



Music
in American
Society

1776-1976

*From Puritan Hymn
to Synthesizer*

Edited by
George McCue

Music in American Society
1776-1976



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Preface

This book is the literary legacy of a national music festival in St. Louis, organized to identify as clearly as possible the specifically native character of music originating in the United States of America. The festival—the Bicentennial Horizons of American Music and the Performing Arts (B.H.A.M.)—sponsored more than 250 performances and workshops between Flag Day and Independence Day 1976. It was the only event of the Bicentennial celebration to address itself to a survey and evaluation of the musical development of this country.

During the festival's three weeks, the St. Louis community resounded to the music of bands, groups, orchestras, choruses, instrumental and vocal soloists, recordings made by field researchers, and music from electronic systems. The music was performed on the Mississippi River levee under the great Gateway Arch, in Powell Symphony Hall, in academic halls and classrooms, in widely dispersed municipal and county parks, in the streets of downtown St. Louis, and in television and radio broadcasts. These events provided exposure to the gamut of music and musical ideas developed during this country's two centuries as a nation, and in the prior century and a half as a

cluster of English colonies, and French and Spanish settlements.

The one event designed to bring the festival's purpose into historical and philosophical focus was a symposium of twelve musicians and musicologists, each an authority of high reputation. All took part in workshops and discussions at twelve participating universities and colleges, and other BHAM events, but they did not assemble all together at any one time. Their platform is this book, and their symposium takes place here, in these pages, in papers that in most cases were prepared for this publication rather than for workshop use. The contributors were explicitly concerned with the American character in music, not as a mannerism but rather, in the words of William Schuman, as "simply feeling the national spirit and breathing with it, however loosely or vaguely that may be defined." They have undertaken to survey the exceedingly diverse American style and sound from all segments of American society—from rural, urban, and ethnic sources, with their relation to the corporate, governmental, commercial, and private sectors that have become increasingly influential in supporting and giving direction to this country's creative talent.

The idea for the symposium/book was advanced by K. Peter Etzkorn, of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, who became one of the contributors. He was joined in its planning by Dr. Allen C. Larson, associate professor of music, Webster College, and by Frank Peters, music critic of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, also a contributor. The project was guided through many a crisis by the resourcefulness and never-failing good humor of the festival chairman, Elizabeth Gentry (Mrs. Homer E.) Sayad.

Among innumerable obligations, special thanks are owed to Frances Gillett, professor of music, St. Louis Community College at Meramec; Constance Smith, head of acquisitions, Pius XII Library, St. Louis University; and the Rev. Francis J. Guentner, S.J., professor of music, St. Louis University, for research assistance. Financial support of the Missouri State Council on the Arts and the participating universities and colleges is gratefully acknowledged. BHAM was sponsored by the St. Louis Spirit of '76 and cosponsored by the National Park Service.

The term *American* is used here with recognition that it properly refers to any and all of the nations of the Western Hemisphere. An acceptable national adjectival reference to

the United States of America has not yet been devised, and there is no choice but to employ “American” with this special application.



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Americanism in Music: A Composer's View

William Schuman

This volume supplies a number of scholarly inquiries into various categories and aspects of American music, written by respected specialists. My assignment is different from theirs, and is quite specific: I am asked to write an introduction to this printed symposium on music in American society, from the perspective of a practicing composer—one who is identified as an American composer, who takes satisfaction in being so identified, and who might therefore conceivably make some contribution toward a definition of the “American” character in our music. At this late date, our country’s two hundredth birthday, one might wonder why it should seem necessary to attempt to define (or to redefine) the characteristics that make American music American, yet even now the undertaking is not a simple one: there are many questions to be asked, and more than a few allow for a plurality of valid answers.

We can, however, at least proceed from the acknowledgment that there is a more or less generally recognizable American character in music, as distinctive in its way—or ways—as the music, say, of Spain, Russia, France, or Scandinavia. In all these countries, as it is in our own, there have been movements

to encourage native composers to create music in a "national" style, and, possibly more significant, many of them have produced such music entirely spontaneously, without the need for such encouragement and without self-consciousness. A great deal of music has been produced by now, in our country as well as elsewhere, that unarguably exudes the pulse and flavor of the land and its people, and this has not so much to do with the use of folk material, or writing in a folk style, as with simply feeling the national spirit and breathing with it, however loosely or vaguely that may be defined.

