

# AEI PROGRAM ON American Citizenship

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## Music and Civic Life in America

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*This essay is the third in a series exploring the role of professions in a modern, liberal democratic society and their effect on the civic culture of the nation. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit [www.citizenship-aei.org](http://www.citizenship-aei.org).*

Civic life is the life we live in dealing with problems of common concern. It is our public life, as opposed to our private life. In a liberal democracy, civic life is all-embracing in the sense that it is open to all. Yet in such a regime, civic life may also be a small part of life, since liberal democracy assumes the priority of private life.

Correspondingly, the music we share in our civic lives will occupy a smaller place than the music of our private lives. Music may be more private than many other activities: it is not verbal, and through its rhythmic component, affects us bodily—that is, most privately, despite the ability of groups of people to move in unison to a beat. Speeches mark our public life more than music; we have no musical equivalent of the Gettysburg Address.

Being nonverbal, music may communicate more universally than any given language, and yet what is universal is not necessarily civic. Music is thus both above and below civic life, both more private and more shared. The naturally tenuous connection between music and civic life has been particularly evident in America, and the connection has grown more tenuous or ambiguous over time. Yet, as we hope to show, American music remains perhaps the best expression of what America is.

### Civic Music

We may start by acknowledging the place music has found in American civic life. The National Anthem is sung or played at many public events, and the unofficial anthems—"America the Beautiful" and "God Bless America"—at others. "God Bless America" was sung spontaneously by

members of the US Congress on the steps of the US Capitol Building on 9/11 and was played twice at the 9/11 service at the National Cathedral on September 14, 2011. Presidential campaigns since the first decades of the 19th century have featured songs, often folk or other familiar tunes, to which new words were added. More recently, campaigns have adopted popular songs by well-known performers.

Public or civic music has also resonated in Americans' shared life on national holidays. From the founding era through at least the first decades of the 20th century, Americans gathered in large numbers on such days to hear bands perform in concerts or parades. The most powerful recent use of music in American civic life was during the civil rights movement, when spirituals and other folk music combined to unite the movement and give voice to its aspirations.

Historically, music has filled its most prominent civic role in war, an activity that requires, even in a liberal democracy, the subordination of the private to the public. "Yankee Doodle" and William Billings's "Chester," a rousing defiance of tyranny and invocation of a liberating God, were popular during the Revolutionary War. During the Civil War, "The Battle Cry of Freedom," "Dixie," and, of course, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" inspired the warring sides. George M. Cohan's "Over There" encouraged Americans heading to Europe to fight in World War I.

A number of songs, many influenced by swing music, shored up national feeling during World War II. Although not martial and not even specifically tied to the war, the music that Aaron Copland wrote during the war

years, particularly “Fanfare for the Common Man” and “Lincoln Portrait” (both written in 1942), is perhaps the most civically minded music an American has produced. Linked by Copland to a speech by then-vice president Henry Wallace (“The Century of the Common Man”), “Fanfare” has escaped its partisan origins, opening Democratic conventions; Bob Dylan concerts; Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama inaugural ceremonies; and closing the ceremony decommissioning Shea Stadium.

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If we take war songs as America’s most civic music (excepting the music of the civil rights movement), we observe that over time, it has become less religious, less assertive, less programmatic, and more sentimental. Neither World War I nor World War II produced anything like “Chester,” let alone “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Popular war music during World War I still encouraged the boys to fight; most World War II music expressed longing for an end to the war and a return to home and loved ones. “God Bless America,” first performed in 1938, called for God’s blessing on America but was not a call to war, which is one reason it could be appropriately premiered on Armistice Day, a day commemorating the end of World War I.

We may associate the music popular during the Vietnam War or the first Gulf War with those conflicts, but most of this music was not written specifically with either war in mind or tended to protested against them. Only country music managed an unquestioningly patriotic (although often sentimental) statement in the aftermath of 9/11. Country music is also the only currently popular (and not specifically religious) music in which “God” appears as something other than an expletive.

Copland’s civic music, while secular, marks an exception to the general trend. “Lincoln Portrait” asserts in its spoken quotations of Lincoln’s words the essential truths of the American regime, escaping all sentimentality. This contrasts with composer John Adams’s “The

Transmigration of Souls” (written to commemorate the 9/11 attacks), which, however moving, expresses publicly only private grief. The truth expressed in “Lincoln Portrait,” along with the quality of its music, has made this song a possession of all Americans.

