"Too Real to Be Funny": Social Protest and Cultural Memory Through Four Post World War II American Operas, 1934-1954

by

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Introduction

In February 2011, President Richard M. Nixon finally got his due on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City. Nixon, sung by baritone James Maddalena, is the dramatic lead of American composer John Adams' 1987 opera, *Nixon in China*, which sets the 37th president's infamous trip to Red China in 1972 to a score of pulsing modernist music. The revival received high praise in the music and popular press, with most reviewers noting the opera's glorious entry into the cannon of American operatic theatre solely by dint of its being performed at the Metropolitan Opera. "Under Mr. Gelb, the [Met] now actively courts contemporary works and modern productions," *New York Times* opera critic Anthony Tommasini wrote in his glowing review. "The Met's embrace of *Nixon in China* is way overdue."[1]

Appearing at the Met has become tantamount to achieving musical maturity in the American — and by extension, the Western — operatic world. While not all works presented on the Lincoln Center stage achieve eternal fame, it is widely understood that to be staged by the Met is to obtain tacit endorsement from the opera establishment.[2] Peter Gelb, the Met's current director, may assume that his work approaches 'revolutionary' status in its presentation of traditional operas in nontraditional formats, but his company is largely synonymous with the conservative mentality of the operatic production apparatus.[3]

As desirable and coveted a Met engagement may be, works like Adams' *Nixon in China* and other contemporary operas demonstrate considerable life on stages besides the

[1] Anthony Tommasini, "President and Opera, on Unexpected Stages," *The New York Times,* February 4, 2011, C1.
[2] Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 164.
[3] Alex Ross, "Diminuendo", *The New Yorker* Vol. LXXXVIII, No. 4 (March 12, 2012), 82.

one at Lincoln Center. The blood of the American opera theatre may emanate from the heart of New York City, but its regional veins supply more than just fresh young singers and new works for use by the establishment. Indeed, companies in Houston, San Francisco, Chicago and even Minneapolis have become proper companies in their own right, mounting exciting new works and pushing new forms forward into the cannon.

Still, the operas that we remember as a culture are those that the Met has anointed through a repertory performance. Just as *Nixon in China* was a regional triumph and pop cultural oddity until February 2011, so too are the works of many composers clamoring for a similar acceptance. Opera in America plays to a constrained audience, but that audience requires certain signals in order to fully embrace a work. Often, that acceptance does not extend to American works by American composers. American operas have historically suffered at the hands of the Met's production board; from an early twentieth century high of 14 operas under the baton of director Giulo Gatti-Casazza, native performance has consistently declined since the 1940s.[4] Those operas that have seen sustained success — *Nixon in China*, George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Carlile Floyd's *Susannah* — have primarily dealt with uniquely American themes and American issues.[5]

Further complicating the equation is the sheer difficulty in presenting an operatic work in English. The defacto American native tongue does not lend itself easily to the kinds of heavy glissandos and vocal acrobatics required in most operatic vocal passages,

[4] Krik*, American Opera*, 166.
[5] Leon Maurice Aufdemberge, "An Analysis of the Dramatic Construction of American Operas on American Themes, 1986-1958," Northwestern University, Ph.D., 1965, 9.

rendering any kind of native attempt suspect and awkward.[6] The form is foreign and exotic, success is rare, and the audience is notoriously picky. With the odds so skewered against any kind of lasting influence, why would any ambitious American composer ever decide to write an opera?

A group of twentieth century American composers did just that, especially in the fertile years bridging the economic collapse of the 1930s with the postwar boom of the 1950s. Led by men like Aaron Copland — who famously dubbed opera "*La forme fatale*" for young composers— a generation of American musicians sought to redefine the country's sound and culture through revolutionary forms and even more revolutionary music.[7] In a speech presented at New York's Town Hall in January 1941, Copland laid out his understanding of the American musical landscape's immaturity and the unnatural dominance of the Metropolitan Opera:

> In order to be musically full grown, a country most possess three indispensible elements: a large number of interpretive artists and organizations who are functioning all the time; a wide cross-section of intelligent music listeners who are listening all the time; and an indigenous school of composers who are writing music all the time…The Metropolitan Opera Co. provides, I'm afraid, another example of our musical immaturity; perhaps I am foolish to look for maturity in an opera public.[8]

Copland sketched out the parameters of the operatic problem in America. The country offered a mature production apparatus and a waiting audience, but lacked some essential ingredient. Whether that ingredient was a new form or a native theme, Copland

[6] Aufdemberge, "An Analysis…", 23.
[7] Aaron Copland, "A Composer's Journal (1960)," in *Aaron Copland: A Reader, Selected Writings 1923-1972,* ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: Psychology Press, 2004), 290.
[8] Aaron Copland, "Is America Musical Mature?" speech at Town Hall Symposium, Jan. 10, 1941, Folder 14: Town Hall Symposium, Box 212, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and his contemporaries sought to solve the puzzle through their compositional efforts during this time. A current of political hedonism and implicit sexual politics ran through these men and their works, lending the period a distinctly controversial tint when viewed through the rear window of contemporary historiography. Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein and Virgil Thomson were engaged in many of the most current political debates of their time, yet their radicalism diminishes in the nostalgic gleam of popular memory. They hoped to address the complicated questions of citizenship, patriotism and national culture in their music, but the public who received this music was reluctant to engage in introspective considerations of identity as the mid-century American socio-economic juggernaut grew in size.

Together, the lives and careers of Copland, Bernstein, Blitzstein and Thomson offer a sweeping portrait of a twenty-year period of American exploration in the operatic form. While the world around these men simmered in the socio-economic battles being waged in New York and the capitals of Europe throughout the Depression and a looming global war, a similar explosion of creative effort ignited across the American cultural landscape. Cultural historian Nadine Hubbs has called these men and many of their contemporaries the queer collective of modern American musical experimentalism, but her analysis only scratches the surface of the question so central to these composers' works and lives.[9] Hubbs lumps these men and their immediate contemporaries together in an effort to skewer conceptions of American music, suggesting that these homosexual (i.e. 'queer') composers were controversial and deserve contemporary reconsideration

[9] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

largely by dint of their homosexuality. Her surprising approach to the oft-forgotten historiographical question of sexuality and gender identity in popular culture is indeed worth analysis, but Copland, Bernstein, Blitzstein and Thomson all led more complicated lives than Hubbs' initial approach allows. With varying degrees of prior success and present notoriety, all four composers managed to miss out on vague signals of popular trends and political currents, creating curious works of cultural dissent that failed to find both an audience and a lasting influence in American music.[10]

Yet these men were not failures, and their memory is preserved through their respectively impressive catalogues of popular works and recurrent citations in musical scholarship. Copland is remembered more often than not as the "Dean of American Music," Bernstein receives praise for his emphasis on popular musical education and ethnographic adventures in musical theatre, Thomson is a legendary music critic and Blitzstein is best known for his radical incorporation of protest through musical expression. Each man should also be known today for his groundbreaking postwar opera. That these operas are not fondly remembered or regularly performed reveals much about the transitional period between the end of World War II and the dawn of the midcentury consensus framework cited so often today. Failure in the cultural sphere also suggests the potency and sway of newly drawn political boundaries, particularly in the unstable postwar period. These operas propose a fresh look at the transition from economic collapse and global war to postwar prosperity. In biographies and musical scholarship on

[10] Hubbs is right to include Samuel Barber and Gian Carlo Menotti in her analysis of the midcentury 'gay mafia' in American music. However, this study will not consider these men or their works. Their themes (mythological and European) and musical styles (neo-romantic and Italianate) do not fit within this essay's American-centric musical and thematic concerns.

the composers at hand, these transitional years are often seen only as extended historical footnotes.[11] Yet recent works on postwar design and cultural concerns aptly reconsider the twenty years at the heart of this study. These works ask deeper questions about the common aesthetic threads that bound together disparate groups of diversified cultural producers, and seek to lay the groundwork for the popular postwar artistic forms that are now so widely recognized.[12]

Indeed, operatic failure presents a parallel story of wider successes. American culture seemed ripe for exploration and innovation between the 1930s and 1960s. The rise and decline of radio, the birth of television and the steady progress of recorded popular music all show that America could and would take up new forms of cultural consumption if provided adequate reason. And Copland, Thomson and their ilk saw some of this adoptive ease in the introspective prewar period, when new works and new ideas ran rampant throughout the American psyche. Devastated by the crippling economic depression of 1929, the America of President Franklin D. Roosevelt seemed distinctly willing to probe its cultural identity in an attempt to redefine the tattered nation's conception of itself. Audiences were eager and growing, as Blitzstein breathlessly described in an oft-cited 1936 *Modern Music Quarterly* article, "Coming — the Mass Audience!":

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[11] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music*: *The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Barry Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of An American Musician* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1997); Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York City: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1999).

[12] Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise* (New York City: Picador 2007).

> A first rate composer writes a work. The work is a revelation of the composer himself, it is also an articulation of the life and times about him. Reflection, also prophecy…the art is renewing itself. The individual composer achieves his pure, ultimate, undisturbed individuality only on the basis of a smooth and balanced social machinery; it is his function as a musician to aid in the building of such a machinery.[13]

Work composed through the Federal Theatre and Music Projects of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and the propaganda arm of the U.S. State Department in the 1940s reflect these composers' attempts to directly engage with and explore the tastes of such new audiences, containing a broad cross section of the previously under stimulated American mass public. Indeed, Blitzstein and Thomson saw considerable success with their operatic premieres in 1934 and 1936, respectively. While each work premiered to a small audience and is more a bright footnote in the modernist and agit-prop musical sectors than an enduring example of a successful or popular American opera, these works indicate that the period was open to experimentation and redefinition along the personal lines that Blitzstein articulated.

Historians often explore the Federal Theatre Project and its related programs without considering their hefty cultural legacies as a living, changing artistic force. Notable exceptions include Steven Watson and Susan Quinn, who discuss the long-range cultural afterlife of Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* and Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*. [14] Watson accurately calls *Four Saints in Three Acts* a defining moment in American modernism and Quinn is apt to outline just how exaggerated most discussion of *The Cradle Will Rock* can be. Still, these and other cultural historians who focus on the WPA's

[13] Marc Blitzstein, "Coming: The Mass Audience!" *Modern Music Quarterly, Vol. XIII,* no. 4, May/June 1936, Folder 6: Modern Music Quarterly, Box 9, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[14] Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York City: Random House, 1998).

Federal One rarely extend their analysis beyond the death knells of the WPA into a postwar discussion of these composers' continued artistic inheritors and imitators.[15]

A closer look at *Four Saints* and *The Cradle Will Rock* reveals larger truths about the supposedly limited operatic audience in America. History remembers and preserves each work partly because of the public clamor that surrounded their premieres. That clamor, in turn, derives from the nature of the audience that so vocally expressed its adoration of the works. These were small, highly specialized audiences with significant public cachet and the unique ability to spread the word about the operas across cultural sectors. Thomson and Blitzstein witnessed first-hand the importance of audience identification in their work — queer modernists for Thomson, leftist labor-minded activists for Blitzstein — and how exciting and engaging those specific publics could spread awareness of their work above and beyond an original audience. Copland found limited but potent success in his own prewar opera composition, *The Second Hurricane*, chiefly because of the work's popularity among his fellow composers.[16]

Ultimately the four postwar operas at the core of this study — Thomson's *The Mother of Us All,* Blitzstein's *Regina*, Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* and Copland's *The Tender Land* — failed to find a responsive core public, which in turn limited their legacy and diminished their cultural influence. As each composer approached the creation and dissemination of his work during the postwar period, he appeared to directly refer to the success afforded him in the prewar period as indicative of renewed possibility after the

[15] Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art Out of Desperate Times* (New York City: Walker and Company, 2008).
[16] Leonard Bernstein to Aaron Copland, undated 1938/39, Folder 1: Leonard Bernstein, Box 247, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Blitzstein was also a vocal fan of the work.

