

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

U. S. COMPOSERS AND POETS:
The Intersection of American Classical Music and American Literature
By Gerald F. Sweeney

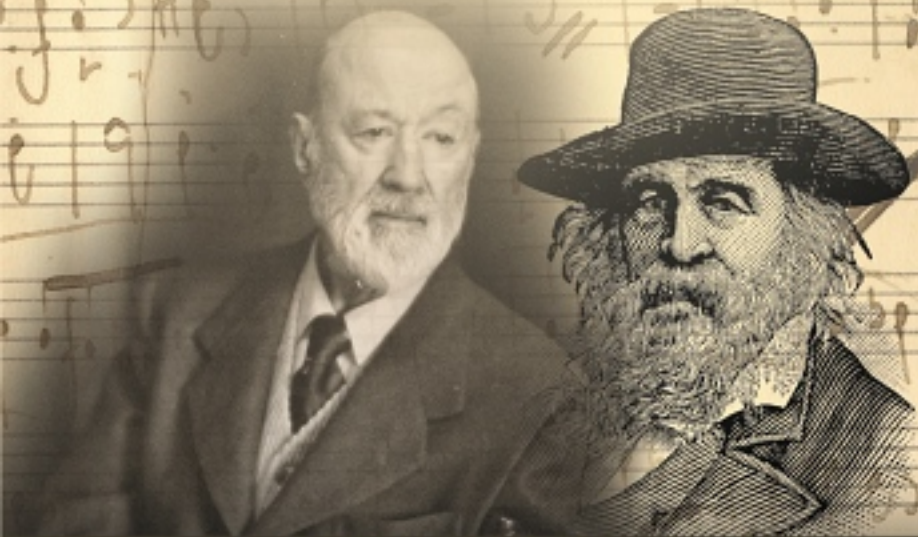
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AMERICAN CLASSICAL MUSIC
AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

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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 the arts?

The relationship between American classical music and its 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 in Gershwin and Billy Collins.

Reading and listening to these writers and composers of classical music have been principal pleasures in life. Music must surely be the favorite art of our better angels.

For me, the French horns did not sound early. In high school, my total commitment to music blew through Benny Goodman's clarinet and Swing—the latter enhanced by suburban train rides to wartime Broadway at age thirteen. (Yes. The lines around the Paramount for Sinatra were regimental size). Classical melodies began floating into my dorm room as a freshman in college during the late 1940's when I started

listening to the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts. Having no idea what I was listening to, I only knew that in that year of my brain's awakening, I gauged that opera was one more way of opening the clogged passages of my jazz-jumping mind.

Later as an upperclassman, I took three Music Appreciation courses from one of the best teachers I ever had. Later still, when I was fifty or so, I took six piano lessons and discovered I was both inept and too busy to continue. But I had begun buying LP's when they were first introduced onto the market and carried many of them through multiple moves for seventy years. My favorites turned out to be Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler.

As someone more tuned into literature than music, I have enjoyed relating American writers to native composers. The more I listened, the more connections I found so the impetus for these listings is basically to help tie the two together. I think I first noticed the many musical references to the poetry of Walt Whitman. Because all artists are involved with matters of the heart, there is a synchronism to be found in these tunes and stanzas.

Like most, I have always preferred live music. My first experiences coincided with the rise of young Lenny Bernstein when I would attend matinee concerts at Carnegie Hall. There were some performances when only a half-dozen of us occupied the entire upper balcony. In those years, the anti-art trend in America was on the cusp of turning the country into a culturally-aware nation. The postwar G.I. Bill and a European

travel rush, encouraged by a favorable currency rate, inspired globe-trotting voyagers. Once home, these travelers insisted on elevating the quality and quantity of art and music in museums and concert halls all across the land.

By then I was a confirmed classical fan, seeking a rise in spirituality through music's uplifting loft. Many of my life's happiest memories revolve around music. There was, for instance, the May Festival in Ann Arbor. Each spring the Philadelphia Orchestra would come to town and play about ten concerts in a week's time. I would buy tickets for as many of the programs as my parsimonious budget allowed and listened to Ormandy conduct his silver strings. I can still hear in my head the flute solo played by William Kincaid at the end of Brahms *First*—an ending I have always associated with the voice of God.

Serving in the Army during the Korean War, I spent two years at Fort Bragg. Most off-hours were passed in the basement of the Post Library where I would listen for half-days to the great works of the repertoire, rejoicing at all those beautiful sounds. Later, working in New York, summer weekends were spent with friends in the cool mountain air of the Berkshires where we lounged on the grass listening to the Boston Orchestra at Tanglewood, my favorite place on the face of the earth. Those were the years of Copland, Bernstein and Foss and the flowering of our national music.

