

Chapter 31: Music and Politics in America and Its Allies: 1930–50

I. Introduction

A. Composers of this period incorporated new sounds and began to push the boundaries of what was considered “musical.”

1. The American Communist Party aligned itself with less radical forms of leftism and used indigenous American culture and history to promote their ideas.
2. Several composers produced distinctively American takes on the traditional genres of symphony and opera.
3. Between World War I and World War II, American composers also experimented with “ultramodern” styles, even though the political situation was somewhat more stable than in Europe.

B. Edgard Varèse

1. Varèse, an innovative composer in the United States in the 1920s, worked toward the “liberation of sound.”
2. He studied the music of the Italian Futurists before moving to New York in 1915.
3. His first American work, *Amériques*, was on the scale of the *Rite of Spring*. He attempted (unsuccessfully) to blend neoprimitivism and futurism.
4. His *Ionisation* (1931) uses thirteen percussion players. It uses recognizable gestures in traditional ways, but its nontraditional techniques move it far from contemporary experiments.

C. Splitting the semitone: microtonal music

1. Microtones are commonly defined as pitch differences smaller than a half step.
2. One of the new sounds composers toyed with was microtones. The most common was to split half steps into quarter tones.
3. Julian Carrillo, a Mexican composer, tried out new tunings (and new instruments and notation).
4. Ives claimed his father experimented with quarter tones.

D. New sounds, new instruments, new tunings

1. Harry Partch invented a forty-three-interval scale and the ensemble to perform it.
2. Partch, itinerant during the Depression, sought alternatives in many aspects of music.
3. Lou Harrison also built new instruments, as did several others.
4. These new directions lost steam in the 1940s.

II. The American Left and music

A. During the Great Depression, American arts moved toward a new image that reflected populist patriotism.

1. At the same time, communist parties around the world united, and the American Communist Party participated in a policy known as the Popular Front.

2. In the United States, music of the folk (folk lore), or the “proletariat,” became an instrument for progressive political action.
 3. Others collected American music from different groups, such as cowboy songs (Lomax), Southern Baptist hymns (Sacred Harp), and others.
- B. Aaron Copland’s American music
1. One of the composers who absorbed elements of the folk revivals was Copland.
 2. Copland’s style was individual and technically competent—both Modernist values.
- C. Carlos Chavez and Silvestre Revueltas in Mexico
1. Mexico’s leading musician, Carlos Chávez, conducted the premiere of Copland’s *El Salón México*.
 2. Silvestre Revueltas, a Mexican composer who worked in both Mexico and the United States, also combined European Modernism, neoprimitivism, and Neoclassicism with indigenous elements.
- D. American patriotic works
1. In response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Copland received a commission that resulted in his Lincoln Portrait.
 2. Part of its purpose was to show affinities between Communist USSR and the United States, who were now allies in World War II.
 3. Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man* dates from the same period and was commissioned by the conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra to open concerts during the war period.
 4. Aspects of Copland’s folk song style—their novelty and originality—and not literal authenticity mark them as national emblems.
 5. Because of connections with communist ideology, Copland was forced to make a political stand that separated from him from his earlier affiliations and moved him to broader nationalist aims.
- III. The Great American Symphony
- A. Along with the “Great American Novel,” World War II prompted an interest in the “Great American Symphony.”
1. A distinctive American school of composition began to flourish during the Depression years, and it was supported with Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration financing of orchestras as part of the “New Deal.”
 2. The first composer in this regard was Roy Harris.
 3. Howard Hanson, of Nebraska, looked to Sibelius as a model. (Hanson was of Scandinavian descent.)
 4. William Schuman became president of Juilliard in 1945, an influential position.
 5. Other notable American symphonists were Virgil Thomson, William Grant Still, and Samuel Barber.
- B. Accessible listening: Samuel Barber and Sergey Rachmaninoff
1. American symphonic style featured these elements: melodic breadth, diatonicism, jazzy or syncopated rhythms (often asymmetrical), and a full sound (due to large brass and percussion sections).

2. Barber's music exemplifies this style too, especially in his concertos and *Adagio for Strings*.
 3. The works of Rachmaninoff also merged nineteenth- and twentieth-century styles in a manner that the public found accessible.
- IV. Opera in mid-century
- A. American and English opera remained somewhat traditional in the mid-twentieth century.
 1. The most prolific opera composer in the United States was the Italian-born Menotti.
 2. In Europe, some notable operas include Stravinsky's *The Rakes Progress* (1951) and Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1956).
- V. Benjamin Britten
- A. After Strauss composed his operas, the next main composer of opera in Europe was Britten.
 1. He publicly stated that his duty to opera was a public service.
 2. Britten composed seventeen works for the lyric stage.
 - B. A Modern anti-hero: Britten's *Peter Grimes*
 1. Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* can be read as relating to his own experiences.
 2. He and Peter Pears, his lifelong companion and the tenor who premiered several of his roles, were conscientious objectors at the beginning of World War II and moved to the United States.
 3. They returned to the United Kingdom in 1942. *Grimes* was written during this period.
 4. Britten alters the original story to portray Grimes more sympathetically.
 - C. Britten on "the composer's duty"
 1. Britten wished to be "used" by society in a way that would allow his talent to advance the humanities.
 2. The tangible outcome of this desire was the *War Requiem* (1962).
 3. This was Britten's "sermon" to artists on their responsibilities to the larger community.
- VI. Olivier Messiaen: "the charm of impossibilities"
- A. The most important figure in France at this time was Messiaen.
 1. Whereas Copland, Shostakovich, and Britten composed for society and Schoenberg, Webern, and others composed for history, Messiaen composed for truth, "timeless truth."
 2. Messiaen was Catholic and an active church musician.
 - B. Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*
 1. Messiaen's most famous work, *Quartet for the End of Time*, was composed while he was in a prisoner-of-war camp in 1940.
 2. The title can refer to the Apocalypse—the end of time and the end of conventional ideas of rhythm and meter.
 3. Messiaen also sought new conventions for melody and harmony.
 4. Messiaen drew on Medieval ideas associated with the isorhythm and complicated fourteenth-century mensural notation.

5. The *Quartet for the End of Time* demonstrates several facets of Messiaen's music.

C. Faith, nature, color, and rhythm

1. Most of Messiaen's music has Christian titles and themes, although some intertwine faith and secular passion.
2. One example is his *Turangalila-symphonie*, which premiered in 1949.
3. Birdsong was a major part of Messiaen's compositional inspiration.
4. Messiaen's music is complicated and difficult, but it has been relatively popular and has a devoted following.