American victory in World War II. Yet profound changes unfolded just as these works premiered. The American population that greeted these operas also encountered subtle but vastly significant cultural and political shifts in their general lives, creating a confusing and unfamiliar landscape. Even more, the specific audiences required for each work to gain real notoriety or success was in many cases the exact opposite of the kind of wealthy patrons who regularly attended opera in America. This gap between conservative audience expectation and radical compositional hope only increased as the bland conformity of the 1950s continued in scale.

The sustained conversation between these men provides a useful lens for better understanding the World War II transitional period. Any artificial grouping of these men as a means to cultural illumination extends from the very real fact that the four were close friends who ran together in the midcentury modernist musical circles and influenced each other's works. After the 1934 premiere of Thomson's Dadaist spectacle of a modern opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts,* Copland remarked to a friend in the lobby that he "didn't know one *could* write an opera."[17] Where Nadine Hubbs finds real purchase in her *Queer Composition* is her nuanced narrative of the ways in which these four men and their contemporaries influenced American music as a unit while nevertheless offering unique contributions as individuals. At a time when nonconformity could end one's career, these men had little incentive to call attention to their sexuality. Under these conditions their status as homosexual men lent a sense of urgency to their collective musical nation building. Between the lines of their compositional limits, Hubbs teases out the playful

[17] Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1997), 267.

implications and subtle suggestive qualities that made their work so vital.[18] Out of repression and inference came the musical and theatrical works that have come to define a nation; not these four operas, but these men's' collective work as token examples of midcentury modernist American music.

The combined experiences of Copland, Bernstein, Blitzstein and Thomson follow a similar trajectory. From the broad dreams of prewar avant-garde modernism and social engagement to the depths of postwar suspicion and Red Scare cultural conformity, these four composers took a troubled and difficult path into the postwar decades. Their prewar expectations of popular acceptance for works that sustained internal reflection and national critique were instead unceremoniously soiled upon the rise of the Cold War. Continued denial or avoidance of the existing cultural truths that plagued them would settle any question of their works' modern legacy.

The four composers showed some recognition of the requirements for elusive operatic success. As his own work was about to premiere in 1952, Bernstein offered a speech that suggested his real comprehension of the need for audience engagement in contemporary opera:

> Is music being inflicted upon the American public? For whom do we play? Is real love for music restricted to more or less international communities of large cities? The public is as important as the composer…all musical cultures take root in theatre...[and] out of all of this will come an opera. It's what I'm trying to do, there is a great wave of operas already (indeed, almost every young composer)…Even dramatic works by 'difficult' composers are popular, because they exist in the theatre…One cannot

[18] Hubbs, *Queer Composition of American Sound*, 3-14.

> expect the Public to be personally involved in this music, except as listeners…[the public] demands its own expression.[19]

Bernstein articulated a crisis that each composer faced as he presented his work. The modern public demanded a certain sense of real or aspirational ownership in any cultural work they promoted through their attendance, which made the serial suburban sitcoms and glorified musical dramas of the postwar decade so successful. Musical theatre productions like *South Pacific* or *On the Town* and television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* provided glamourized versions of recognizable locations and situations that most audience members could look to as feasible blueprints forward. These were cultural guideposts for the postwar age, playing to newly moneyed audiences that sought outlets for that new income and directions for those new aspirations.

Many of the audiences that ingested the popular arts mentioned above would have also identified personal connections to the operas of Bernstein, Copland, Blitzstein and Thomson. Unhappy suburban housewives fond of the Cleaver family saw themselves in the daily struggles of Bernstein's Dinah, and college-bound youths found common cause with the emotionally fraught Laurie in Copland's opera.[20] These audience connections never reached critical mass because of longstanding cultural affinities and perceived class boundaries between the mass culture public and the private world of the semi-elite who frequented the opera. The dawn of the conformist 1950s forced the radical, introspective years of the 1930s and 40s into a painful and gradual decline, as

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[19] Leonard Bernstein, "You, The Public," speech given May 13, 1952 at Brandeis Festival for the Creative Arts, Folder 17: You, the Public, Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[20] Phillip Max Gentry, "The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 2008, 5-23.

populist and modernist trends in American music clashed openly with the anti-Communist nationalism at play across the expanding and chaotic cultural landscape.[21]

This essay traces the chronological rise and fall of modern American opera in the years surrounding the Second World War. The music and motivations that drove each composer are threaded throughout, allowing the collective conversation to underline central themes that unite the men across the twenty years in question. Chapter one examines the artistically productive years of the Depression, concentrating on Thomson and Blitzstein's early operatic successes and the influence of the federal government's Federal Theatre Project on experimental American performance. Looping quickly through the seven years that closed out a remarkably vibrant two decades in American composition, the remaining chapters delineate the motivations and musical moments that shaped these men during peacetime. Thomson and Blitzstein take center stage in chapter two, representing an opening volley in postwar opera and reflecting greater truths about the longevity of prewar aesthetic choices. The closing chapter explores Bernstein and Copland's attempts at the operatic form, marking how their political and professional lives reflect the final front in the introspective American artistic movement of the long prewar period. It is therefore convenient that the order in which these operas appear — Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* (1947), Blitzstein's *Regina* (1949), Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952) and Copland's *The Tender Land* (1954) — offers a clear exploration of an artist's evolving role in postwar American society.

Failure, as a metric of cultural discourse, opens up meaningful dialogue on popular memory and enduring social legacies. Using four operatic failures, this essay will

[21] Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010), 310-387.

shed light on the postwar period's vaguely delineated artistic boundaries. Repeated examples of personal trials and public failure define a remarkably volatile phase of American music. In probing such limits, one finds a greater understanding of the depth and breadth of the middle expanse of socio-cultural dialogue. The story of the transition from two progressive crises to the rigidly enforced prosperity that followed is the story of the conception of modern America and of the artistic players who helped discover the shady corners of that newly realized mass identity.

Ch. 1: Depression, War and Cultural Agitation: Radical Excesses in an Era of Change

In February 1936, Marc Blitzstein sent a form letter to his friend and fellow composer, Virgil Thomson. Similar letters were sent to dozens of American composers that week on the same subject, but Blitzstein's loose friendship with Thomson likely prompted him to include a handwritten plea for the older composer's support. "We need your signature, V!" Blitzstein scrawled in the margins of the letter, urging Thomson to sign a petition protesting a case of perceived political censorship at a planned Works Progress Administration concert.[1] Thomson's status as an editor and frequent contributor at the influential journal *Modern Music* made his signature on the protest letter a valuable show of establishment support for the manifesto.

The details of the hypothetical concert are hazy. A performance by the contemporary composer Elie Siegmeister had been rescheduled or cancelled due to a dispute between Siegmeister and the director of the WPA's Composers' Forum-Laboratory, Ashley Pettis. Siegmeister had hoped to include a free-form poem highly critical of modern industrial tycoons like Henry Ford and Andrew Carnegie as an accompaniment to a piano composition in a concert scheduled for February 26.[2] When the Composers' Forum-Laboratory identified the work as out of place in a federally sponsored event meant to exalt American ideals, Siegmeister called foul and angrily wrote himself out of the program.[3]

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[1] Marc Blitzstein to Virgil Thomson, February 10, 1936, Folder 9: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 26, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[2] Ashley Pettis to Elie Siegmeister, January 24, 1936, Folder 9: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 26, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[3]3 Elie Siegmeister to RECIPIENT, February 26, 1936, Folder 9: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 26, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

While Siegmeister's indignant reaction set the entire chain of events in motion, it was Thomson's interpretation of the affair that drew larger questions of musical activism to the forefront. In a carefully worded letter to Blitzstein, Thomson offered a candid assessment of the episode, revealing both the subdued atmosphere of the mid-1930s American cultural landscape and his own feelings on political showmanship:

> I can't really sign that manifesto because it doesn't make sense. It accuses Pettis of using the WPA for political purposes, when the most that he's done is to refuse to let someone else use it for political purposes, if even that…Siegmeister is not pure in his motivation. Framing up situations to get oneself persecuted, however entertaining it may be as a private amusement, does not justify marshaling the phalanxes of the solid professional front. I hope you let it drop.[4]

But Blitzstein did not let the issue drop. He included Thomson's thoughts on the matter in a petition eventually sent to Pettis and the staff of the Composers' Forum-Laboratory, and later thanked Thomson for his frank understanding of the nuances of the protest at hand, that "touch all [composers] sharply."[5]

The divide between these composers was greater than their written exchange suggests. Together, they present a detailed portrait of the uneasy cultural truce between leftist activists and more middling mainstream artists during the Great Depression and the New Deal-sponsored Works Progress Administration. Bound by the economic depression's limitations, artists and cultural figures like Blitzstein and Thomson sought to use the perceived unity of the so-called cultural front to further their own political causes. While Thomson, Blitzstein and their contemporaries may not have seen their work as

[4] Virgil Thomson to Marc Blitzstein, February 26, 1936, Folder 9: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 26, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[5] Marc Blitzstein to Virgil Thomson, March 12, 1936, Folder 9: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 26, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

part of a "front" movement, recent historians of the period have identified how these musicians were in fact plugged into the popular discourse that formed the very tenets of said cultural front.

That front, artfully described in Michael Denning's masterful work *The Cultural Front*, drew a broad spectrum of social progressives and artistic agitators together for a temporary truce.[6] The front's derivation from the Communist Party USA's 1934 Popular Front strategy — a proposed union of workers, farmers and the rest of middle America dedicated to pushing back against reactionary forces on the global political right — has led many contemporary observers to assume deeper Communist Party ties and direction among the artists of the period.[7] Such simple categorizations eclipse the sweeping range of political and artistic forces at work during this decade. In his book, Denning describes the manner in which the children of laborers and other working class families matriculated into a cultural sub-class; that is to say, a group of workers devoted to producing the trappings of mass entertainments for large portions of society. This was the dawn of mass culture, and the men and women who participated in the creation of that culture were predisposed to identify with their working class roots as a matter of course.[8]

Some artists were full-fledged Communists, while some artists were mere progressive bystanders. The framework provided by the cultural front motif may allow for an easily digestible snapshot of American intellectual culture in the 1930s and immediate

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[6] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York City: Verso, 1996), xv-xvi.
[7] Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and the War* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19-21. Crist's critical analysis of the Denning text served a guide for this section.
[8] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 126.

prewar period, but the era was arranged on a far more diversified political gradient.[9] Simple calculations of left, right or center cannot fully encapsulate the period's fragile dynamism. By exploring the professional and personal interactions among Blitzstein, Thomson, Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein during this era, it is possible to tease out the artistic and political limits of the era.

That these four men from mostly middle class backgrounds were able to tap into the currents of discontent that openly raged throughout the 1930s indicates the pervasive influence of dissent at this time. But the extent and development of dissenting radicalism varies even amongst these four men. Copland and Thomson were musically radical, developing a modern "American" sound out of nationalistic and individual authority to shape the future of the country's music. Blitzstein and Bernstein, in their writings and theatrical productions, opted for a radicalization of content, toying with the idea of "music for use" and developing the basis of a proudly defiant music-performance idiom. Taken as a group, these men represent the musical character and activity of the decade.

"The American Artist and the American Audience Face to Face": Depression-Era Arts

As the economic ravages of the Great Depression continued to wreak havoc on ordinary American life, artists and members of the cultural production apparatus also suffered decreased employment. An analysis of the employment situation dating from the late 1930s estimated that theatrical job numbers declined by more than 30 percent even in the

[9] Denning, *The Cultural Front,*4-5.

Depression's rosiest employment years.[10] These employment peaks, which affected many of the main cultural spheres beyond the theatre, were brought about in part by Federal One, the Federal Arts Project within the Roosevelt Government's Works Progress Administration.