Some of the more obvious questions that come to mind are: What are the attitudes and approaches toward Americanism in music that apply specifically to composers? Do composers think, when they want to write music, that in this or that particular work they wish to be "American"? Is the process a conscious one? Is there some special thinking, some special intellectual or emotional adjustment, that goes into the writing of works that are supposed to be "American"? Is the process different from writing abstract works that are not given nationalistic titles? Is there special conditioning or preparation required, or is the identity something as natural as our various regional speech-patterns? Different composers may answer some or all of these questions differently; I think the best way for me to deal with them is to speak for myself and not attempt to present a consensus. My comments, moreover, will only relate to some of the criteria inherent in considering these and similar questions rather than attempting to supply authoritative answers. And, too, I should like to add that we are really talking about United States music since the term *American* includes countries other than our own.

When a piece of music draws the comment, "Only an American could have composed that," the meaning is far from precise: what is "American" in American music is only peripherally (if at all) measurable by the criteria of scholarly investigation. It has, as I have suggested, more to do with feeling. These Americanisms spring from a complex of factors, largely of emotional recollection, for the qualities that make music identifiably American are, to a large degree if not basically, in the ear of the beholder. When enough beholders perceive the product to be indigenous, then so it becomes. A body of recognizable characteristics has emerged through the collective

experience of listeners over a long period of time, and we call the result *American*. However, since listeners are as varied in their sophistication as the extraordinary range of American music itself, the inexact nature of these characteristics becomes the more apparent when we attempt to pinpoint or define them in terms of universals.

We do not even ask this question—"Is American music truly American?"—about all categories of music. We ask it only about what we might call *formal music*, the music of the established concert and theater categories, while the Americanism of most American music is taken for granted. We assume, for example, that the marches of Sousa are as thoroughly American as the waltzes of Strauss are thoroughly Viennese, and the thought of asking whether they are would simply never occur to us. Why, to articulate such an inquiry about Sousa's marches would be foolish, gratuitous, and even, I suppose, un-American! In the same way, we never ponder the authenticity of the Americanism of what we hear in any form of popular music, whatever the category; if we are told that the music really came from distant lands, which were the founding sources of some of our most treasured popular music, it is of little interest except perhaps to scholars. The whole wealth of our nonformal music, then, is by use, tradition, and long affection ours, unmistakably in the American tradition regardless of the original sources. It has become genuinely Americanized through indigenous use, our expression as a people in all our incredible and fascinating variety.

From my point of view then, as an individual composer, I am not attempting to comment upon the many categories of music dealt with in the chapters that follow, but limit my observations to so-called serious or concert music, and even more specifically to the symphonic.

Only a chauvinist would claim there is a qualitative factor related to Americanism in music—that is, that the degree of identifiable "Americanism" in a work directly affects or indicates its value. Whether or not a piece is "Americana" has nothing to do with its being a better or less good musical work. Yet I think a distinction must be made between commentators, on one hand, who say that locale has absolutely no importance—that is, where one happens to live when one writes a piece of music makes no difference in his writing of it—and critics who

claim a qualitative aspect measured in terms of whether a work is "American" or not. My own feeling is that if a work sounds American to us, then we have a most intriguing special category of music, music that relates our own American composers to their native soil in the same way composers of such countries as Britain, Italy, and Spain are related to theirs. Since nationalism, or patriotism, can give music a special flavor but cannot alone ever ensure its quality, works that are American in orientation are neither better nor worse for that reason than music composed in an international style—that is, a style that could have come from any composer anywhere in the world, granted a similar ambience.

If we agree, then, that a recognizable national character in music in itself carries no particular merit, is this question really of any importance? The answer is assuredly Yes. Traits do emerge. Localities, from small units to large, engender particularities, be they of dress, cuisine, gesture, attitudes, or a thousand other categories. It is the particularity of American symphonic music that I believe can be recognized and, perhaps to some degree, demonstrated to prove that we do have an American music. And this national connection, it seems to me, is more than just the comfort of belonging, of local identification: it can represent a genuine and deep-felt need on the part of both composer and listener.

