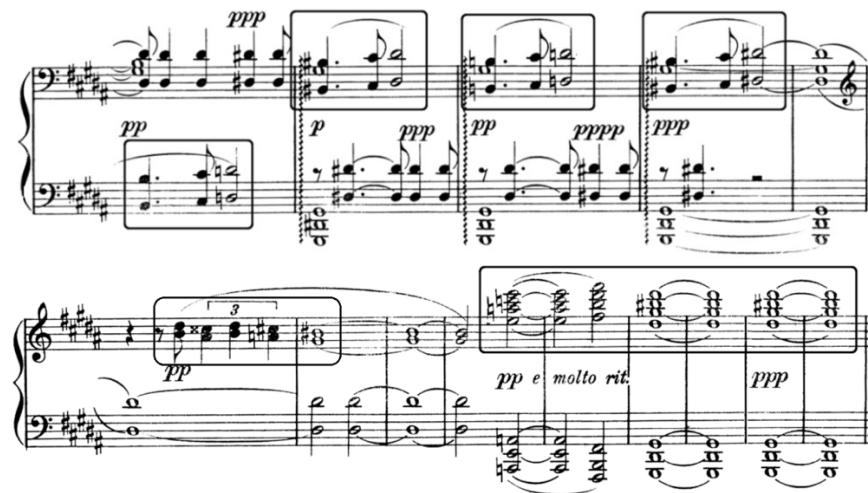
In measure 49, the climax resolves to A flat major. This section is marked *tranquillo* and built on an open fifth pedal point; A flat - E flat. The melody is in A flat Major and a simple V-I harmony permeates this section (Example 23).

Example 23 - "Nightfall," mm. 49-52



The last thirteen measures illustrate an alternation of major and minor in the extension of the penultimate measure of a theme. The completion of a theme is interrupted by a short motive of b' theme in measures 101-102. And then a theme is completed in measures 104-109 with the melody of E to F sharp to D sharp, which was previously introduced in measures 11-12 (Example 24).

Example 24 - "Nightfall," mm. 96-109



"The Fountain of the Acqua Paola"

"The Fountain of the Acqua Paola" (1916) is a fine musical depiction of water containing several passages that bear a strong resemblance to the water music of Ravel. The opening measures are similar to Ravel's "Ondine" from *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Both



works are written in the treble range of the piano; both have the melody in the lowest voice; and both works have an accompaniment in the upper part in even, flowing groups of four using pianistic figurations that are primarily in groups of three (Examples 25 and 25.1).

Example 25 - Ravel, "Ondine," mm. 2-3



Example 25.1 - "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," mm. 5-6



Griffes utilized cross-rhythm, and chromaticism as well in measures 17-18. These features are created by an alternation of chromatic ascending minor sixths and chromatic descending minor thirds. The arpeggiated sixteenth notes in the left hand are a progression of secondary dominant seventh and diminished seventh chords. A similar configuration is found in measures 1-2 of Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* (Examples 26 and 26.1).

Example 26 - Ravel, *Jeux d'eau*, mm. 1-2



Example 26.1 - “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola,” mm. 17-18

The musical score for Example 26.1 consists of two staves. The upper staff is the right hand, featuring a complex, arpeggiated texture with many notes and accidentals, marked with *pp*. The lower staff is the left hand, playing a more rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes. Below the staves is a box containing the following chord progression: **V7/A# viio7/D V7/E - V7/F viio7/B V7/D# -**

Chords which lack the third are used in several sections in this piece. Ascending and descending arpeggios in the Più animato and Calmato sections in measures 21- 26 evoke the flowing of water through their motion. A similar passage to this type of chord in measures 23-26 of “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola” can be found in Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau*, measures 21-22; and the arpeggiations in measures 62-64 of “Ondine” (Examples 27, 27.1, 27.2 and 27.3).

Example 27 - Ravel, *Jeux d’eau*, mm. 21-22

The musical score for Example 27 shows two staves. The right hand (upper staff) features a series of arpeggiated chords, with notes moving in a stepwise fashion across the staff. The left hand (lower staff) plays a steady, rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The overall texture is light and flowing.

Example 27.1 - Ravel, “Ondine,” mm. 62-63

The musical score for Example 27.1 consists of two staves. The right hand (upper staff) has a melodic line with some rests and a final chord with a sharp sign. The left hand (lower staff) plays a rhythmic accompaniment. The lyrics “*p* augmentez peu à peu - - - - -” are written below the left hand staff. The score is marked with *f* and *p*.

Example 27.2 - “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola,” m. 21

Example 27.3 - “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola,” mm. 23-24

Chromatically saturated passages in measures 29-37 contain cross-rhythms of three against six against eight. The chromatic figuration resembles to measures 348- 349 from “Scarbo” from Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Both are supported by tonal chords (Examples 28 and 28.1).

Example 28 - Ravel, “Scarbo,” mm. 348-349

|           |   |           |   |   |           |   |           |   |   |           |   |
|-----------|---|-----------|---|---|-----------|---|-----------|---|---|-----------|---|
| B $\flat$ | A | B $\flat$ | B | C | D $\flat$ | C | D $\flat$ | C | B | B $\flat$ | A |
|-----------|---|-----------|---|---|-----------|---|-----------|---|---|-----------|---|

Example 28.1 - “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola,” mm. 29-31

The musical score for Example 28.1 shows two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with frequent triplets and sixteenth-note patterns. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a steady accompaniment of quarter notes. The piece is marked *a tempo* and *pp*. Below the staves, a chord progression is indicated: Bb7, F7, Bb7, F7, Db, Eb7, Db, Eb7.