The WPA offered federally funded jobs in a variety of fields and sponsored American writers, visual artists, musicians and actors.[11] The government marketed the 1935 Federal One arts projects as a way to give jobs to American artists in their field when employment was scarce. The project's own estimates placed unemployment at nearly 30,000 in the theatre industries.[12] As one writer explained in an 1938 article describing the progress of the Federal Writer's Project, "[the ranks of the unemployed were] suddenly swollen to more than 10 million…but they were not all ditch diggers."[13] Harry Hopkins, the WPA's outspoken and controversial director, explained his own reasoning behind the program to a reporter when he announced the creation of Federal One: "Artists were suffering…acutely in many cases. The WPA theory is that this human skill and talent should be preserved and the wealth of the nation added to materially by those who possess it."[14]

The Federal Arts Project organized orchestras, theatrical troupes, writers' guilds, mural painting troupes and journalists, among other large-scale cultural projects.[15] The

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[10] Cedric Larson, "The Cultural Projects of the WPA," *The Public Opinion Quarterly 3* (July 1939), 491-495.
[11] E. Current-Garcia, "American Panorama: (Federal Writers' Project)," *Prairie Schooner 12* (Summer 1938), 79-80.
[12] Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York City: Noble Offset Printers, 1940), 20.
[13] Current-Garcia, "American Panorama," 79.
[14] Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art Out of Desperate Times* (New York City: Walker and Company, 2008), 13.
[15] Larson, "The Cultural Projects of the WPA," 494.

works varied in their efficacy and size — the Federal Theatre Project sponsored regional touring circuits that introduced theatrical performance to more than 18 million first-time spectators and the Writers Project produced several highly regarded travel guides for previously ignored parts of the country — but gradually seemed an unwritten understanding emerged: works presented under the auspices of the federal government should not be critical of that government.[16]

Writings, plays or pieces of artwork that could be misconstrued as "controversial" had the potential to discredit the entire enterprise. A 1937 publicity statement from the Federal Theatre Project's central office suggests the tricky balancing act that this arrangement provided:

> The Federal Theatre does not take sides in any controversy be it social, political, or otherwise. It does, however, desire to stimulate an interest in current social problems which will be of benefit to the average citizen.[17]

Indeed, when pressed by his congressional and journalist detractors, Hopkins continued to insist that the Federal Theatre Project would be "free and uncensored," but the eventual arrival of politics — in the form of "Living Newspapers" and other documentary-style performances that presented current headlines and socio-economic crises as impromptu stage works — forced Hopkins and his managing theatre director Hallie Flanagan to pull back on their pledge against censorship.[18] Despite Flanagan's stringent efforts to convey her theatre as politically neutral and socially moderate, the inherent spectacle of a theatrical enterprise attracted more potent Republican vitriol than

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[16] Elizabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2-5.
[17] Elizabeth Cooper, "Dances About Spain: Censorship at the Federal Theatre Project," *Theatre Research International 29* (Spring 2004), 232.
[18] Quinn, 69.

would any other WPA organization.[19] Already fundamentally opposed to government outlays for Keynesian stimulus purposes, Republican Congressmen used the visible qualities of the Federal Theatre Project to their legislative and demonstrative advantage. The project's budget amounted to less than 1 percent of the entire WPA yearly congressional spending allocation, but that did not stop the Republican-controlled Congress from voting to defund the entire organization as an urgent matter of "fiscal restraint" in June 1939, less than four years after the project began.[20]

Audience Engagement and Political Discourse in Mid-Century American Music

Of course, the idea that the government could and should provide cultural jobs on a content-limited basis was anathema to active musicians, including Marc Blitzstein and Aaron Copland. Deeply involved in a variety of left-leaning and Communist musical causes, Copland's loud and publicly leftist dialogue came in an era when such stances were met with popular praise rather than social discomfort.[21] In an oral history collaboration chronicling this early chapter of his professional life, Copland spoke openly about leftist politics as artistically modern and symptomatic of the times; the composer's prize-winning 1934 entry into a worker's music collective contest, "Into the Streets, May First" remains a popular socialist-labor anthem.[22]

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[19] Hallie Flanagan, *Arena,* 313. Flanagan tells an amusing story of an unnamed Republican Congressman who called her office soon after the project was cut, asking for information on new productions in his district. Flanagan dryly informed the Congressman that he had just voted to cut the program, which shocked the confused Congressman; he hadn't realized what his vote in favor of cutting the Project's funds really meant in terms of the national theatre.
[20] Quinn, 286.
[21] Elizabeth B. Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," *Journal of the American Musicological Society 56* (Summer 2003), 410-412.
[22] Aaron Copland, and Vivien Perlis, *Copland 1900 Through 1942* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 355.

Copland subscribed to the Popular Front's main current of artistic thought, which posited that radical realism represented the best way through which to reach a wide audience. This realism focused on quotidian interactions of ordinary people in familiar situations, and used that familiarity as a way to spread the social gospel — rights for labor unions, equitable distribution of wealth, responsive government welfare — of the American Communist Party's Popular Front among the working and massed classes.[23] Between 1934 and 1949, Copland served on the boards of such varied groups as the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom, the American-Soviet Music Society, the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, the Workers' Music Association and the United States' Government's Committee for Inter-American Relations, among other quasi-political cultural clubs and organizations.[24] The Brooklyn-born child of a prosperous middle-class Jewish family, Copland would come to find his professional musical subjects among the teeming masses who perhaps might not have even been able to frequent his father's upper-middle class Washington Avenue Store.[25] Copland described his father's moderately sized department store as the center of his early life, and his wide-eyed, nostalgic rendering of the store included not so subtle suggestions that the store served a distinctly high-end clientele.[26]

Blitzstein took even more radical positions. He taught classes in workers' schools in New York City and generally called for the use of music and theatre as a kind of

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[23] Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), xvi-xix.
[24] Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, *Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations,* 83rd Cong., 1st Session, 1953, Folder 3: Correspondence, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[25] Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York City: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1999), 16-19.
[26] Copland and Perlis, *Copland 1900-1942*, 16-25.

agitation-propagandist coupling. In the early 1930s, he accompanied his politically conscious wife, novelist Eva Goldbeck, on a cultural outreach trip through Soviet Russia.[27] The composer inherited the 'agit-prop' mantle — the deliberate artistic blend of social protest and cultural folk pastiches — from German dramatist Kurt Weill, his mentor and frequent collaborator.[28] Letters, articles and activities during the 1930s and early 1940s reveal a man bent on twisting the theatre and the mass song towards what he saw as its 'proper' use in cultural indoctrination and social agitation. An undated passage from a journal he kept during his demoralizing 1930 trip to Russia belies his resolute belief in the classless Marxist system that the country nevertheless aspired towards:

> Was this the Russia we had read about? The land where everyone must wait on himself, where even an expression of the desire for material comfort is a reversion to hated capitalist tendencies?...the aura of capitalism inspired a burning hatred, of revolt versus slavery, against boss role, against making robots of men, against the greatest accumulation of wealth for the smallest few.[29]

Even as the voyage showed Blitzstein the harsh reality of life under Lenin's Soviet system, he remained focused on the ideal of socialist class unity as a distant goal at which to aim. He was committed to the ideals of the esoteric socialist-labor struggle, if not the actual governing realities of such a system, and the stark conditions he observed in Russia likely tempered his activist impulses towards the cultural propagandistic sphere. The wealthy, spoiled child of a prominent and unhappy Philadelphia couple, the self-

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[27] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music*: *The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 30-40. Gordon also suggests the Goldbeck was the main source of Blitzstein's radical politics; she is said to be the driving force behind his gradual and devoted shift leftward.
[28] Robert James Dietz, *The Operatic Style of Marc Blitzstein in the American "Agit-Prop" Era* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1970), 147-165. Blitzstein's most enduring success is in fact his English adaptation of Weill's *Three-Penny Opera*.
[29] Marc Blitzstein, "Russia Journal," Undated (1930), Folder 7, Box 6, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

described "brat" had transformed himself into a working-class warrior in the rarified world of the performing arts.[30]

This political consciousness shaped itself through Blitzstein's teachings, lectures and articles on music. He strongly pushed his view of the engaged composer who would occupy a verbal, visceral force in public life. He praised Copland for his "flat, undecorated honesty," and saluted other like-minded composers who created works based on their distinct and unmitigated individuality.[31] Furthermore, he wrote in an undated draft of a radio lecture eventually delivered March 20, 1936 that "music is not suspended in midair; it is indissolvably [sic] joined to and dependent on all sorts of social factors — history, geographic, ethic, economic circumstances,"; concepts outlined in this draft would be repeated and refined in many areas of the composer's professional life until the end of the decade and even beyond.[32]

The composer and conductor *wunderkind* Leonard Bernstein cuts a neat split between the two extremes of the musical spectrum currently in question. Given his youth and close personal relationships with both Blitzstein and Copland, Bernstein inherited the compositional and professional standards discussed by his mentors, even as those mentors themselves continued their careers and Bernstein veered away from some of the older men's more radical ideas. In the period at hand, the younger Bernstein pursued an undergraduate degree in music at Harvard University in his native Boston. He excelled

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[30] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Mark Blitzstein* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 4-15.
[31] Marc Blitzstein, "Composers as Lecturers and In Concerts," *Modern Music Quarterly XIII* (Nov. / Dec. 1935), pp. and Marc Blitzstein, "Coming — The Mass Audience!," *Modern Music Quarterly XIII* (May / June 1936), pp.
[32] Marc Blitzstein, "The Composer, the Audience and Music," Undated (1936), Folder 8, Box 9, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

in composition and conducting courses, and took on a heavy load of general liberal arts courses to complement his music studies. Bernstein first met Copland at a dance performance in New York City in 1937, and the burgeoning conductor's work on a Blitzstein opera during his senior year would provide the foundation for another important musical friendship in the young man's life.[33]

Bernstein's senior thesis in music offers a distinct take on his feelings on engaging issues and audiences in tandem. The work, entitled "The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music," incorporated many of the themes that would later come to dominate Bernstein's later professional dialogue — nationalism, the American "sound" and the importance of jazz as a natural, neo-native American folk idiom. Bernstein cautioned the rise of what he perceives as "the fetish[ization] of nationalism [in music]…deliberately confused with political or social nationalism," but urged on the search for "organic" American nationalism as musical complement. In short, Bernstein utilized complicated political metaphors to describe a relatively simple musical concept. Some of this complexity may be the nature of an undergraduate thesis — Bernstein's 60-plus page text included roughly a dozen listed sources — but his identification of a gap in America's musical heritage is notable for its candor. "Nationalism is not an element arbitrarily inflicted upon music, it must be organic," Bernstein wrote, expressing some of Copland's own musical goals. Disgusted with earlier composers' stunted attempts at lifting Indian and African American slave melodies in the pursuit of a unique American

[33] Claudia Swan, *Leonard Bernstein: The Harvard Years, 1935-1939* (New York City: The Eos Orchestra, 1999), 3-23.

sound, Bernstein instead pushed the more natural incorporation of jazz elements into composition.[34]

It is hard to discern Bernstein's actual political motivations during this time period. Political and performing arts historian Barry Seldes' recent work on the composer's later political engagements suggests that Bernstein's Harvard years were more about grooming for future successes than taking active and conscious stands in political issues.[35] Bernstein established a reputation as a charmer and social climber early on in his childhood, and was accused of abusing his obvious gifts for implied personal benefits. A note from a professor who served on Bernstein's thesis committee praised the scholarship — Bernstein received high honors — while critiquing the scholar: "I thoroughly disapprove of Mr. Bernstein's attitude and of the superiority assumed by him."[36] Regardless of Bernstein's motivations or political leanings, that the young academic actively participated in musical discussions at play in the profession suggests the depth of the argument in question.

Virgil Thomson, a friend and frequent associate of both Copland and Blitzstein, placed himself squarely on the other end of the socio-musical spectrum as described earlier. His dour, candid musical treatise *The State of Music* appeared in 1939, and neatly summed up his opinions on composition, the composer and music in the public sphere. His treatise does not shy away from critique, calling musical experimentation as distinctly

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[34] Leonard Bernstein, *The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music, 1939*, Folder 3: Thesis, Box 70, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[35] Barry Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of An American Musician* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 3-24.
[36] H. Lechteurell, "I thoroughly disapprove," Folder 11: Correspondence, Box 70, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The professor also wrote on the side of the typewritten letter, "Please be certain Mr. Bernstein is made aware of my feelings."

leftist and suggesting that "the public is not a statistical concept…the musical artist who is indifferent to his audience loses it."[37] Deeply conscious of the political motivations of some of his fellow musicians, Thomson still asked composers to avoid popular wisdom that treated the audience as nothing more than a discrete number of filled seats in an auditorium. Instead, Thomson offered a limited engagement model, appreciating audience needs and desires without presupposing the willingness of that audience to accept the packaged political messages of composers like Blitzstein and his ilk. That Thomson was directly involved in some of Copland's Soviet-American musical endeavors offers a telling picture of the particularly murky political divisions of the period.