We should not exaggerate the change in America’s martial music during the last century. All wars have featured sentimental songs about home. But accepting our characterization of American civic music as roughly accurate, if what little civic music we have has become more secular, sentimental, and private over time, how did the change come about?

### Private Music

We should note first that music expresses emotion and sentiment better than it does ideas. Music is thus particularly inapt for American civic life, since that life rests not on sentiment but on an idea (human equality). In other places in times of crisis, people may fall back on shared emotions conveyed in a common history, on collective traditions and folkways, or even on a national religion. All of this may be evoked in commonly shared music.

This is not true in the United States. America has no sustaining folk tradition because there is no one sustaining folk. Copland did use certain folk melodies and rhythms in his “popular” music, but the genius of “Lincoln Portrait” is the use of Lincoln’s words. To borrow a metaphor from Lincoln, the music is a frame of silver around apples of gold. Without the words, the music would convey only emotion without a specifically American object.

The “privacy” of American music also reflects the relative absence in American history of national public institutions to sustain music. America has had neither an established church nor a royal court to provide patronage and endorse official styles. Instead of a court or church, American musicians have relied on the marketplace to sustain their work. But the market is concerned with satisfying individual, private needs. It expresses the sum of those needs.

Popular market-driven music may carry political content, as some minstrel songs did, but this is not the same as music sustained by and identified with public institutions and civic life. Furthermore, the specific character of American music during and after World War II derives importantly from technological advances (radio and recording) that for the first time created a truly mass market for music and the possibility of easily enjoying it privately. Sentimentality seems well suited to this technological development.

Another important element in the changing character of American civic music derives from the democratic character of the United States. Lacking other indicators of status, Americans have used cultural activities to distinguish themselves. Shakespeare and opera were once popular entertainments in a way that they no longer are. A deliberate effort separated such “highbrow” art from more popular “lowbrow” entertainment, giving the latter a certain space to develop, which mass communication in the 20th century exploited fully.<sup>1</sup> One example of American musical inventiveness that filled the space created by the distinction between lowbrow and highbrow entertainment was the Broadway musical, a kind of popular American version of opera, which in turn has enriched the repertoires of popular song and jazz.

All of this music, and much that was less accomplished and edifying, could not have flowered as it did without the absence of restraint signaled by the secularization of American life and the decline of censorship. Both of these developments also resulted in large part from deliberate efforts.<sup>2</sup> To consider here only the decline of censorship, beginning during World War I, the Supreme Court—first in dissenting opinions—began the transformation of the First Amendment into a doctrine of freedom of expression. Asserting the superiority of the public over the private in wartime, the court first restricted speech against a war the government was waging. Eventually, the court removed the restrictions, giving increased scope to the private and in effect putting an end to censorship.

The current minimalist state of our musical civic life results from the private tendencies of music itself, which America encourages with a consumer-driven market economy; technology that fosters consumption that is simultaneously mass and entirely private (earphones connected to a digital music device); and an absence of restraints, as well as any common folk traditions. American music has always tended toward the private and heterogeneous, an amalgamation of the musical traditions of America’s various immigrant communities—traditions that remained fairly distinct and yet borrowed freely when they came in contact with one another. American popular music has spread around the world but, in a sense, American music was world music before anyone thought of such a category.

This individualistic strain of American music can be seen in the history of American religious music, though it may appear at first glance to be the most monolithic manifestation of American musical life. Hymns that were shared among the many Protestant denominations through revivals and song collections expressed and

taught what was a largely shared view of God, his universe, and man’s role in it. This music and its theology had a powerful public presence in American life, given the dominant role of Protestantism throughout most of the 19th century.

However, this narrative fails to account not only for the minority Catholic and Jewish populations, but also for the serious contention in Protestant worship music. Shape-note hymnody is one example of the alternative musical options that emerged from a widespread disagreement over how trained, polished, or participatory religious music ought to be—or even if any music at all should be used in worship.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even religious music expresses what separates Americans more than it expresses what they have in common.

## American Music

America’s musical culture is not a melting pot but rather a stew, comprised of disparate ingredients that mingle with and inform one another while remaining distinct. It is the individual elements that predominate. It is fitting, then, that the period when economic, technological, and political trends began to increase the scope of privacy in American life came to be called the “Jazz Age.” This term uses jazz as a metaphor for the increased individualism and freedom of expression in America that appeared in the 1920s. Thus, what is often considered the most American music expresses perhaps the least civic qualities.