When I retired in 1995, I finally had time to write the novels that I had stored up during a lifetime of overwork. After studying the history and genealogy of my tribe, I decided to

write a series of seven novels—*The Columbiad*—about one family, my own, traversing the Twentieth Century. The centennial timeline was chosen for, among other reasons, my particular and probably eccentric view of America. I believe firmly in the middle class and unions and remember a time when the nation was unified during WWII—when neighbors helped one another and communities shared and struggled together. That older America was once illustrated by Columbia, who represented the United States, the bountiful goddess with the passions of her female generosity, when *Hail Columbia* was once the national anthem. Until the time of the Spanish-American War and the Industrial Revolution, Columbia ruled. Then along comes warlike Uncle Sam, bringing his hubris to bear upon the national mold.

When I began writing the novels, I knew it would be a twenty-year effort and I hoped this time would allow me simultaneously to study a new subject or one that I had understudied. I chose American classical music, a choice that has come to mean a great deal to me. But fair warning, I have preferences. For one thing, a streak of Americana runs through me. As an additional warning, I'm always looking for literary references in these musical works, like the dozen or more native pieces that reflect Dickinson's poetry. The principal purpose here is to connect the two. And, a rationalization is offered. I feel that if musicians can borrow from works of literature, writers should have the right to comment on music.

Having so stated, it still must be said that I am not qualified to write this book. I don't know a C Sharp from a D Minor. My

only performance background occurred when I sang “Tantum Ergo” in the church choir in the eighth grade. I’m writing the book anyway. There will be terrible gaps owing to my lack of knowledge, for which I can only apologize in advance out of ignorance.

There is much left out of the listings, which are not complete, and surely many fine pieces are overlooked or unknown to me. It’s fragmentary and much good work is unaccounted for, but my knowledge only extends so far. The pieces I have selected represent my interests, my recording collection, my concert going and my whims.

My interests, as I said, lie in the crease between American music and American literature, and in Americana and its general history. This work tries to indicate the relationship between American music and literature, so the emphasis is on cataloguing those relationships.

Though I am advancing toward 93 years of age, and because my heart and I will probably never see the completion of this work, some of the selections are hasty. But I’m going to proceed anyway. But because I’m moving fast, they’re might be a little smoke left behind in the driveway.

Yes, a little knowledge is dangerous. Have I heard all this music? The answer is: Not by a long shot. And I don’t trust my memory either, so beware. All that I know is what I’ve heard. And sometimes I follow form.

What I'm looking for is music that literary minds might appreciate. Often a piece is listed for no other reason than its unusual title.

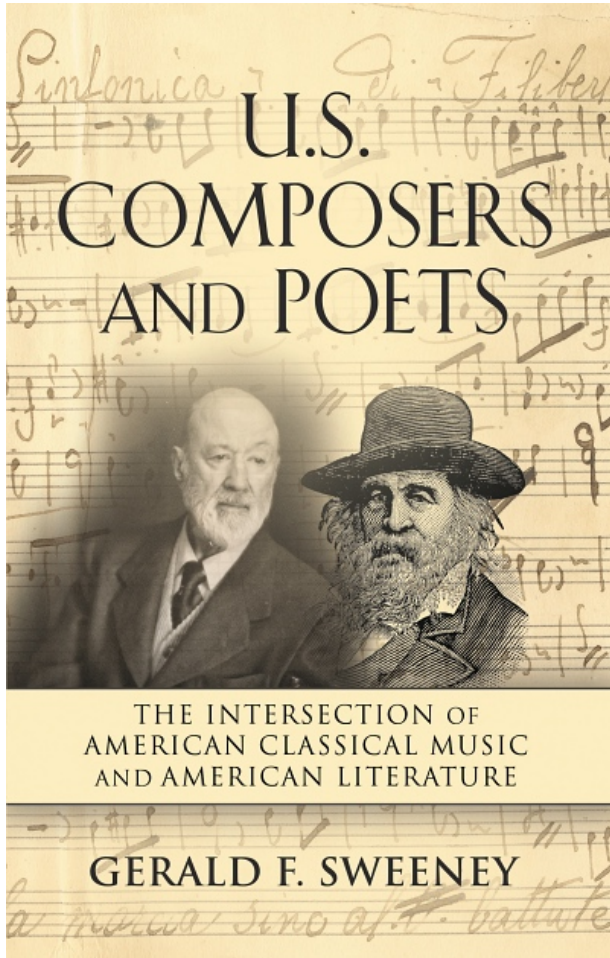
Melody for those Romantics among us still standing, after the post-modern crushing, feel that emotion, not logic, will secure personal pleasure.

In total, I always thought that musicians knew something I didn't.

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 lots of articles and books by and about composers (see below). Dates after work indicate first hearings, as best as I can tell. Literary-related musical works are in boldface

Any additions or corrections you should like to make are welcome and will be reviewed before the complete (A-Z) edition is published at sweeneygf@aol.com.

Settle back, hit the play button and let's listen.



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