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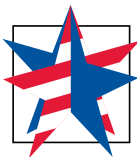

AMERICAN
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How American Is It?

Virgil Thomson said that American music was nothing more than "whatever is written by American composers." This author argues there's a lot more to Americanness than that.

BY Kyle Gann

The Americanness of American music is a vexed issue. It always has been. In 1892 Antonin Dvořák came to teach in America, and the next year, upon finishing his New World Symphony, paternalistically offered composers here his advice on how to write "American-sounding" music: use Negro melodies. Everyone got mad. Amy Beach replied, in print, that Negro melodies were no part of her heritage and then wrote her Gaelic Symphony based on the Irish tunes of her upbringing. The eminent John Knowles Paine's response—quoted by the late musicologist Adrienne Fried Block—was that music was a universal language and that there was no reason to strive for "Americanness":

> *The time is past when composers are to be classed according to geographical limits. It is not a question of nationality, but individuality, and individuality of style is not the result of imitation—whether of folk songs, negro melodies, the tunes of the heathen Chinese or Digger Indians....*

Charles Ives, who knew the New World Symphony and its alleged Negro sources well, came up with his own complex and idiosyncratic strategies for making music sound American and spent the next thirty years working them out.

Some American composers see their music only in relation to European trends. Others feel more or less left out depending on what your criterion of Americanness is. So everyone gets mad. Many have taken refuge in Virgil Thomson's libertarian pronouncement: "American music is whatever is written by American composers." That defuses all the tensions, makes everyone feel included. And yet... .

Let's look at it from the outside. I teach an annual 20th-century repertoire course for Bard College's MFA conducting program.

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Many, and in some years most, of our conducting students are international, from Spain, Scotland, France, Brazil, Italy, China. I don’t stress the Americanness of American music, but when I play examples even by composers not known for their folksong quotations—Rochberg, Schuman, Bernstein, Sessions, Piston, Persichetti—the foreign students always point it out. “It sounds very American.”

We try to analyze it. For one thing, there’s the orchestration. European 20th-century music creates nuanced, subtle textures with the entire orchestra. Americans tend to work in choirs of instruments. Listen to the Rochberg Second, or the Schuman Seventh, or the Sessions Third: the strings are soaring along in one line, the winds are playing a circuitous countermelody, the brass punctuate with chords. It doesn’t sound like Schoenberg, Bartók, Hindemith, or Stockhausen. Even the American *12-toners* don’t sound European. Twelve-tone music was “the universal style,” but Americans, with maybe a few exceptions, fell back into American habits. Ever since Paine, there have always been American composers, especially in academic circles, who stress that there is no real difference. But the foreign students’ perceptions disagree.

I attended the Bang on a Can festival once with German/Spanish composer Maria De Alvear. She came up to me and asked, “Why does American music always sound like Philip Glass?” I countered with, “Why does European music always sound like Stockhausen?” “True,” she replied, satisfied. That would be a gross oversimplification, but generally speaking, post-1920 American music is more diatonic, European music more chromatic. Europeans are more comfortable with dissonance, sophistication, and abstraction; Americans with consonance, simplicity, and clarity. It even affects expatriates. When Schoenberg and Stravinsky came to America, they started writing less dissonant, more tonal music (Schoenberg’s Chamber Symphony No. 2, Stravinsky’s Scènes de Ballet). When Frederic Rzewski moved to Belgium, he gave up the populist style of *The People United* and entered the more abstract, pointillist world of *The Road*. John Cage toured Europe in the 1950s and abandoned the simple prepared piano music he’d written in New York for the “parametrical” density of *Atlas Eclipticalis*. Individuality aside, when composers know who’s going to be in the audience, they often inflect their style accordingly.

Then there’s rhythm. To grow up in the country that invented jazz imparts a certain feel for syncopation. That’s where Dvořák’s advice about Negro sources caught hold, unconsciously. European performers don’t grasp our rhythms. I heard a French pianist play Ives’s First Sonata at a university. Afterward, several students went up and sang the song “Bringing in the Sheaves” for her and told her how to accent it like jazz, which she wasn’t doing. Listen to Stravinsky’s *Ragtime* and Copland’s Piano Concerto back to back: one was merely notating an approximation; the other really caught the nuances. Copland played through that concerto for Roy Harris, who is said to have exclaimed, “Why Aaron, that’s *whorehouse* music!” We hit notes on the offbeats harder; we bend the time to make it swing a little. We’re more insistent on hearing the beats *against* which the melodies are playing. European music rolls along more evenly.

