

US Composers and Poets shows the relationship between American Classical Music and American Literature

U. S. Composers and Poet

The Intersection of American Classical Music and American Literature

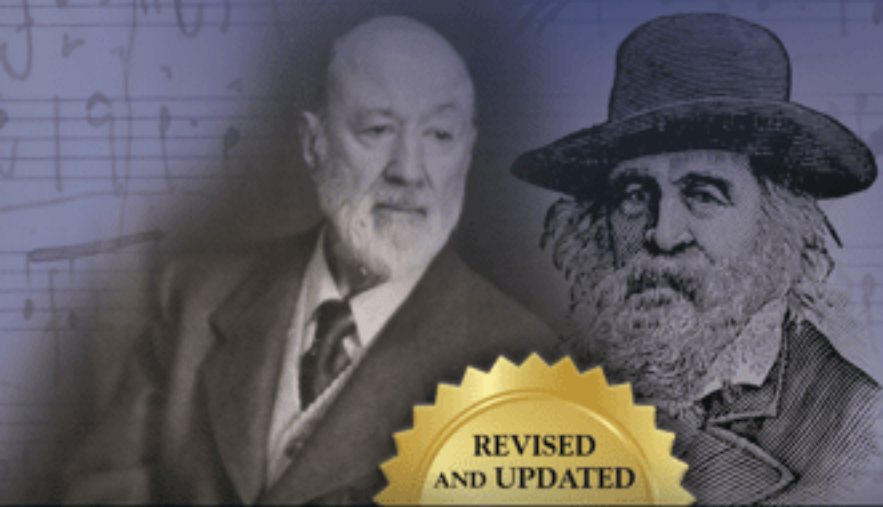
(Revised and Updated)

by Gerald F. Sweeney

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AMERICAN CLASSICAL MUSIC
AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

GERALD F. SWEENEY

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Introduction

If one were to define Americans in a general way, one would say they are an open and industrious folk, clever as well and optimistic, sentimental with a love of mystery.

How to find these same qualities manifested in their art?

The relationship between American classical music and the nation's literature flows back and forth with these same qualities. Whitman and Copland both reflect American openness and expansiveness. Cleverness is seen in the poetry of Dickinson and Parker and in music like John Adams' *Harmonielehre*. Warm feelings can be roused by Samuel Barber and Mary Oliver alike. Love of spirituality is found in Emerson and Hailstork. And industriousness can be viewed in the many works of Henry James and Hovhaness and Cowell. And optimism is found in Gershwin and Billy Collins.

Reading and listening to these writers and composers of classical music has been one of the principal pleasures of life. Music must surely be the favorite art of our better angels. Literature can't be far behind.

Acknowledgements go to Wikipedia and YouTube. Works might be cited as (Available on You Tube) or (YT). I am also indebted to hundreds of CD liner notes and a host of program notes collected over the years. Plus many articles and books by and about composers (see Acknowledgements).

Dates after work indicate first hearings, as best as can be told. Literary-related musical works are in boldface.

Critics have classified groups of native composers:

One can mark the development of American music by way of the Second New England School (Chadwick, Beach plus MacDowell) and note that these composers constitute a distinct era. Along with the arrival of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, an early 20th Century American group appears (Ives, Griffes etc.). Followed by the appearance of Gershwin and Copland to

show the world that there is an American style. Then along came Harris, Hanson, Piston and Sessions.

Monroe Levin describes four pockets of 20th Century American composers;

Copland Group. - Tonal with modern touches.

Sessions Group - Chromatic harmony and melody whether atonal or not.

Harris Group – Tonal with traditional touches.

Barber Group –Tonal and lyric.

American musical development on the other hand, says Joseph Horowitz, runs along six lines: Pre-WWI German – The Boulangerie – Ultra Modernists – Interlopers - Eastern – Gershwin.

Ultra-Modernists include Cowell, Rudhyar, Cage, Crawford, Seeger and Ruggles.

John Warthen Struble talks about three main streams in the 20th Century: 1. American Modernism (Ives, Gershwin, Copland); 2. Academic Modernism (Sessions et.al.); 3. Experimentalists (Cowell, Varese, Ruggles, Cage).