This conclusion is unfair to jazz, however. There is obviously individualism in the music, but jazz is above all an ensemble music. Its performers compete within a cooperative structure. The music reflects composer Elliot Carter’s characterization of his own music (albeit of a different genre from jazz), which he also offered as a characterization of our civic life: “A lot of individuals dealing with each other, sensitive to each other, cooperating and yet not losing their own individuality.”<sup>4</sup> The spirit of cooperation among individuals holds true not merely between the musical forms brought to these shores as their performers borrow and learn from each other, but also within the few genres that can be said to have developed here.

America has elevated music that is primarily collaborative in its composition and spontaneous in its performance. Improvisation occurs, of course, in non-American music, and people besides Americans gather to share and collaborate in making music with the spontaneity displayed in jazz, blues, and rock. But in jazz, America developed a music that at its best rivals the great

achievements of Western classical or concert music, yet is not composed by a single person and not performed from scores that are strictly followed by the musicians. The spontaneous, collaborative effort at the heart of jazz is surely intertwined with the American project of individualism and personal freedom, a “rebellion” against the “monarchical” ways of musical Europe.

As the example of jazz suggests, if America has little civic music, it does have music that expresses something about its civic life. Moreover, the bubbling stew of American music produces morsels that escape mere privacy and become part of our civic life in two ways. First, musicians may use their music for political purposes. The civil rights movement, as we noted, received the support of many musicians who either wrote music specifically for that purpose or turned the music that was their life to the service of that cause. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson is an example of the latter; Bob Dylan, briefly, of the former. Before Dylan, and in connection with other causes as well, there were Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie.

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The second way that music may become civic or political is through appropriation. This is the case now with presidential campaign music. One of the more interesting examples is the Reagan campaign’s appropriation of Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA.” Springsteen objected to this, since it worked against his political loyalties. Yet even if a musician composes and performs with an explicit political purpose, he does not control the fate of his work. In 1988, most voters might have associated George H. W. Bush, a World War II veteran, with Kate Smith’s version of “God Bless America,” a World War II-era song. But the Bush campaign used Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” a song Guthrie wrote reportedly as a critical response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” Presumably he, like Springsteen, would not have liked the political use to which his song was put.

What music evokes may differ from its composer’s intent, and some of the intended civic purposes of music succeed more than others. Both Jackson and Dylan used their music to support the civil rights cause, yet Jackson’s music, and other African American music, powered the civil rights movement in a way that folk and protest music did not. Nor did the folk revival have staying power. The reason for these differences is that the spirituals were still relevant in a way that folk music was not. Much traditional African American music, certainly the spirituals that Jackson sang, spoke of endurance and the longing for freedom, as did the civil rights movement. There was no fit like that between folk music and anything political. The people singing folk music were no longer “folk,” but the people singing spirituals still longed to be free.

Folk music as political—or protest—music was derivative and sometimes a mere fashion. It was not a way of life but a “lifestyle,” as we now say. To the extent that it was political, it was about current events and connected to ideological conceptions—and thus ephemeral. Dylan himself pointed to this in his 2004 autobiography, *Chronicles*, by writing that Robert Johnson, one of the original bluesmen, “can’t sing Washington DC is a bourgeois town,” and neither, after a short while, could Dylan sing “Blowin’ in the Wind,” itself based on a Negro spiritual (although, according to his website, Dylan has performed “Blowin’ in the Wind” over 1,000 times, most recently in November 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Folk music drew on human experience, but those singing it no longer had that experience, and those who had it tended not to be revolutionaries. The Carter Family, in singing “Single Girl, Married Girl,” were not offering a woman’s liberation anthem. Folk singer Joan Baez, although a pretty maid, was a middle-class kid, no more likely to meet a bandit on the highway than Dylan was to wear boots of Spanish leather. Spirituals came from a long history of human suffering, but those singing them in their churches and then on the streets could still claim to be living that experience. It was not reverse racism that led blacks to find folk music unappealing, nor was it slumming that led whites to African American music, including soul and rhythm and blues. In addition to the quality of the music itself, African American music was alive in a way that folk music was not.