“Clouds”

“Clouds” was written in 1916 and, like “The White Peacock,” was later orchestrated by the composer. The *trillo* tempo marking, the steady moving chords in quarter notes and the *pp* dynamic level all combine to create a calm, meditative mood, reflective of clouds. Donna Anderson described this piece as: “certainly one of the most beautiful compositions that Griffes ever wrote. It is an exquisitely colored and a mystically tranquil utterance”<sup>48</sup>

“Clouds” is an experimental work compared to other three, in that it uses extended passages of bitonality and makes abundant use of the French augmented sixth chord. It clearly begins and ends in the key of D flat, but the middle sections lose their sense of key center due to the use of non-harmonic tones, free chordal progressions and extended or altered chords. As in the previous movements, sections are separated by tempo or texture changes rather than traditional cadences. Like “The White Peacock,” the metrical pattern is complex. The metric unit is the quarter note, but the meter changes frequently. The meters used are 3/4, 4/4, 5/4, 7/4, and 8/4.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 208.

The piece opens with an ostinato chordal passage in the mid-range of the piano. The main theme enters in measure 2 in the high range. The key of D flat is firmly established, except in measure 5, where the addition of an E and G natural to a D flat chord hint at the bitonal passages to come. A similar passage may be seen in Debussy's "Nuages" from *Nocturnes* (Examples 29 and 29.1).

Example 29 - "Nuages," mm. 1-4

Example 29.1 - "Clouds," mm. 1-5

In measures 10-14, the rhythm changes to an arpeggiated triplet figure in the low bass outlining the harmonies of A flat, B, D flat and G, while the upper voices move in

duplets, outlining seemingly unrelated chords. Above the A flat harmony a French sixth and a diminished seventh chord appear. This is followed by a B major harmony with a French sixth chord above it. These seemingly unrelated chords tend to move with a descending chromatic line which is the binding element that makes this passage work (Example 30).

Example 30 - “Clouds,” mm. 10-12

In Callender’s article, he talked about the role of voice-leading in Scriabin.<sup>49</sup> The concept is directly connected to Griffes’ gesture of dissonance in the coda. In measure 42, above a D flat Griffes adds a seventh (C natural) and lowered second (D natural) notes which border the tonic note (Example 31). It is similar to the first measures of “The White Peacock.” To use Callender’s vocabulary, two notes surrounding a dominant,

<sup>49</sup> Callender, “Voice-leading Parsimony in the Music of Alexander Scriabin,” 219-233.

sharp-four and flat-six, *fuse* into the fifth (Example 31.1). It appears again in the beginning of “Nightfall.” In measure 2, the chord, D sharp *splits* into D natural and E (Example 31.2). This concept reveals one of Griffes’ innovative harmonic techniques and also another connection between Griffes and Scriabin.

Example 31 - “Clouds,” m. 42

The image shows two parts of musical notation for Example 31. On the left is a piano score for measure 42 of 'Clouds' in 4/4 time, featuring a complex chord with a 'rit.' marking. On the right is a simplified chord diagram showing the notes of the chord on a single staff.

Example 31.1 - “The White Peacock, the first measure

The image shows two parts of musical notation for Example 31.1. On the left is a piano score for the first measure of 'The White Peacock' in 3/2 time, featuring a complex chord with a '7' marking. On the right is a simplified chord diagram showing the notes of the chord on a single staff.

Example 31.2 - “Nightfall,” m. 2

The image shows two parts of musical notation for Example 31.2. On the left is a piano score for measure 2 of 'Nightfall' in 4/4 time, featuring a complex chord with a 'sharp' marking. On the right is a simplified chord diagram showing the notes of the chord on a single staff.

## Conclusion

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into early 20<sup>th</sup> century, art music was dominated by European Romanticism. America was no exception. Several new musical trends developed in the early twentieth century, including impressionism. These trends were attractive to American composers. Griffes was perhaps the greatest exponent of the impressionistic style in America. He not only absorbed Debussy's and Ravel's techniques, but also developed his own harmonic approach to create his individual style. The statement of A. Walter Kramer about the *Roman Sketches* supports this opinion:

Conceived with a seriousness that is distinct and admirable, Mr. Griffes' four piano pieces after William Sharp deserve consideration. Mr. Griffes is, above all, a composer of refinement and culture ... Harmonically they go further than his "Fantasy Pieces" published two years ago.<sup>50</sup>

In the *Roman Sketches*, Griffes employed not only impressionistic elements such as whole-tone and pentatonic scales and parallelism, but also new combinations of sonorities, non-chord tones, bitonality, and free floating chord progressions. Taylor A. Greer says that "... perhaps Griffes had indeed established a new strain of impressionism."<sup>51</sup>

Several decades after his death, a reconsideration of Griffes' importance has taken place. R. Ellsworth stated "He was one of our few truly great talents." in his article

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<sup>50</sup> A. Walter Kramer, *Musical America*, 1 December 1917, cited in Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 208.

<sup>51</sup> Haché, "Charles Tomlinson Griffes Revisited," 41.



“Forgotten Americans.”<sup>52</sup> Griffes held a significant position in the history of American music, and his stature continues to grow. Ellsworth’s idea is supported by Aaron Copland who said:

Composers like Charles Martin Loeffler and Charles T. Griffes were the radicals of their day... No one can say how far Griffes might have developed if his career had not been cut short by death in his thirty-sixth years, in 1920. What he gave those of us who came after him was a sense of the adventurous in composition, of being thoroughly alive to the newest trends in world music and to the stimulus that might be derived from such contact.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> R. Ellsworth, “Forgotten Americans,” *American Record Guide* (September 1957), cited in Kim, *The Complete Piano Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 102-3.

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