Post Modernists include: Bolcom, Harbison, Rochberg, Albert, Zwilisch, Tower, Corigliano, Del Tredici and Druckman.

But first there's the split between tonal and serial music, partially resolved later by the Minimalists (Riley, Reich, Adams, Glass).

Randall Thompson lists five categories of musicians: Nationalists/ Eclectics/ Esoterics / Electronic/ The Innovators.

Then there's the entire business about soft and hard music. Copland tried to compose both. Some reverted to writing agreeable music (Kirchner, Del Tredici) after experimenting. There's Carter and the High Moderns – postmodern eclectics. Also the more Progressive types: Becker, Bauer, Eichhein, Gruenberg, Ornstein. Meanwhile, we still have an admiring group of Middle of the Roaders – Cadman, Carpenter, Loeffler and Converse.

The dispute in the 50's between traditional and Schoenberg's Twelve-Tone music was fierce. Many complained that identifying "better" or "worse" compositions was fruitless.

Some stayed with Traditional music – Diamond, Harris, Hanson, Schuman, Barber, and Piston.

Between traditional music and dissonance, why can't we have both of them?

The listing here includes the music of over 850 U.S. composers. There are over 380 American poets and writers as well posted. Plus there is a listing of non- American writers who have inspired U. S. composers.

Walt Whitman's poetry attracted the work of 71 composers. Amy Dickinson's writing was the basis of 54 compositions. Next was e. e. cummings at 32.

Eleven other writers' works captured the inspiration of fifteen or more composers: Langston Hughes (23); Longfellow (19); Melville (19); Millay (19); Frost (18); Poe (18); Wallace Stevens (18); Sandburg (17); Gertrude Stein (16); Sara Teasdale (15) and Hawthorne (15).

Then Vaschel Lindsay (14); Mark Twain (13); Washington Irving (12); Abraham Lincoln (12); Hart Crane (9); Thoreau (9); Stephen Vincent Benet (8); Paul Laurence Dunbar (8); William Carlos Williams (8); Ezra Pound (7); Theodore Roethke (7); Anne Sexton (7) and Thomas Wolfe (7).

Faulkner had none, whereas Fitzgerald and Hemingway captured three apiece.

There is also a list of 75 Black composers who have written music based on Black themes. There are also 24 Non-Black composers writing on Black matters.

Sixty American composers wrote music based on Indigenous/Indian themes and melodies.

Among writers from other nations, American composers created 78 pieces of Shakespeare's work. Among other non-Americans, Blake (surprising to me) was second with 35 then Yeats with 25.

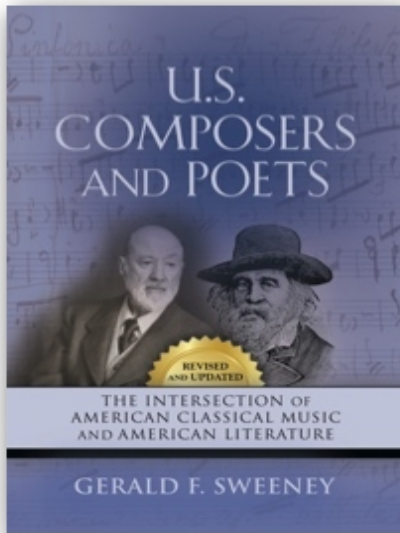
Of the many subjects that composers choose, it can be said that the 9/11 tragedy was high on the list, as was Harriet Tubman and, of course, the World Wars. As to the memory of the slain, there were 27 pieces written commemorating Martin Luther King, 24 for John F. Kennedy and 8 for

Robert Kennedy. Other favorite subjects included Sojourner Truth and the Abstract-Expressionist painters.

All these numbers of composers creating music of poets are an underestimation. There are many more uncounted pieces that have been turned into music than are noted here.

Some obsessions include Del Tredici's fascination with Lewis Carroll and Alice. He composed a half-dozen or so pieces based on the girl from Wonderland. Hanson likewise wrote the same amount of pieces on Walt Whitman.

In all, a glorious mix of American ingenuity.



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