We might draw two lessons from the contrast between the political use of spirituals and the fate of protest music. First, any music that is political runs the risk of being reduced to ephemera or mere fashion, especially if it is connected to a particular theoretical take on politics. This is a problem for any music that tries to be

civic. Second, if spirituals are about freedom, then they express musically what America is about. They reverberate broadly and endure because they express the human longing for justice and freedom at the core of the American Revolution, a longing that transcends politics. Recognizing this corrects or qualifies our earlier statement that music is inapt for American civic life because that life rests on an idea, and music is not good at expressing ideas.

## Intentions for and Reception of Music

The appropriation of music for political purposes leads us to another important point about music and civic life. As we already suggested, the examples of “Born in the USA” and “This Land Is Your Land”—even “Fanfare for the Common Man”—indicate that the role of music in American civic life is almost entirely a reception issue. That is, the effect of a piece of music in the civic realm depends much more on the way in which the audience interprets its message than on whatever message, if any, was intended by the composer or performer. This is not merely a phenomenon of recent political and social history. Jazz as a musical phenomenon and the Jazz Age as a cultural phenomenon actually had much less to do with one another than one might imagine. Musicians such as Louis Armstrong did not specifically intend to become the musical wing of a major cultural movement.

In acknowledging this gulf between intention and reception, we must acknowledge that the audience may not entirely misinterpret what the musician produces. Jazz audiences saw in the music, among other things, increasingly proud and assertive black musicians creating a forum for public personal expression; this both mirrored and informed the general trend of increasing individual liberties in the era that bore the genre’s name and in the decades that followed.

Similarly, there were elements in Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” that informed the Reagan campaign’s decision to appropriate the song for political use, despite the song’s obviously pessimistic lyrics. Whatever its words might say, the music itself is not pessimistic. It is powerful, pushed by a steady beat, and reinforced by a recurring riff. Nor does the voice that sings the words sigh in resignation. Almost a scream at some points, the voice declares a proud identity forged through hardship. In the song, the brother at Khe Sanh is gone, but the voice and the character it gives expression to remains. The singer has survived and endured. He was “born in the USA,” so what else should we expect? The song has become an unofficial American anthem—an anthem of American endurance.

The effect of “Born in the USA,” then, is not unlike the blues, one of its ultimate sources. B. B. King often sings about loss and disappointments, but has anyone ever left a B. B. King concert feeling depressed? Part of the reason one does not is the effect of the music, above all its rhythm, which does not depress energy. Built in part on a tradition of directly engaging the audience, the blues and similar music, in the hands of a powerful and skilled performer like King, can build something like a communal experience, as one can hear on his 1965 album *Live at the Regal*.

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One can also hear in King’s performance the African American church experience, as he delivers a short, humorous sermon against domestic violence in “Worry, Worry.” Both King and Springsteen, in fact, create in their performances something very much like the communal experience of religious worship familiar to generations of American churchgoers, reassuring their audiences that though life is not easy, we survive and endure.

And yet in a culture that emphasizes the reception of music by the audience, a reception that can differ from person to person, this communal experience can itself fall prey to the subjectivity or privacy that increasingly characterizes modern life. That is, it is not too outlandish to imagine two people of very different political viewpoints—Barack Obama and Chris Christie, for example—at the same Springsteen concert, participating in a communal experience that reinforces two significantly different points of view. Even music experienced communally begins to exhibit an increasing multiplicity or segmentation today, reflecting the character of American civic life and the diversity of American life more generally.

Whatever may be true of civic life, music has itself become fragmented, driven as always by the market, but recently in particular by technological developments. Technology has allowed music to become increasingly private and portable. People no longer have to come together at home, church, or the bandstand to hear music. Each can go his or her own way, marching to the

beat of a favorite and entirely different drummer. Technology now makes it easy to record and distribute music, reducing entry costs to the musical world. By posting a video on YouTube, a musician can reach a large audience—or a small and very appreciative one. Low entry costs mean many more entrants, many more subgenres and styles, and many more musical tastes being represented among audiences. As music has become less and less a marker of status, individuals have developed increasingly diverse musical tastes.

At the same time, however, these technological, economic, and cultural forces have arguably given rise to a homogenized style of popular (pop) music intended to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. For decades, country music has become less country and more like other kinds of popular music, slowly abandoning banjos and mandolins in favor of the distorted electric guitar of many pop hits. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, rock music attempted to combat its diminishing share of radio play by incorporating elements of the rap and hip-hop music that were beginning to take over the airwaves. Today, one would be hard pressed to find a major pop single that does not borrow from the electronic dance music that is popular among young people worldwide.