Copland picked up on some of Thomson's larger themes in a jaunty review in the fall 1939 edition of *Modern Music*. The younger composer loved the book, calling it "the most original book on music that America has produced." Furthermore, Copland directly engaged with Thomson's gradated political calculations for musicians, assuming that Thomson was not directing his ire at politically engaged composers, but rather at "composers' organization[s] in the affairs of any political party, rightist, leftist or liberal."[38]

Excerpts of some of Thomson's musical criticism during the period present, in the composer-critic's characteristically frank fashion, a sense of unease with the engaged, agit-prop extremes of others like Copland and Blitzstein. A review of Copland's early work in the Winter 1932 volume of *Modern Music* lays plain Thomson's hesitant, halfway

[37] Virgil Thomson, *The State of Music* (Rahway, New Jersey: Quinn & Boden Company, Inc., 1939), 3-14.
[38] Aaron Copland, "Thomson's Musical State," *Modern Music Quarterly XVII* (Nov./Oct. 1939), 63-65. Additionally, a playful exchange between the two composers can be found in a series of letters written in early 1939 between Copland and Thomson. Thomson praised Copland's own book, *The New Music*, expressing hope for his own pending work of music theory: "My new book gets toward being finished. I like it better than yours. I only hope it sells as well."

approach to the concept of a composer's presence in his work: "Aaron Copland is at the same time an inspired composer and a comparatively ineffective one. The music is alright, but the man is not clearly enough visible through it."[39] In this and other reviews, Thomson expressed his nuanced discomfort with the musical and political trends of his time. Even as he himself took part in some of the very same trends he discouraged in the above review, the composer still tacked to the middle in his own work and life.

At the end of the decade, his declaration against what he saw as protest and Marxist themes in music — a real or imagined slight against Blitzstein's angry and engaged activism — rings profoundly clear: "the common good is not a musically interesting idea."[40] Thomson was a musical radical in tone and concept, but his avant-garde modernism had distinct boundaries. Just as he declined to get involved with the Siegmeister petition in 1936, so too did Thomson refrain from overt radicalism in many areas of his life. Ever attentive to his public persona, Thomson steadfastly refused to be identified with any strain of political or musical exhibitionism.

So what to make of a composer whose individuality drew directly from his political passions, imagined or otherwise? It is not immediately apparent how to rationalize these wildly divergent schools of musical and political thought from a removed perspective in which the composers at hand are commonly lumped together by dint of their age and perceived stylistic commonalities. American music in the 1930s danced a complicated ballet, written by a loosely bound group of dissimilar men. The story they traced then would come to influence their work in the postwar decade still to come.

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[39] Virgil Thomson, "Aaron Copland," *Modern Music Quarterly XVIII* (Jan. / Feb. 1932), pp. XX.
[40] Thomson, *The State of Music*, 145-150.

"Foppishness and Pseudo Intellectuality": Thomson's Queer Entry on to the Scene

It is interesting to find that one of the most notable and celebrated examples of radical high art and music in the 1930s came from none other than Thomson, who so artfully argued against political and personal involvement in musical scores. The 1934 premiere of *Four Saints in Three Acts,* his oddly surrealist operatic collaboration with noted modernist writer and poet Gertrude Stein, is often heralded as a defining moment in both queer and modernist art.[41] Thomson's close and enduring friendship with Stein played a considerable role in the work's unique flavor. But music scholar Nadine Hubbs, in her lengthy treatment of the opera in her book *The Queer Composition of America's Sound*, paints both the premiere and the work itself as a kind of radical-queer assertion of personal pride in identity — that same visible composer that Thomson called for in his review of Copland's work.

Hubbs' exploration of Thomson's motivations is deeply flawed. Her reliance on standard queer sexual tropes — the "queer sexual freedom associated with Harlem" or the "intergenerational artistic marriage of lesbian and gay Americans living in Paris," to cite glaring examples — posits 21st century sociological constructs on hazily understood artistic decisions from the early third of the previous century, often to destructive effect. [42] Her suggestion that Thomson's infamous decision to cast his operatic fantasy on Catholic themes with only black singers drew upon anything more than a quirk of the composer's

[41] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 20-22.
[42] Hubbs, *The Queer Composition*, 19-63.

unusual and unpredictable tastes, for one, does not bear into consideration Thomson's repeated insistence that the choice came from an aesthetic and scenic design standpoint; hardly a celebration of "queer sexual freedom" inherent in the black body.

If modern queer theory is to be applied at all to the Thomson-Stein case, sexuality historian George Chauncey's careful metric of homosexuality and self-identification in Manhattan during the early twentieth century is a viable start. Chauncey delineates the differences between so-called "fairies," "rough trade" and "queers" — respectively effeminate polysexuals, those who partake casually in the sex on a power-dynamic level and those homosexuals who use their middle class identity as a social shield against the more wild and unseemly fairies on Manhattan's Bowery.[43] Thomson would likely fall under the queer umbrella, openly living as a gay man among his friends and close acquaintances but shying from public displays of extravagance.[44]

It is in that spectrum that we must consider Thomson's collaboration with Stein. While Hubbs is right to point out that the creators deliberately put a part of themselves into *Four Saints in Three Acts* — a gauzy, plotless chamber piece focused around the imagined daily lives of Catholic saints — such decisions did not likely extend to costuming or cast choices. In a collaborative 1959 biography, Thomson suggested that he chose an all-black cast for the contrast of their black skin against a largely white scenic design and that Stein was mostly opposed to the unusual idea.[45]

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[43] George Chauncey, *Gay New York City: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York City: Basic Books, 1994), 10-13.
[44] Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1997), 70.
[45] Kathleen Hoover, *Vigil Thomson: His Life and Music* (New York City: Sagamore Press, 1959), 63-65.

The production grew out of conversations about theatrical treatments between Stein and Thomson while in Paris in the early months of 1927. Thomson had previously set Stein's poem "Capital Capitals" to music, and the pair decided they would create an opera around similar modernist aims. In letters from the period, Stein speculated how a successful opera could make the pair "as popular as Gilbert and Sullivan," and indeed, musical historian Steven Watson articulates the fashion in which Thomson, a previously unheralded Paris-based composer-critic of little note, used the opera to "storm the American musical establishment."[46] The work was completed in 1928, but delays in securing production funds and trans-Atlantic rights transfers set the premiere back until the spring of 1934.[47] The final version of the opera obliquely references same-sex attraction, sexual frustration and the distinct feeling of "otherness" that a pair of queer composers might feel within the scope of hetero-orthodox 1930s American mass culture, all cloaked beneath a cover of religious piety and characteristically Steinian abstraction.

Hubbs' narrative of the February 7, 1934 premiere in Hartford, Connecticut is especially apt:

> [It] was a major cultural and social event, a watershed spectacle that left its high-bohemian audience cheering wildly and weeping for beauty…account[s] suggest the [audience] had witnessed a glorious and redemptive birth — of nothing less than the national culture.[48]

Reviews in the alternative and mainstream press alike toggled between rapturous and confused, and the modernist tone of the work likely skewed appreciation to a certain sect of the "in" crowd of contemporary modernist culture. Copland could count himself

[46] Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York City: Random House, 1998), 6-12.
[47] David Harris, "The Original 'Four Saints in Three Acts," *The Drama Review 26* (Spring 1982), 102-104.
[48] Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 19.

among the avant-garde; his amazed appraisal of the work — "I didn't know one *could* write an opera" — suggests that *Four Saints in Three Acts* stands as a shift of his comprehension of American musical possibility.[49]

The work is often seen as unapproachable to mass audiences, but its twee modernist sensibilities no doubt appealed to the right sort of people in the New York media establishment of the era, as the premiere continues to be remembered as an unheralded mass cultural press event. The opera was an enduring success — or legend — because of its incorporation into larger public discourse. Advertising firms used dialogue and referential images from the work in completely unrelated print magazine spreads and department store window displays later in the spring season of 1934, hawking "Four Suits in Two Acts," and "Four Wraps in Cellophane (With Apologies to Gertrude Stein)."[50] Its February 20 opening on Broadway drew eager and enthusiastic crowds. Whether parody or praise, the volume and degree of public reaction indicates the deep cultural purchase granted the piece.

Thomson appeared to have reserved wholly positive feelings about his involvement in the work. Despite his later caution against a composer's personal political engagement in his professional work, Thomson would continue to reference the work as a noticeable and outstanding triumph in speeches and articles well after the hubbub around the premiere had faded.[51] The wider cultural implications of this work would not be made entirely clear until considerably later in the composer's own career, but the abject

[49] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 267.
[50] Alyson Tischler, "A Rose is a Pose," Steinian Modernism and Mass Culture," *Journal of Modern Literature* 26 (Summer 2003), 24-26.
[51] Articles and speeches that attest to this end can be found in great number in the Boxes 73 and 74 in the Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

failure of a 1952 revival of the piece offers a suggestive hint on future interpretations of 1934's token musical performance spectacle.[52]

Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* and Cultural Ferment Near the Decade's Close

A spectacle of a different sort, Marc Blitzstein's 1937 Federal Theatre Project production of his labor-rights opera *The Cradle Will Rock* is remembered today as one of the most controversial episodes in the history of Federal One, the WPA's arts wing. The opera also launched theatrical phenomenon Orson Welles and his producer John Houseman into a decade-long collaboration that would develop the legendary radio drama *The War of the Worlds* and *Citizen Kane*, one of the most critically successful films of all time, among other high-profile performance pieces.[53]

The controversy that surrounded *The Cradle Will Rock* has grown into theatrical legend, surpassing the actual details of the story behind the production. In her sweeping new history of the Federal Theatre Project, performing arts historian Elizabeth A. Osborne spells out how the project's politically controversial works in large urban centers — like *The Cradle Will Rock* in New York City — garnered more press attention than the more popular regional and community theatre groups in less cosmopolitan areas.[54]

Admittedly, the show should never have been heard at all. After more than a year of development under Welles and Houseman's Project #891 — a specialized subdivision of the Federal Theatre Project's New York branch devoted to classical theatre — Blitzstein's labor opera lost its funding in an eleventh hour reallocation of funds. Federal

[52] Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture, and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 59 (March 2007), 144.
[53] John Houseman, *Run Through: A Memoir* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1972).
[54] Elisabeth Osborne, *Staging the People*, 151.

agents from the project locked away sets and costumes as restricted federal property, and the police surrounded Manhattan's elegant Maxine Elliot Theatre, turning away the nearly 600 patrons gathered for an opening-night preview.[55] The production's organizers sold more than 14,000 advance seats, including one evening entirely devoted to a group of labor rights activists familiar with the composer's Downtown Music School.[56] Undeterred, Blitzstein, Welles, the cast and a group of 100 fans and random passers-by ventured across town to the Venice Theatre, where the composer launched into a spontaneous solo performance that would become the founding basis of protest theatre legend.[57]

As Blitzstein — alone on the theatre's stage with only a piano as instrument — played the plaintive first notes of the opening "Moll's Song," the young actress Olive Stanton stood in her seat and sang along from the house.[58] Other cast members joined in as Blitzstein played through the entire opera, and the remaining audience members leapt to their feet as the proverbial curtain fell on the spontaneous protest piece. Taking the stage, a triumphant Welles told the audience that they had witnessed an act of artistic protest, rather than a political one. Similar impromptu productions were staged throughout the summer season, but the charged protest of the premiere could never again be duplicated.[59]

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[55] Carol J. Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*" and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s," *The Musical Quarterly* 73 (Dec. 1989), (445).
[56] J.E. Vacha, "The Case of the Runaway Opera: The Federal Theatre and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*," *New York History* 62 (April 1981), 134-135.
[57] *New York Times*, June 17, 1937, 1A:3.
[58] Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 144.
[59] *New York Times*, June 17, 1937, 4A:1.

