An engaging biography of one talented person with two disparate musical personas

Taking a Chance on Love
The Life and Music of Vernon Duke

By George Harwood Phillips

When his friend George Gershwin persuaded Vladimir Dukelsky to change his name to Vernon Duke, what the music world already knew became apparent to the public at large—the man had two musical personas—one as a composer, the other as a tunesmith. One wrote highbrow music, the other lowbrow. Yet the two sides complemented each other. Neither could function without the other.

Born and classically trained in imperial Russia, Vladimir Dukelsky (1903–1969) fled the Bolshevik Revolution with his family, discovered American popular music in cosmopolitan Constantinople, and pursued his budding interest to New York before his passion for classical music drew him to Paris, where the impresario Serge Diaghilev hired him to compose a ballet for the Ballets Russes.

Taking a Chance on Love immerses us in Duke’s dizzying globe-hopping and genre-swapping, as financial concerns and musical passions drive him from composing symphonies to writing songs, from brilliant successes to Broadway flops, and from performing with classical performers to writing books and articles. Throughout, as he crisscrosses the landscape of American music, collaborating with lyricists such as Howard Dietz, Ira Gershwin, and Sammy Cohn, the incomparable Vernon Duke emerges clearly from these pages: sometimes charming, sometimes infuriating, always entertaining.

Although Vernon Duke has entered the canon of American standards with such songs as “Taking a Chance on Love,” “I Can’t Get Started,” and “April in Paris,” little is known about the composer with two personas. Taking a Chance on Love brings the intriguing double life of Dukelsky/Duke back into the spotlight, restoring a chapter to the history of the Great American Songbook and to the story of twentieth-century music.

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