Increased interplay and influence among genres is not necessarily a bad thing, but one cannot tune in to Top 40 radio these days without noticing an astonishing and unprecedented uniformity. This was not always the case: in 1961, the Marvelettes' version of "Please Mr. Postman" was followed in the number 1 spot by The Tokens' "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." In 1962, Ray Charles's "I Can't Stop Loving You" was followed by David Rose's "The Stripper," an instrumental. In 1963, Lesley Gore's "It's My Party" was followed by "Sukiyaki" by Kyu Sakamoto—the only Japanese language song ever to have reached number 1 in the United States. In 1964, the Beatles' "Can't Buy Me Love" was followed in the number 1 spot by Louis Armstrong's version of "Hello, Dolly." In contrast, 2012 saw nearly indistinguishable singles by Kelly Clarkson and Katy Perry reach the pinnacle of the *Billboard* charts one after the other.<sup>6</sup>

Technology and the market seem to be making music simultaneously more heterogeneous and homogeneous. Together, these trends do not bode well for a more civic music in America, since what is widely shared tends to be banal and what is not banal tends not to be widely shared. These processes have come nowhere near their end: music making, not merely music's consumption and distribution, is still adjusting to the way our lives and interactions are increasingly mediated by the mobility of people and information.

Further, if civic life is among the many aspects of human life being dramatically overhauled by the Internet, then one might argue that the music that will most affect civic life in the future will be that which most easily conforms to the demands of the Internet. This might be a very different music from the sort that people played 50 or even 20 years ago with their friends or neighbors while sitting on their front porch after dinner. It is hard to imagine someone like Woody Guthrie emerging as the political conscience of a generation in the "information age." Among other disadvantages, he would have a difficult time commanding the attention of modern audiences in the way that seems necessary for music's efficacy in the civic realm.

## Music and Morality

If technology and the market continue to change music, one thing that is likely to stay the same is concern with what music expresses and the effect that it has on the individuals who listen to it and the society they live in. Many cultural commentators have raised wary eyebrows at the drug culture associated with the rise of electronic dance music, and the association of hip-hop with urban violence in the minds of many worried parents has been a source of intense debate for some time.<sup>7</sup> Moral questioning of musical developments is obviously not a recent phenomenon—as the outcry of an older generation over Elvis's coiffed hair and shaking hips or, even further back, the claims that jazz was the music of savages—attest.

Citing such examples may suggest that we should not take too seriously the concern that current music could adversely affect morality. After all, America and its music survived (and perhaps even benefited from) jazz and rock 'n' roll; surely it will survive hip-hop. In this view, the changes in popular music over the 20th century concern style, not morals. We should not make too much of the difference, for example, between Anita O'Day at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, elegantly attired, sophisticated, melodically inventive, and rhythmically compelling, and Lady Gaga at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, wearing a dress assembled out of raw meat. (Or if that comparison is too farfetched, between Lesley Gore and Lady Gaga.) A choice between the two would be an expression of mere taste.

Yet, no less an authority on popular culture than Susan Sontag insisted in her famous essay on camp that "nothing is more decisive" than taste. "Taste governs every free—as opposed to rote—human response," she said.<sup>8</sup> Taste is an expression of a preference, and our preferences,

taken together, determine who we are. One who has a taste for *Pride and Prejudice* is likely to be a certain sort of person who is different from the person who has a taste for, say, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance*. There need not be a difference between the two, of course, and if there is, the difference need not be moral and the comparison disparaging.

Hip-hop has often been lambasted as an outlet for the glorification of violence, drug addiction, and unhealthy relationships, but it offers a tradition of musical commentary that is not dissimilar to that of blues artists like King.

But some differences are significant, and at first glance, one cannot help but contrast B. B. King's brief, humorous sermon—which acknowledges the violence that may mar the relationships of those in his audience but encourages them to turn away from it—with more contemporary music that seems to glorify and thus encourage such violence (or at least does not discourage it). Yet further reflection reveals this to be an unfair contrast, not least of all because the blues and other popular music have always contained violence and sex. Consider the 1920s blues legend Bessie Smith's "Black Mountain Blues," in which she sings of a man who left her:

I'm bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun.  
Lord, I'm bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun.  
I'm gonna shoot him if he stand still and cut him if he run.