More lasting public damage was already done. By defying a federal order meant to halt an opera seen as too pro-labor and pro-communist for government sponsorship, Blitzstein and his cast added to the divide between acceptable popular arts and fringe works of protest. The composer would further cement these ideas in a series of articles and speeches glorifying the use of theatre as an agitating social utility: "Music in the theatre is a powerful, almost immorally potent weapon," Blitzstein wrote in a *Modern Music Quarterly* contribution only seven months after his adventure at the Venice Theatre. "It will do things that you would never dream of, it can be fantastically perfect for one scene, it can loosen up another scene to an extent which is unbelievable."[60]

To Blitzstein and his collaborators, it certainly appeared as if Congress was specifically targeting the opera when it slashed WPA funds in the middle of 1937. But the cut was part of a larger congressional conversation on the role of the federal government in promoting the arts. A bill surfaced in late 1937 proposing the establishment of a cabinet-level arts bureau, even as Congress cut thousands from the Federal One budget.[61] The inherently ostentatious qualities of theatrical performance made it easy for the program's detractors to call it wasteful or against federal principle; but the program's controversial excesses were already part of popular discourse, dooming it to cancellation in the 1939 congressional session as Republican Representative Martin Dies' House Un-American Activities Committee garnered leverage against the diminishing influence of the Roosevelt administration.[62]

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[60] Marc Blitzstein, "On Writing Music for the Theatre," *Modern Music Quarterly* 25 (Jan./Feb. 1938), np.
[61] Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, 230.
[62] Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 335.

The status of *The Cradle Will Rock* as a protest piece on its own is not in question. The strident labor opera tells the story of "Steeltown, U.S.A.," a stand-in for the many communities in the modern Rust Belt taking to arms for organized labor during the decade.[63] The main character, steelworker Larry Foreman, agitates for union rights against the villainous company owner Mister Mister (in an attempt to universalize his message, Blitzstein refrained from giving his characters realistic or identifiable names). After several illegal citizen arrests and propagandistic battles against the town's anti-union Liberty Committee, Larry Foreman wins the battle for unionization.[64]

The opera's music is an odd mix of show tunes, popular pieces and patriotic marches. Like Thomson, Blitzstein used a form of American pastiche to move his plot along, teasing his audiences with glimpses of musical familiarity while actually using completely new musical devices to tell original stories. Some of this perhaps was an attempt to win over audiences with musical comfort; the opera preached a radical political agenda artfully cloaked beneath a layer of pleasant, nearly recognizable songs of a quasi-show tune variety.

The production would have been controversial enough on its own, as the very real labor strikes and the bloody, anti-union Memorial Day Massacre at Chicago's Republic Steel Mill earlier in 1937 gave the opera's pro-labor qualities an especially potent tint. But Houseman and Welles, ever the showmen, seemed particularly eager to market *The Cradle Will Rock* as a major moment in the American theatre even as the strikes and theatre closings continued. Regardless of the motives, the controversy simultaneously

[63] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music,* 136.
[64] Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock* (New York City: Self-Published, 1938).

drew a crowd and built a legend far larger than the piece's own particular merit.[65] Though Blitzstein would look to *The Cradle Will Rock* as a means of personal satisfaction and proof of popular success through his career, he would never again achieve such high critical attention.

The controversial aspects of the opera extended to revivals mounted in the years immediately preceding the premiere; a 1939 production directed by a young Bernstein at Harvard University had to be moved to downtown Boston to avoid vague threats of police action in the school's suburban location.[66] Blitzstein himself attended the premiere, as did Copland, and the work's composer called the opening "a thrilling wallop, second only to the New York opening" in a telegram to the young conductor / pianist, Bernstein.[67] Thomson recognized the work's qualities in a 1937 petition against the WPA cancellation, and in a 1947 review of a revival, calling *The Cradle Will Rock* "the gayest and most absorbing piece of musical theatre that America's left has inspired…the work is a tough one and hard to spoil."[68]

Copland's *The Second Hurricane*, a children's opera for high schools, premiered in April 1937. It was far more musically sophisticated than *The Cradle Will Rock*. That the remarkably similar production team of Welles and Copland could produce a work of comparable abstraction and superior musical quality merely months before the bombastic premiere of *The Cradle Will Rock* offers a pointed picture of the operatic scene at the time in New York City. Success was measured out according to critical and popular acclaim,

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[65] Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation*, 185.
[66] Barry Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein,* 11.
[67] Telegram, Marc Blitzstein to Aaron Copland, June 2, 1939, Folder 30: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 8, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[68] Virgil Thomson, "When the Cradle Was Young," Nov. 25, 1947 *The New York Times.*

and big-time productions like Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* far surpassed high school operas like Copland's *The Second Hurricane.*[69]

This earlier work was a masterful exploration of the same American idioms that Bernstein longed for in his Harvard senior thesis — jazz, African-American spiritual melodies and the like — as the basis of a truly American sound. The piece is simple and the plot (and resulting book) was heavy-handed and hammy, but the musical brilliance of Copland's melodies shone through the plot deficiencies.[70] Despite critical praise from all of the composers featured in this study and a popular demand for further elaboration, Copland's first opera remained a playful side project, a first attempt at the operatic form that went nowhere and generated little by way of note for the future "dean of American music."

Copland gained far greater critical momentum in his ballets and solo-symphonic pieces written during the late 1930s. His concert orchestral work *El Salón México* (1936) and his revolutionary ballet *Billy the Kid* (1938) were highlights of the period, reflecting the composer's attention to native musical color and innovative American mythology.[71] The ballet, in particularly, with its cowboy narrative and distinctly homosexual overtones of life on the open and proto-masculine Western plains, toyed with contemporary expectations for the subject matter.[72] These gentle but powerful twists of musical and masculine standards would continue to influence Copland's works for years.

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[69] Aaron Copland and Vivien Perlis, *Copland 1900-1942*, 257.
[70] Aaron Copland and Edwin Denby, *The Second Hurricane: A Play –Opera for High School Performance* (New York City: Boosey & Hawkes, 1937).
[71] Gail Levin, "Aaron Copland's America" in *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective,* Gail Levin and Judith Tick, eds. (New York City: Watson-Guptil Publications, 2000), 78.
[72] Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 320-325.

What determined operatic success during the middle years of America's Great Depression? If anything, reflection on these four compositional giants shows that no one formula existed to produce a popular and critical resilient opera. Controversy could both sell tickets and close a theatre; abstract artistic purity could move audiences to tears and drive away the less culturally motivated classes (even as those classes willingly allowed for the incorporation of abstract modernist language into their department store advertisements.) The American sound was new, or as of yet still undiscovered, and the paying public seemed to have little desire to sit through any composer's three-hour exploratory venture into that sound without proof of prior success.

Nevertheless, these four composers and their musical contemporaries discovered the possible socio-political subversion that their music could easily deliver with a few well-placed blows. As the decade of the Depression closed and a new one opened, that musical weaponry would come to wage war on a society no longer so attuned to willful theatrical critique of the ideals it once held dear. And though the years of the Second World War would prove immensely productive to both these composers and the country they came to serve, these desperate, early years would serve as a far more informative and lasting influence than the four years at war.

Ch 2: Regina Meets Susan B.: Thomson, Blitzstein and the Problem of Postwar Prosperity

To take Aaron Copland at his word, he stopped being a political activist after 1949. While his personal and professional lives often directly intersected with the immediate political concerns of his era, he steadfastly refused to see himself as a conscious political actor. "I am not a political thinker," Copland told Senator Joseph P. McCarthy's Permanent Senate Subcommittee on Investigations in the spring of 1952. "There is a great distinction in my mind between being a member [of an organization] and signing a paper."[1]

Yet Copland did more than just sign papers at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in March 1949. His speech at the event, entitled, "The Effect of the Cold War on the Artist in the United States," served as a final rallying cry for the prewar Soviet model of cultural engagement:[2]

> I am going to start by saying that I wrote this paper myself. Nobody told me what to say, and if anybody had tried to tell me what to say, I wouldn't be here. I feel I have to put it bluntly because the press has quoted the Governor of this State and a spokesman of the State Department as stating that this conference and all its panels are mere fronts for the spreading of Communist propaganda…we are being taught to think in neat little categories — in terms of blacks and whites, East and West, Communist and the Profit System…An artist fighting in a war for a cause he holds just has something affirmative he can believe in. The artist, if he can stay alive, can create art. But throw him into a mood of suspicion, ill will and dread that typifies the Cold War attitude and he'll create nothing.[3]

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[1] Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, *Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations,* 83rd Cong., 1st Session, 1953, Folder 3: Correspondence, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[2] Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise* (New York City: Picador 2007), 405-406.
[3] Aaron Copland, "Effect of the Cold War on the Artist in the U.S." in *Aaron Copland: A Reader, Selected Writings 1923-1972,* ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: Psychology Press, 2004), 128.

While Copland meant well when he attempted to argue that the event was not part of a Communist front movement, he was woefully misinformed. The weekend conference at New York City's Waldorf Astoria Hotel was sponsored by the Soviet government, and many of its members and participants — Dmitri Shostakovich Lillian Hellman, Charlie Chaplin, Henry Wallace, and other New Deal remnants and celebrity activists — were orientated a bit farther left in the popular political spectrum than Copland might have been willing to admit.[4] The New York media had a field day with the conference, giving equal weight to the attendees and the massed protestors in front of the hotel while adopting a mocking and deliberately suggestive tone in daily reports; a 1950 media studies analysis of the event estimated that the inflated media coverage of the conference helped lend it a more controversial tint than originally intended by the event's organizers.[5]

For years after, Copland continued to publicly denounce his own participation in the conference as the end of a period of youthful excess (this despite his decidedly middling age of 49 at the time of the conference). He made certain that his congressional testimony in 1952 reflected the more musical motivations behind his appearance at the event. "I was very anxious to give the impression that by sitting down with Russian composers, one could encourage the thought that since cultural relations were possible,

[4] Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 411.
[5] Henry A. Singer, "An Analysis of the New York Press Treatment of the Peace Conference at the Waldorf-Astoria," *Journal of Educational Sociology 23* (Jan. 1950), 258-270.

that perhaps diplomatic relations were possible, as well."[6] Copland's true sentiments were thinly but effectively masked beneath an evasive testimony.

But the United States and the world had been altered dramatically in the four hectic years immediately following the end of the Second World War, with a shift in pop cultural tastes chief among the changes that swept across American society.[7] Higher discretionary incomes made consumers more able to consume and engage with popular culture of all kinds and the American public rapidly became more conscious of the political posturings of its cultural elites.[8] This awareness sprung up as Cold War political rhetoric and government-sponsored anti-Soviet paranoia raged through the well-tended streets of America's new suburban landscape.[9]

For composers and quasi-celebrities like Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson and Mark Blitzstein, the very political beliefs that nurtured revolutionary and radical works during the 1920s and 1930s abruptly moved from the center of popular arts towards the undesirable extremities of mass discourse, coloring their work and casting a sometimes unfavorable light on their careers. Now firmly established in the country's cultural scene as major movers and players, these men's dalliances on the leftist fringes of that public artistic space were met with derision and even disgust from critic and paying public alike. Unfazed by their experiences in the war, the four composers used the

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[6] Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, *Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations,* 83rd Cong., 1st Session, 1953, Folder 3: Correspondence, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[7] Greg Castillo, *The Cold War on the Home Front*: *The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 32.
[8] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love With Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
[9] Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 2-7.

postwar landscape as a canvas on which to refine their prewar production ideals. That their work during this period was largely unsuccessful says more about changes in audience preferences than it does about the composers themselves.