In fact, I have a secret theory that the most American technique of all is to reiterate a limited number of harmonies in rhythmically surprising patterns. You find it in *Appalachian Spring*, in the Cage String Quartet, in much of John Adams’s and Feldman’s music, even occasionally in Babbitt—in other words, across the entire spectrum of American styles. Copland stole it from *The Rite of Spring*, no doubt. But the technique is almost absent from well-known European music outside of Stravinsky, and remains common, generation after generation, in America. We like sustaining tension with rhythmic surprises.

And then there are the continual American innovations. It is certainly an interesting coincidence that in the 1910s three American pianist-composers— Henry Cowell, Leo Ornstein, and George Antheil—all made a public splash using tone clusters, hitting the keyboards with their fists and forearms. A few years later they learned that Ives had been doing it all along. Ives was imitating, on the piano, the drums of

With this issue,* Chamber Music*’s series of articles documenting the NEA’s* American Masterpieces: Chamber Music *initiative comes to an end. From the spring of 2008 through the summer of 2011, the Endowment supported many hundreds of performances—in venues from Florida to Alaska—of ensemble music by American composers. All of the articles in this magazine’s series, as well as calendars of the performances, remain available on www.chamber-music.org.

his father's marching bands—a non-Negro American source tradition. Cage put bolts and screws in the piano strings. Cowell came up with a new theory of rhythm, based in what are now called "tuplets," implied tempos of quintuplets, septuplets, and the like; dozens of younger Americans, starting with Conlon Nancarrow, followed him into that brave new world. Harry Partch devised a 43-tone scale and invented new instruments to play it. Today, European composers of the "spectralist" camp have become interested in microtones, but they use quarter-tones and eighth-tones, not the pure harmonies and unequal scales of Americans like Partch, Ben Johnston, Terry Riley, and LaMonte Young. These weird American composers all get called "mavericks," but all that really means is that they're working outside European conventions.

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I'm being entirely anecdotal, suggestive rather than categorical, because we all know there's no hard and fast line. Sessions felt strongly that he was continuing the Schoenbergian tradition. What I said above about simplicity, clarity, and orchestrating in instrumental choirs certainly doesn't apply to Elliott Carter. Americanness and Europeanness in classical music are qualities open for anyone to draw on. Where the distinction more obviously lies is in the differences between American and European society.

Europe is a culture that provides tremendous government support for the arts. Far more Europeans (and Canadians, and Australians) can get orchestra pieces played than Americans can, and with more rehearsal time. Americans, in general, write less often in the large, established musical genres often because those opportunities aren't open to us. Americans are more surrounded by and, one has to suspect, are more susceptible to popular music genres. Even American composers who go to conservatories often play in garage bands first, and our jazz departments exert a wider influence. Europeans make electronic music in huge, state-supported studios and experimental centers like IRCAM. American electronic composers are more likely to start by hard-wiring CD players, like Nic Collins, or putting together simple radio circuitry, like David Tudor, or generating sounds in Garage Band on their laptops like thousands of today's undergraduates.

Perhaps most important of all, American composers feel more pressure to make music "accessible" than Europeans do. Americans sell things. It is part of our political philosophy that we have to attract people to our music. Europeans often get an impressive level of support, whether or not general audiences like their music. I attended a music conference in Warsaw, at which no audience showed up. It was explained to me: "The government gives us money to do this whether anyone shows up or not, so we didn't bother to advertise." In America, the idea of paying someone for music with no audience seems like some kind of Communist plot! We composers do not have the government behind us attesting that our music is part of a cultural heritage worthy of public support. American music is required to be its own advertisement. Thus the *tendency* toward simplicity, clarity, diatonicism, even a kind of naiveté.

If there is such a thing as Americanness in American classical music, this is where it originates. Our ancestors came here, from Europe or Africa or Asia, and were ripped away from the musical support systems on those continents. A relative few of us manage to be supported by quasi-European institutions, orchestras and chamber music societies. Even some of these composers are driven by some vague notion of national identity. The rest have had to make our music with what was available, what we found in our backyards, in terms of materials, instruments, and environmental musical influences. Unwittingly, whether tenured 12-tone composers, guitar bangers, or electronics geeks, we are products of our culture. Willy-nilly, we write the music of a freedom-loving, optimistic, overly commercial, too-often dumbed-down, but still idealistic democracy.

Composer Kyle Gann is an associate professor of music at Bard College. He is the author of several books on American music, the latest of which is No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33" (Yale University Press). *His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.*