While Smith appears confused about the most effective use of her weapons, her violent intent is clear. The 1960s blues hit "Hey Joe," performed by dozens of musicians and made famous by Jimi Hendrix, was clearly not breaking new ground when its eponymous character declared, "I'm goin' down to shoot my old lady/You know I caught her messin' round with another man." While the accusation of glorification is up for debate—presumably

no one would wish to be in Joe's position, or Bessie's—these lyrics are certainly a far cry from King's homily.

Just as older traditional and popular music is not an unimpeachable monument to virtue, modern popular music is not simply a purveyor of vice. Hip-hop has often been lambasted as an outlet for the glorification of violence, drug addiction, and unhealthy relationships, but it offers a tradition of musical commentary that is not dissimilar to that of blues artists like King. The music of Tupac Shakur typifies what is, in truth, an ambiguous moral landscape. The rapper was arrested and convicted of sexual assault, and his music certainly did not shy away from themes of violence in general. Yet many of his songs express strong convictions about social justice, including the rallying cry against domestic abuse found in the 1993 hit "Keep Ya Head Up":

And when he tells you you ain't nuttin don't believe him.  
And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him.

You know it makes me unhappy  
When brothas make babies, and leave a young mother to be  
a pappy.

Not all such examples point up contradictions with the lyricist's personal life; rap emcees who behave less questionably have made moral themes persistent in their lyrics. Two recent examples are Talib Kweli and Brother Ali, both of whom draw upon elements of the Islamic faith to emphasize social justice issues.

Acknowledging that popular music has always been morally ambidextrous, one would nonetheless be hard-pressed to find widely available, early 20th-century examples of the sort of graphic violence present in many of Tupac Shakur's less socially beneficent lyrics. One might even observe that contemporary audiences seem to exhibit a taste for more explicit representations of such themes. What we deem publicly acceptable, then, has certainly changed. That is significant, of course, but music is part of the change, rather than the cause of it. Music, like the other arts, has taken advantage of (and not always benefited from) the decline in censorship—the dissolving line between what was privately known but unacknowledged about human life and what was publicly acknowledged. It is probably not a coincidence that the disappearance of that line coincides with the change in civic music that we described earlier.

While those who recoiled when they saw swiveling hips on TV would have been unlikely to foresee gangster rap and meat dresses, hindsight is perhaps somewhat clearer. However, accepting that there are moral issues in

matters of taste, and that taste may decline and not just change, does not imply that all popular music or any particular type of popular music corrupts morals. But it does highlight the importance of music for the character of our civic life. What is the relationship, then, between music, morality, and civic life? Remembering the importance of reception in popular music, we should probably conclude that music reinforces a taste that is already present in its audience. Thus, if we find some music ugly to our ears and damaging to our souls, it is likely an expression of a larger prevailing taste or sensibility shared with an audience, rather than being the source of that sensibility in the first place. The producer and the receiver will have something in common before music forms a bond between them.

### Copland took common folk melodies and rhythms and elevated them to compelling popular music that was also art.

Let us accept that there is ugly, brutalizing music, even if we can dance to it or its composer wins prestigious fellowships. How did the sensibility that is receptive to such music come into existence? One might start with Aaron Copland's music primer *What to Listen for in Music* (first published in 1939). Copland distinguishes what he calls three musical planes: the sensuous, the expressive, and the musical. In discussing the sensuous plane, Copland acknowledges that listening to music can be pleasant. But he warns his readers that they should not get the idea that "the value of music is commensurate with its sensuous appeal or that the loveliest sounding music is made by the greatest composer."<sup>9</sup> In discussing the expressive plane—what a piece of music might mean—Copland had another warning: music may mean nothing definite and, in fact, the more indefinite music is, the more likely it is to be a great work of art. Copland's aesthetic, then, is that the less definite and pleasant music is, the better music it may be.

Copland is right that if music is too definitely about something, it may not remain alive in the sense of revealing something new to us each time we listen to it. Overtly political music provides many examples. It is also true that the beauty of a piece of music, like the beauty and meaning of a poem, may not be apparent on the first listen or even the 21st. But if the beauty is there, we will eventually hear it. In addition, from the composer's or performer's

viewpoint, the material he or she works with can become so hackneyed that it no longer "says" anything to him or her and he or she will need to develop new sounds. Or as a simple matter of developing the art—the techniques involved in the music—composers or performers will push for something new. As it is new, it will be unfamiliar; as it is unfamiliar, it may not be immediately pleasing.