Still, the composers' continued allegiances to prewar formulations of compositional success might have unintentionally influenced the public to ignore or avoid their works. In his apologetic congressional testimony in 1952, Copland nevertheless managed to throw in a few cutting reposts to Senator McCarthy's angry series of questions. After explaining away his attendance at the Waldorf Astoria Conference as a musical concern, Copland added a longer reflection on his motivations:

> Musicians make music out of feeling aroused out of public events. A wise musician makes his music out of the emotions of others and you can't make music unless you are moved by events. [10]

When pressed by Senator James Eastland, a Democratic member of McCarthy's subcommittee, on the effects of "revolutionary music" in popular culture, Copland pleaded ignorance on the exact specifics of what "revolutionary music" might sound like.

Copland struck a delicate balance in his acceptance of his Communist associations from 1949. While not fully embracing the Soviet-Communist label given to him by his Congressional detractors and interrogators, he evaded further discomfort by ducking under his belief in the musician-composer as an active member of society. This posture stemmed from Copland's lifelong quest for American musical idioms and folk traditions as sources for compositional inspiration, but much of this insistence on musical engagement is a direct derivation of his prewar visions of social engagement as a key to

[10] Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, *Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations,* 83rd Cong., 1st Session, 1953, Folder 3: Correspondence, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

compositional success. The "radical realism" that seemed so obvious to Copland in 1939 continued to play a key role in his music through the late 1940s well into the 1950s and beyond.[11] This was a music meant to engage directly with even the lowest strata of his audiences, a music intended to convey broadly American themes based on a miscellany of common experiences. The evolution of Copland's taste and musical tone reflected popular opinion: neo-nationalist, stereotypical treatments of American themes and songs garnered praise and therefore begot pieces of a similar tone.

The Waldorf Astoria Conference and the resulting political fallout can be seen as a fault line in American culture during the immediate postwar period. The buildup of anti-Communist suspicions and political realignment drove gradually forward until 1949, culminating in a massive socio-political movement at the dawn of the following decade. This was the beginning of Henry Luce's "American Century": a period of world leadership, economic domination and cultural dynamism that the publisher of *TIME* and *Life* magazines so aptly posited in his 1941 article calling for American dominance during and beyond the war.[12]

How Copland, Thomson, Bernstein and Blitzstein dealt with this political shift in light of their prewar motivations and ongoing cultural engagement outlines much about the role of the popular arts during the second half of the twentieth century. The artist was at once an agitator and soothsayer, and a move forward in either direction removed his artistic credibility or shunned him as a political upstart. Speak too critically of the American moment, and an artist was a communist and a traitor. Play the fawning

[11] Elisabeth B. Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Number 56 (2003): 412.
[12] Henry R. Luce, "The American Century, Life 10 (17 February 1941), 61-65.

capitalistic patriot, and the artistic establishment would rip a work apart. The balancing act required in performing and presenting cultural works during the postwar decade would prove to be beyond the skill of these four composers, as analysis of their postwar efforts will show. Even in a period of rapid change and open-ended possibility, their works failed.

Common Men and Patriotic Music: American Composition During World War II

Thomson, Blitzstein, Copland and Bernstein were not without models for artistic and patriotic balance. Their own compositional outputs during the war years were prolific in both their size and exploration of unquestionably American themes and issues.[13] Caught up in the calamitous atmosphere surrounding the international conflict, each composer joined the war effort in his own unique way, using the united struggle against fascism as an entryway into a wider audience. With American conservatives suddenly on the same anti-Nazi, pro-war platform as socialists, communists and their leftist brethren, the political landscape was thrown open to wider participation from the inhabitants of the social fringes.[14]

This artistic unity stemmed in part from a perceived need for examples of American cultural superiority in the growing propaganda proxy fight with the Axis powers. The United States' interpretation of the Nazi challenge was as cultural as it was political, and any society worth its salt in the global struggle needed clear and powerful examples of its artistic values on the home front if it hoped to even consider winning the

[13] Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 284-286.
[14] Larry May, "Making the American Consensus: The Narrative of Conversion and Subversion in World War II Films," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, eds. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996),

strategic fight on the ground.[15] Music was an important part of that cultural struggle, and Copland and Blitzstein's works in support of the war effort reflect that kind of engagement.

Copland served as a global ambassador for the U.S. State Department from the early 1930s through the end of his life, teaching classes and leading musical outreach missions in Latin America and Eastern Europe around themes of the American "sound" and modern music theory.[16] Despite the conservative rancor that often greeted his participation in these programs during the 1950s, Copland remained a firm believer in the power of the American musical language as a tool that stressed common concepts of universality and shared humanity. His periodical writings from the early period of the war pay a dedicated attention to domestic musical concerns, asking his contemporaries to "grow up" and produce music worthy of a global audience:

> In order to be musically full-grown, a country must possess three indispensable elements: a large number of interpretive artists and organizations who are functioning all the time; a wide cross-section of or intelligent music listeners who are listening all the time; and an indigenous school of composers who are writing music all the time.[17]

Among the men who would come to populate that school during the war period were Copland, Blitzstein, Thomson and Bernstein.

Thomson spent the early part of the 1940s living in voluntary exile in Paris, continuing to contribute music and criticism to the American cause while largely ignoring the signs of the coming war; he admitted in his own 1966 biography that he had not

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[15] Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and the War* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2005), 112-117.
[16] Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 220-240.
[17] Aaron Copland, "Is America Musically Mature?" Town Hall Symposium, 10 June, 1941, Folder 14: Writings and Speeches, Box 212, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

considered leaving Europe until the Germans began their full-scale invasion of France in the spring of 1940.[18] His return to America launched his new career of cultural commentary. Thomson accepted an appointment as music critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune* in the autumn following his return, becoming an influential, vital voice in the American critical sphere and contributing greatly to public perception of the composer as an opinion who must be noted.[19]

On the compositional side of the aisle, Blitzstein used the war to leverage official institutional support for his work, gaining audience exposure in the process. He was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the war effort, and his August 1942 enlistment as an "entertainment specialist" in the Air Force was a high point in his political and musical participation during the war.[20] It seems that Blitzstein was thrilled to be a part of the armed forces; a telegram he sent to Copland from his point of enlistment exclaimed "This is it! I finally got what I was after."[21] Soon after enlisting, Blitzstein was sent to the United Kingdom, where he helped produce and score films and other dramatic works that glorified the Allied cause. His personal output from these years included the bombastic "Airborne Symphony," which celebrated the miracle of flight and honored his temporary military career. The 1945 premiere received mixed reviews, but the tone and timbre of the work — brassy, patriotic themes and enthusiastic praise of American justice and military victory — run through many of his governmental and personal music written

[18] Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 312-317.
[19] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 328-333.
[20] Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 207-226.
[21] Marc Blitzstein to Aaron Copland, 29 August, 1942, Folder 44: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 246, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

before the end of the war in 1946.[22] (Oddly enough, Blitzstein enlisted in the army despite growing public knowledge of his sexual orientation. While abroad, he met Technical Sergeant William Hewitt, with whom he would begin a stilted and often difficult affair and friendship that lasted well beyond the end of the war.)

Bernstein had a far more successful and productive war period, writing popular ballets, scoring hit musicals and touring the world as America's most promising new conductor in waiting. The early part of Bernstein's decade was electric, as his wildly successfully November 1943 debut as conductor for the New York Philharmonic can rightly illustrate.[23] From that point on, Bernstein's career seemed to explode, as his symphonic works, ballets and musical theatre efforts all opened to rapturous reviews and eager press, winning awards and breaking box office records.[24] Of particular note for the purposes of this study is Bernstein's 1944 musical *On the Town*, written with lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green. The high-stepping, happy-hued play shows a group of U.S. sailors on a single day's shore leave in New York City. The exuberant sailors matched the expansive score, skipping across a fanciful Manhattan cityscape to tunes of quasi-pop jazz synthesis and musical theatre bravado. The work did well at the box office, broke through theatrical color barriers and went on to become an equally beloved 1949 feature-length film staring Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly.[25]

That film was a full-throated affirmation of the U.S. sailor — and by proxy, the homosocial American male — as a sexually dominant and socially beloved hero. One of

[22] Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 240-280.
[23] Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 110-118.
[24] Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography*, 129-144.
[25] Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 135.

many "wholesome sailor-boy musicals," the film presented a decidedly conservative vision of womanhood, pushing for traditional versions of family life and marital roles as a way to rebuild American society in the postwar period. The resulting suggestion for women was highly contradictory; women were told to be emotionally available yet remain sexually pure in order to better serve the needs and social codes of returning service men.[26] It was a ringing endorsement of patriotic, pro-American sexual mores, even as the composer's own sexual proclivities ran counter to such sexist dialogue. The homosexual qualities of sailors aside, Kelly's earlier exploration in the sailor-boy musical genre, *Anchors Aweigh* (1945), used the sailor more for his dancing possibilities than for his subtextual sexuality. The actor-dancer-director's influence carried over to his *On the Town*.[27]

Copland used the war to explore his own boundaries as a composer, creating some of his more lasting works in a remarkably limited time range. From 1942 to 1945, Copland composed the bulk of what we have come to know as his standard repertoire, including the *Lincoln Portrait* (1942), *Rodeo* (1943), *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1943) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944).[28] What made this period all the more remarkable was the apparently deliberate attention to American mythic character in music. Each work, in its way, is a celebration of the fabled 'American sound' that so eluded Copland throughout his early years, and the composer would later turn to these works as aural proof of his

[26] Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York City: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974, 4-5.
[27] Beth Genné, "'Freedom Incarnate': Jerome Robins, Gene Kelly, and the Dancing Sailor as an Icon of American Values in World War II," *Dance Chronicle* 24, no. 1 (2001), 89.
[28] Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 357-400.

devotion to his county when accused of foreign sympathies in the middle of the next decade.[29]

Moreover, the works show Copland directly engaged with a unique blend of the personal and patriotic. *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring* might primarily deal with supposedly American concepts of the Western frontier and the life of the cowboy, but the sense of sexual discovery — and subversion — inherent in both works (a sexually misdirected cowgirl, a forgotten pioneer for civil rights, a defiant Appalachian daughter) is distinctly Copland. This personal touch helped open the works to larger audiences, and Copland's magisterial yet familiar touch with each work have contributed to their continued endurance as key examples of mid-modern American music.

Bernstein's personal writings from the time suggest his own desire to create a more open frame of reference for classical composition. In a 1945 essay, he extolled the value of "the people" in musical creation, warning his misguided contemporaries that "art is no fad, but one of the most direct means of communication that human beings have, and their most personal expression."[30] It stands to reason that Bernstein himself found personal expression somewhere between the thematic extremes of his token 'Jewish' symphony, *Jeremiah* and the ultra-patriotic fantasy of *On the Town*. American values and themes sold well during a time when such values were at their greatest risk of destruction, and composers like Bernstein, Blitzstein, Thomson and Copland were fortunate enough to find marketable inspiration within the boundaries of popular taste.

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[29] Aaron Copland, "American music and the American Scene, 1940/1950" (unpublished draft), Folder 14: Personal Writings, Box 202, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[30] Leonard Bernstein, "The Arts Belong to the People," 25 November, 1945, Folder 8: Writings, Box 71, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The Problem of Victory and the Post-War Boom

To say that America's victory in World War II was decisive is an understatement. The end of the war in 1946 saw the dawning of an American age of geopolitical domination, in which American tastes, values and economic preferences took precedence over all others. For many countries, including the physically devastated countries of Western Europe, the American model — as deliberately exported through President Harry Truman's European Economic Recovery Plan and sub-textually through the postwar international design fairs in Western Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States alike — was the new aspirational ideal.[31] Images of single-family homes that were built for solid, nuclear families consuming wholesome, pre-packaged food offered the ruined, backwards nations of the world a picture of a possible "American tomorrow." Naturally, that tomorrow could come faster after a country opened its markets to the American goods that created the commoditized market dream.