It is not that we need to prove there is musical life here, heaven knows, for in our century the United States has become both an export and import nation of prime importance in music. In the nineteenth century we certainly did not export our performing artists on any meaningful scale, and did not import musicians who would come to these shores for their training. What little importing and exporting we did then were in the obverse of that pattern: a few virtuosi imported to perform, a few serious students exported to study in Europe. All that has changed dramatically now. American performing artists are in demand the world over, and our professional music education has reached such a high point of development that serious students now come from the old centers of learning in Europe as well as from everywhere else in the world to study here.

But performing and education alone, however excellent, while validating an intensity of musical activity, obviously do not make for the culture of a country. It is the creative artist

who gives the country its stamp as a mature nation in terms of any art; in music we have, over the past fifty years or so especially, developed our own composers and our own school of composition, which certainly stand on a level with that of any other country in the world. I do not mean to minimize or dismiss the efforts and estimable accomplishments of composers in the United States before the twentieth century, but it is surely in the last half century that we have seen the maturation of American creativity in music, the flowering of the American school.

In music, as it is in the other arts, the creative artist's intention to strive consciously for expression of his locale, or consciously to avoid such expression, or to ignore that consideration altogether, need not, and ought not, be a major factor; personally, I think it is wholly beside the point of genuine creative motivation. The real point is simply that for some creators there is such a oneness between their own work and their origin that this oneness often has to be expressed in a straightforward, identifiable way that is wholly natural, wholly uncontrived. This is the need I alluded to a few paragraphs back: whether consciously felt or not, I believe it accounts for much of the music that is nationalistic in spirit. Here again, while I must emphasize that this national or local identification has nothing to do with superficial flag-waving or chauvinism, and that it also, no matter how deeply felt, is neither assurance nor measurement of musical worth, it does constitute an extra element of direct communication.

The formative environments in which artists grow naturally and inevitably have enormous impact on the work the artists produce. It is equally true that these impacts need not necessarily be revealed through localized emphasis. As noted above, for some creators this sense of identification, and the need to express it, are fundamental and essential parts of their natural creative process. This applies, of course, not only to American composers, but also to composers, poets, painters, and other creative artists in all cultures.

It is reasonable at this point, then, to ask: What is an American composer? A simple answer often given is that an American composer is one who is born in the United States, or one who is a citizen of the United States, or one who has come to this country and spent his formative years here. For example,

one could never rightly claim a Hindemith or a Stravinsky or a Schoenberg as American, since these composers' formative years were not spent here and obviously their work is not identifiably American (though Hindemith, who spent the least time here, did succeed to some degree through the words of Walt Whitman in capturing an American flavor in his requiem, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*). On the other hand, there are composers who have come from distant shores who have spent their formative years here, and may or may not have developed into composers we recognize as American in terms of the character of their music. Indeed, then, this question might be answered in two ways: American composers are individuals who write music that we feel is American in approach and sound, and people who happen to be Americans but who produce music that is not identifiable in terms of a national character.

A step beyond this in dealing with this question might be the establishment of two sets of criteria for determining "Americanism" in music. The first would be a set of general descriptions—adjectives—with which we attempt to define specifically American qualities; the second would be an examination to determine whether there are any measurable techniques connected with American music that might give us a bit more to go on than pure speculation.

One often hears that American music is optimistic (affirmative is the interchangeable term), or typically sentimental, or that it reflects the quality of jazz. But surely if we talk about optimism, or poignancy, or pessimism, or large-scale or small-grain, or even the jazz influence in particular, we are using descriptive phrases that could be applied to many different kinds of music being written in many different lands. We would have to go much farther than this to arrive at any sort of convincing definition by means of adjectives. If we say that this music could only have been written by a man who understood the vastness of the plains, then we might well ask what is so different about the vastness of the plains in America in contradistinction to the steppes in Russia, for example, in terms of inspiration for a large-scale, broad utterance. If we speak of introspective music, that is surely to be found in the works of composers of every land and every period. No, if these adjectives are to be at all helpful in defining American music, then