In these ways, Copland's aesthetic preferences make sense. But they may also lead to something more problematic. To say that good music may be indefinite and unpleasant can lead to the claim that the best music must be both. In her essay on camp, published 25 years after Copland's book first appeared, Sontag wrote that camp, which she did not deplore, was the appreciation of pure artifice devoid of meaning and depoliticized: "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious." It was art delivered from moral relevance: "Camp is a solvent of morality."<sup>10</sup> However, it was not nihilistic, Sontag claimed; she reserved that "honorific" for Pop Art, which was newly fashionable at the time she wrote. A few decades after Copland's book appeared, modernist sensibility had ended up in a place where Copland, at least, did not. The closer to meaninglessness and the more ugly a work of art is, the greater is the art or the artifice. We might call this the HBO aesthetic: only the ugly is real.

Whatever is true of cable TV, it is not the case that every composer who writes atonal polyrhythmic music is a Pied Piper leading us to the abyss. For one thing, such music seldom has much of a following. Nor is it the case that popular culture consists only of the ugly and meaningless. Interestingly, Copland, who began and ended as a modernist, wrote beautiful and meaningful music that was broadly appreciated yet critically approved only during his communist fellow-traveler days. His equivocal but nonetheless real political passions led him to fulfill the role of the artist or composer in an older understanding in which music was meant to help shape or reinforce moral and political sentiments.

Copland took common folk melodies and rhythms and elevated them to compelling popular music that was also art. He captured something distinctively true and beautiful about America, as have in their own ways Louis Armstrong, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, and even Tupac Shakur. To say that all these musicians produced good music is not to say that their work is all equally good, or good in the same way, or always good, but it is to acknowledge that popular music, and hence in some way civic music, can be good music.

Whatever musicians are doing, there is always the question of reception, of what Americans do with the music that surrounds them. In this regard, we might

recall an anecdote related by classical music educator and broadcaster James David Jacobs.<sup>11</sup> A few days after 9/11, he attended a memorial service in New York City for the victims of the terrorist attacks. Many people had gathered at a public park, and a large number had arranged themselves in a semicircle on some steps. They looked like a choir, but they were singing different songs; part of the group was singing “Give Peace a Chance,” while another part sang “God Bless America.”

This story seems an appropriate illustration of one of music’s roles in America’s civic life. In the hands of a boisterous people, our music creates rich opportunities for the expression of our convictions. While these convictions are not always held in common, they are powerful in their diversity. For there is one conviction we do share: that our expressions, although not always harmonious, remain complementary. Or in the words of Elliott Carter: “A lot of individuals dealing with each other, sensitive to each other, cooperating and yet not losing their own individuality.”<sup>12</sup>

Recognizing the good in popular and other forms of American music—a good that manifests itself in remarkable variety—leads us to what is probably the most sound conclusion one can draw after examining music and America’s civic life. In its diverse, segmented, complex sway and cacophonous roar; in its capacity for renewal and surprise; in its collaborative, competitive drive; in its constant borrowing from the spirit and rhythm of its once most despised population; in its amateur zeal and professional competence; in its beauty and crudeness, American music may be the most complete expression of American life.

### Author Biography

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### Notes

1. See, for example, Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
2. Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2003).
3. Hymns transcribed in a simpler form than standard notation, with a small number of shapes on the staff representing different tones.
4. Stuart Isacoff, “Elliott Carter (1908–2012), Standard-Bearer of the Avant-Garde,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2012.
5. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume 1* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 286.
6. Fred Bronson, *The Billboard Book of Number 1 Hits* (New York: Billboard Books, 2003), iv; and “Billboard Hot 100 Archives,” [www.billboard.com/charts/1961-12-16/hot-100/](http://www.billboard.com/charts/1961-12-16/hot-100/).
7. See, for example, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); and Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994). Bloom’s criticisms of contemporary music are best known but least informed.
8. Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), 276.
9. Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 9.
10. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” 290.
11. James David Jacobs, “Ives’s Prophetic Music, Post 9/11,” WGH, September 9, 2011, [www.wgbh.org/articles/Ives-Prophetic-Music-Post-911-4213](http://www.wgbh.org/articles/Ives-Prophetic-Music-Post-911-4213).
12. Isacoff, “Elliott Carter (1908–2012).”

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