For many cultural and political observers at the time, this was America's ultimate moment; a time when, as U.S. Chamber of Commerce President (and future Motion Picture Association of America director) Eric Johnston argued, the country's inherent "civilization of abundance" would prove that a culture of defeatism was anathema to the America psyche.[32] With full employment, a gross national income more than double that of the postwar period and the ever-present promise of years of future growth, the

[31] Castillo, *The Cold War on the Home Front*, 32-40.
[32] Eric Johnston, *America Unlimited* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1944).

American moment was intrinsically economic.[33] On the larger world stage, this moment manifested itself in the Marshall, Plan, a Truman-administration economic aid package designed to pull the countries of Western Europe firmly away from the Soviet sphere of influence after the grand alliance of the war drew to a close.[34] The comprehensive economic restructuring package also hoped to prevent a post-war stagnation that could recreate the stagnant socio-political conditions that had fused the end of World War I so smoothly with the beginnings of World War II.

For the purposes of this study, the specific details of the Marshall Plan are not important. The U.S. Congress passed a sizeable, although ultimately incomplete, portion of President Truman's foreign aid objectives in 1947 and 1948.[35] However, the Truman administration's attempts to win passage of its economic support initiatives through a focused adaptation of anti-communist political rhetoric will serve as a key lens through which to view popular and cultural discourse during the entire postwar decade.

By tapping into anti-communist sentiment as it worked towards Congressional approval for its foreign aid initiatives, the Truman administration hesitantly entered into an unexpected power-sharing agreement with the Republican opposition in Congress. This was a marked shift from only a year earlier, when the G.O.P. had attempted to dismantle many of the New Deal policies from more than a decade before. The anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 was the high water mark of this political momentum — until Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, realized the need for larger popular

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[33] Gary A. Donaldson, *Abundance and Anxiety*: *America*, *1945-1960* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), xi-xii.
[34] Richard M. Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Internal Security 1946-1948* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972),16.
[35] Ibid,, 319.

and political support of the administration's foreign aid initiatives in Turkey, Greece and Western Europe.[36]

Foreign aid plans in Turkey and Greece — and later in Western Europe — were deliberately presented as anti-communist in nature, making opposition to these fiscal outlays a sign of political weakness. Normally the go-to party on anti-subversive politics, the Republican Party now faced an arguably progressive administration that was open to more intense persecution of American communists on the domestic home front as a part of its foreign aid initiatives.[37] In his 1972 book on the subject, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, historian Richard M. Freeland examined how Truman used anti-Communist rhetoric to leverage support for his foreign aid projects in Western Europe. According to Freeland, what was remarkable about the Truman administration's willful anti-communist posturing were the lasting effects the decision had on anti-subversive dialogue in America:

> During the latter part of 1947 and early 1948…the situation was agitated by the association of opposition of Cold War foreign policy with disloyalty and communism which had been encouraged by the administration…popular hostility toward communists broadened into a distrust of all dissent.[38]

Truman's distrust of subversive elements in the larger American body politic ironically backfired against his own Democratic Party; the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1948 elections and Truman's near-defeat by Thomas E. Dewey stemmed

[36] William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (New York City: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 15-17.
[37] Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, 149.
[38] Donaldson, *Abundance and Anxiety* 334.

in part from a campaign decision to paint the Democratic leadership as "soft on communism."[39]

For artists and cultural icons alike, these political decisions were hashed out on a mostly distant playing field. But with the gradual incorporation of anti-subversive discourse into popular discussion would come to leave an indelible mark on artistic production during the period.[40] The House Un-American Committee's (HUAC) infamous decision to interrogate artists — as marked by 1947's infamous hearing on the "Hollywood Ten" — heralded a new and altogether different period of political involvement in the arts. Those hearings brought ten screenwriters and directors to the HUAC chambers for a public dressing-down and lingering professional blacklisting for their alleged ties to pro-Soviet causes. Despite widespread denouncement from popular Hollywood stars and progressive politicians across the proverbial aisle, the acrimonious hearings came to stand as physical proof of the impending perils associated with taking outspoken or unpopular (i.e. leftist) stands on political issues of the day while producing art in America.

Cultural awareness of the ominous Red threat extended beyond the nation's capital. Domestic subversion and foreign suspicion became a popular trope of the period, much of which was expressed in the popular arts. Some cultural producers reacted to the Red Scare by transforming anti-communism into an inspiration for their work. The rise of science fiction and spy literature endowed an "us v. them" mentality during the build-up to the Cold War reflected larger social concerns about apparent communist subversion

[39] Ibid, 16.
[40] John Earl Haynes, "Hellman and the Hollywood Inquisition: The Triumph of Spin-Control Over Candor," *Film History* 10 (Spring 1998), 408-409.

in American life.[41] Aliens, monsters and other ghostly examples of an eerie and unapproachable 'other' waiting to invade public space provided filmmakers and novelists with a broad range of dramatic scenarios in which to cloak praise or parody of anti-Communist sentiment. So too did a rise in historically-tinted pageantry and widespread public celebrations of patriotism tie in to a renewed social belief in American exceptionalism as the only bulwark against the perceived deficiencies of the Soviet system.[42] Like the eminent socio-economic American dominance expressed through Henry Luce's supposed 'American Century,' cultural producers latched on to the American moment allowed by WWII victory. America had won the greatest of all wars, and would continue to win through economic development and cultural appropriation and exportation.

"Bigger than *Carmen*": Pomp and Persuasion in *The Mother of Us All*

On the theatrical front, it would be easy to classify Virgil Thomson's 1947 opera *The Mother of Us All* as a kind of political pageant aligned with the more aggressively patriotic productions of the period. However, closer examination reveals just how patriotic the piece truly was. The work's contrarian nature fit with Thomson's own compositional methodology, using seemingly familiar tunes in completely original contexts. It's political pageantry played out on a similar scale, subverting expectation while pretending on its surface to glorify American history.

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[41] Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture* 3-10.
[42] Richard M. Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1998), 150- 158

In a 1942 letter to her friend and frequent collaborator Virgil Thomson, American modernist writer Gertrude Stein offered up a fairly simple proposal. "About the opera," she said, referring to a new project the two had been discussing in a series of letters dating from earlier that year. "I wish that we could write an opera that would be as popular as *Carmen*, it would be nice for the money that. An opera anybody could like, nice for the homely and the elite."[43] It seemed like a natural request for Stein to make; the pair's first opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, had been a hit with the cultural elite at its Connecticut premiere in 1934 but had proved to be a continued source of confusion for the middling public.[44]

So when the opportunity came for the darlings of America's avant-garde to write another opera, the two made a concerted effort to be more open and obvious in their choice of subject matter. In 1945, the Alice M. Ditson Fund commissioned Thomson to write a new opera on an American theme of his choosing for future performance at the Columbia University Theatre in New York City.[45] Mindful of his librettist's temper — vague and unfounded arguments over the distribution and publishing rights of *Four Saints in Three Acts* had run their personal and professional friendship through a dark and socially silent period from 1931 to 1935 — Thomson allowed Stein to choose the subject matter from any manner of significant nineteenth century American figures, so long as the subject was not Abraham Lincoln.[46]

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[43] Gertrude Stein to Virgil Thomson, March 27, 1942, Folder 176: Thomson, Virgil, Box 12, Gertrude Stein Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[44] Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York City: Random House, 1998), 313.
[45] Leslie Atikins Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre* (New York City: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 98.
[46] Watson, *Prepare for Saints,* 115-16.

Stein chose Susan B. Anthony, one of the founders of the American women's suffrage movement and a key figure in the continued struggle for women's rights. It seemed a natural choice for Stein, a literary modernist and openly homosexual woman unafraid to ruffle feathers among the mainstream, especially as the ongoing World War offered women independent careers and a greater voice in public affairs.[47] However, it is rather remarkable that Thomson, a closed, private and mostly closeted homosexual man would move so quickly and enthusiastically into a project like the opera that would become *The Mother of Us All.*

Virgil Thomson would seem an unlikely leading figure in any movement of social protest, musical or otherwise. The prickly, witty composer and influential *New York Herald Tribune* music critic was not known for his political or social progressivism.[48] In fact, Thomson, child of a middle-class Kansas family who slowly worked his way up the ranks of American musical society, made it a point to remove himself from political discussions of his day.[49] As noted earlier, Thomson's involvement in the socially progressive artistic circles of New York and Paris in the 1920s and 1930s was profoundly limited; on several occasions in and even years beyond this period, Thomson sought to have his name removed from group statements supporting social or political agitation.[50] Thomson did, however, draw the line at obvious musical obstructionism; he was one of

[47] Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, 22-27.
[48] Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1997), 325.
[49] Kathleen Hoover, *Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music* (New York City: Sagamore Press, 1959), 15.
[50] Virgil Thomson to Marc Blitzstein, February 26, 1936, Folder 9: Blitzstein, Marc, Box 26, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut. Other letters include a censorship case in 1959 and a statement of artist protest from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1947 that Thomson seems to have declined to sign.

several musicians who pushed to get Mark Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* on its theatrical feet after the W.P.A.'s Federal Theatre Project work stoppage order in 1936.[51]

Thomson's reluctance to make partisan statements in public extended even to his personal life. A lifelong 'queer,' the homosexual composer and critic took great pains to insure that rumor of his supposed sexual deviancy remained only talk.[52] When composer Ned Rorem's scandalous 1966 *Paris Diaries* explicitly 'revealed' the sexual preferences of a slew of composers and musical figures, he deliberately made only oblique reference to Thomson's homosexuality.[53]

Yet Thomson, for all his buttoned-up political and social fears, was not afraid of making a deliberate public display of himself. From an early age, Thomson reveled in a type of mischievous limelight, if only to point out the hypocrisies of those around him. While a student at the newly-created Kansas City Polytechnic Institute, he founded a club called the Pansophists, with a stated goal of exploring and developing an 'infinite variety of viewpoints.'[54] Women's rights and freedom of expression were included among these viewpoints.

Later in life, Thomson continued to speak out subtly on a range of issues while keeping a low personal profile. As the *Herald Tribune*'s music critic, Thomson used his distinctive tone and wit to agitate for a different, more informed modern musician and audience.[55] Even his first published book made waves for its no-nonsense approach to

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[51] J.E. Vacha, "The Case of the Runaway Opera: The Federal Theatre and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*," *New York History 62* (April 1981), 141.
[52] Tommasini, *Vigil Thomson,* 70.
[53] Ned Rorem, *The Paris Diary and the New York Diary, 1951-1961* (New York City: Da Cappo Press, 1998)*,* 66.
[54] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 49-50.
[55] Hoover, *Virgil Thomson,* 92–3.

the role of the musician in public life: "The collaborative arts cannot exist without criticism…what one must never forget (about an audience) is that the consumer is not a professional. He is an amateur."[56]

What, then, prompted the women's suffrage manifesto in *The Mother of Us All*? The quasi-historical tribute to suffrage activist Susan B. Anthony also likely owes part of its feminist political flavor to an episode early in Thomson's life.[57] Back at Kansas City Polytechnic Thomson spoke out strongly in favor of the intellectual merits of his friend Alice Smith, daughter of Frederick Madison Smith, the conservative leader of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[58] When Smith attempted to quiet his daughter down at a party of mixed company, Thomson admonished the elder to take his daughter more seriously and respect her intellectual capacities. In her description of the event to Kathleen Hoover, one of Thomson's biographers, Alice Smith described the event in vivid detail:

> [Virgil] once told my father very forcefully and pointedly that he was neither just nor kind in his refusal to recognize me as an intelligent human being…Virgil's argument appealed to his really strong sense of courage.[59]

This event stands out for is its clear explanation of Thomson's moral crusader streak, and what makes it even more notable is the way in which it entered into the mainstream currents of Thomson biographical lore.

The reprimand appears in both major biographies — Kathleen Hoover's slim 1959 collaboration with John Cage and Anthony Tommasini's authoritative and

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[56] Thomson, *The State of Music,* 19.
[57] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 163.
[58] Hoover, *Virgil Thomson*, 27–8.
[59] Alice Smith to Kathleen Hoover, 1949-50 Folder 14: Edwards, Alice, Box 37, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut

extensive volume of 1997 — but the episode would not have been revealed if Thomson had asked Alice Smith to revise the past when she wrote her memories of the period to Hoover.[60] Judging by the letters stored in Thomson's personal papers, it appears that Hoover approached her subject by sending letters requesting Thomson-centric memoirs to figures that played important roles in the composer's life. Hoover was old at this point of her career — as Thomson noted in his letters to friends and acquaintances during this time — and it is more likely than not that she was unable to meet with all of the figures she profiled in the book. Alice Smith was one of the recipients of a Hoover letter requesting personal details, and Smith mentioned the request in one of her semi-regular letters with her old friend. Smith also asked Thomson if there were any specific events from their college years that he would make him uncomfortable if published.[61]

Thomson's direct response is worth reprinting here in full for its candor and blunt embrace of personal memory:

> Certainly I am not trying to conceal anything, though adolescent maneuvers and effusions are always a bit painful to remember. Something you thought maybe I wouldn't want you to say…I know of no such item. I have no intention of changing anything, even if such silliness were even possible.[62]

In this exchange, Thomson displayed the kind of cutting certainty his readers at the *Herald-Tribune* had come to expect. Thomson comprehended his old friend's hesitancy to offer up potentially damning personal stories, but argued away any such concerns. It is therefore reasonable to deduce a kind of kinship and affinity for women's rights in his

[60] Tommasini, 49.
[61] Alice Smith Edwards to Virgil Thomson, July 16 1949, Folder 14: Edwards, Alice, Box 37, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[62] Virgil Thomson to Alice Smith Edwards, August 20, 1949, Folder 14: Edwards, Alice, Box 37, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

work; indeed, Thomson explicitly states his problems with the Mormon Church's approach to women's rights in a 1979 response to an undergraduate research student studying Alice Smith at Graceland College.[63]

As work on their collaboration came near to a close in the immediate postwar period, it seemed obvious that Stein fully intended to take a more active a role in the development of her second operatic setting than she did the first, but her death in late July 1946 made the final draft of her libretto her only lasting contribution to the work.[64] In tribute to his departed artistic partner, Thomson made few major changes to the libretto when setting the musical score, creating an opera largely in keeping with Stein's vision. He did, however, create the character of G.S., a virtual stand-in for his departed collaborator and a co-narrator with his own autobiographical figure in the work, Virgil T.[65]

The opera is at heart a dramatization of the life and political motivations of Susan B. Anthony. But the improbable cast of characters — including Presidents John Adams and Ulysses S. Grant, actress Lillian Russell, nineteenth-century politician Daniel Webster and a hapless drifter named Jo the Loiterer — makes the opera more than the typical tribute pageant. Instead, the work puts on a veneer of playful protest, critiquing not only the diminished role of women in both nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also heterosexual marriage, political self-importance and the impotence of American political debate. The extended courtship and marriage between Jo the Loiterer and

[63] Virgil Thomson to Nancy Hiles Ishikawai, January 30, 1979, Folder 14: Edwards, Alice, Box 37, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[64] Tommasini *Virgil Thomson*, 390.
[65] Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, 98.

Indiana Elliot, in particular presents marriage as perhaps not worth the trouble, and Anthony's sung conclusion to the work offers plaintive concerns as to whether the pursuit of the ballot was a worthy enterprise to begin with.[66] Set in loosely defined private homes, public squares and a ceremonial hall housing a statue honoring Anthony's memory, the work manages to tie in Thomson's original desire for a nineteenth century historical play with Stein's own socio-cultural aims of subversion. The plot is sparse and the dramatic action centers mostly on the interactions — or lack thereof — between the diverse characters. But a change in scenery and the Act III epilogue give the work a veneer of forward motion, however unconventional it may be.[67]

The opera premiered May 7, 1947 at Columbia University's Brander Matthews Hall in New York City.[68] Critics praised the emotional content of the work, the historical plot device and the elegant simplicity of the score: "Mr. Thomson's musical setting for the libretto is right on every count. Its imagination, directness, and simplicity perfectly set off the intricate words and the actions."[69] The contrast between the patriotic, vaguely familiar score and the culturally subversive text further highlighted the protest character of the work.[70] From the opening notes of the overture, Thomson's music brings to mind a collection of marches, gospel hymns or Victorian parlor songs, while in reality the score was a completely original work. In his iconic book on new music during the period, Aaron Copland pressed his contemporaries to appreciate Thomson's musical

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[66]Leon Maurice Aufdemberge, "An Analysis of the Dramatic Construction of American Operas on American Themes, 1986-1958," Northwestern University, Ph.D., 1965, 229-231.
[67] Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson, *The Mother of Us All* (New York City: Music Press, Inc, 1949).
[68] Olin Downes, "New Stein Opera Has Its Premiere," *New York Times,* May 8, 1947, A, 30.
[69] Robert A. Simon, "Musical Events: Opera Uptown," *The New Yorker* Vol. XXIII, No. 13 (May 17, 1947), 103-104.
[70] Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Review: *Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture, and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre*," *Theatre Journal* Issue 59 (2007): 144.

simplicity: "Thomson . . . deliberately writes music as ordinary as possible . . . from the conviction that modern music has forgotten its audience entirely."[71] Reviewers praised the text's "motley" commentary on an assortment of political and ethical problems of the nineteenth century.[72] What Thomson accomplished was a satire of the cultural problems of his own time; the secretly novel music and heavy historical themes papered over more obvious issues of dissent.

The obscure nature of the work, coupled with its unusual simplicity and only slightly provocative theme, have left it rarely performed since the successful premiere in 1947. A post-Columbia performance history shows the work appearing infrequently at a series of colleges and local arts centers in Midwestern and Mountain states until its eventual revival in Manhattan at the New York City Opera in 1956. Critics universally applauded Thomson's musical choices, but few seemed to truly comprehend the political maneuverings at work behind the scenes.

For later presentations of the opera, Thomson inserted a standard explanatory note in the program and printed libretti: "*The Mother of Us All* is a pageant. Its theme is the winning in the United States of political rights for women. Its story is the life and career of Susan B. Anthony."[73] That theme in itself was an affront to the growing discourse of feminine domestic containment so common in the dawn of the coming suburban decade, a retroactive reference to the brief years of wartime liberation. Some reviewers caught onto this tone, commenting that "the directness and simplicity of the

[71] Aaron Copland, *The New Music* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1968), 136.
[72] Downes, "New Stein Opera Has Its Premiere."
[73] Music Pages, See Folder 120.
[73] Tommasini *Virgil Thomson*, 390.

music is so disarming that its subtlety and penetrating appropriateness are likely to be overlooked, or at least underestimated.[74] Perhaps, as the above reviewer noted, the work was too full of charm and wit to be taken seriously, damaging its efficacy as either as protest piece or a light chamber opera and sentencing it to historical obscurity somewhere between the two extremes. Reviewers often fondly recalled *Four Saints in Three Acts*, suggesting that Thomson's earlier success could not help but cast a critical shadow over his later efforts.

The experience with *The Mother of Us All* did not diminish Thomson's enthusiasm for opera as a composer's ultimate musical form; indeed, in a series of undated and unpublished (but likely late 1948 or 1949) essays, he writes of the expected opera boom to come in the 1950s: "Opera is America's passion today, and when America loves a thing she usually sees that it becomes available to all at the top quality."[75] Even more tellingly, Thomson seemed to have incorporated his own critical failure with *The Mother of Us* All when he wrote the close to another undelivered speech on American opera's perceived deficiencies: "Real opera, the best of it, has always been subversive. I do not see the future as rosy." Even after following the prewar, *Four Saints in Three Acts* formula in constructing his new opera — collaboration with Gertrude Stein, textual vagueness, musical simplicity — Thomson internally posits that his new opera was not subversive enough to attract the avant-garde audiences of the past and too pleasant to cause a stir among postwar audiences looking for a deliberate rise from their modern operas.

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[74] Cecil Smith, *Theatre Arts Journal* July 1947.
[75] Virgil Thomson, *Untitled,* (no date, probably late 1940s), Folder 210: Unidentified Articles, Box 11, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut. Interestingly enough, Thomson also includes a brief line suggesting that "Everybody is accused or something or other, and right now…no one is accused of anything."
[75] Tommasini *Virgil Thomson*, 390.

"The Rise of the Robber-Baron Class": Blitzstein's *Regina* Looks for Revolution

While Thomson is not an obvious choice for postwar agit-prop musical theatre, Marc Blitzstein was perhaps the leading proponent of the movement in the United States. His marked desire to use the theatre as an instrument for social change was already made apparent in his prewar protest opera *The Cradle Will Rock*.[76] After his productive stint in the U.S. Army's British propaganda office during the war, Blitzstein returned to civilian life with an eye to shape the postwar dialogue with his 'music for use.'

Blitzstein's postwar ethic neatly matched his prewar style of loud and indignant radicalism. A lecture he gave in early 1946 at the Baltimore Institute of Musical Arts reflects as much:

> The world is a sorry mess…no sooner have we come out of the horrors of this war than we are plunged into a new chaos of international bickering and scuffling…Music is <u>not</u> a hothouse plant, carefully and preciously protected from the winds of the world, hermetically sealed form history, from yes, let me say it, sociology and politics: music is part and parcel of the body of the world's stuff and in one form or another openly establishes its connection with them…Understand that I am not saying that music *ought* to be these things; I'm saying that it is, even at the hands of those who are unconscious of it.[77]

It was with this attitude in mind that Blitzstein went on to search for a fitting topic for his new opera. With a grant from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation to prepare a work of his choosing, Blitzstein selected a Broadway play about the South's

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[76] Robert James Dietz, *The Operatic Style of Marc Blitzstein in the American "Agit-Prop" Era* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1970), 15.
[77] Mark Blitzstein, *American Music: A New Trend*, given April 7, 1946 at the Baltimore Institute of Musical Arts, Folder 3: Undated Speeches, Box 10, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

most unpleasant fictional family as suitable for the operatic stage.[78] His decision to use the radical playwright Lillian Hellman's popular 1939 play, *The Little Foxes* (later a successful Hollywood movie starring Bette Davis, Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1941) as inspiration is not entirely surprising; the pair ran in similar political circles.[79]

Blitzstein's early notes for his adaptation make special notice of his characters' "insatiable need for power and wealth" and "utterly materialistic values" and identifies the subtextual plot device of "the rise of the robber-baron class of merchants and traders…[who are] bold, unscrupulous, cruel, they gather power, lay waste culture and tradition, exploit the labor of ex-slaves, confiscate the land, the cotton, the women of a dying gentry."[80] The modern political power of this nostalgic plot motif was clearly not lost on the composer.

The result is a stirring theatrical work rich with popular American musical idioms. Themes of jazz, gospel and social dance all weave their way into the score, creating the illusion that Blitzstein had successfully created a type of masterwork of American music. The piece tells the story of the greedy Regina Hubbard, the aging matriarch of an Alabama family at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her efforts to outsmart her brothers and husband in a business merger leave her fabulously wealthy and completely alone, a not so subtle critique of the excesses of the industrial capitalist system. Blitzstein illustrates the Hubbard family's horrific moneymaking schemes with jazzy musical commentary from a ragtag 'Angel Band' of black musicians. That these musicians open

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[78] Gordon, *Mark the Music,* 287–8.
[79] Ibid, 325.
[80] Mark Blitzstein, "Notes and Outline for *The Little Foxes*," (undated, 1946), Folder 3: The Little Foxes, Box 23, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[80] Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 325.

the work in a positive key suggests that Blitzstein ultimately meant his work to be a work of caution, rather than a work of pure admonitory protest. He gives his female leads, Regina and her daughter Alexandra, soaring arias of personal confession, pushing the almost-show tune character of the work more fully into the realm of opera. The most effective scene may be the party scene in Act II, as the characters literally and figuratively dance around each other and the looming finale of the work under a gentle, building accompaniment of waltzes, jazz tunes and ragtime.[81]

The work premiered October 31, 1949 at the 46th Street Theatre on Broadway in New York. While the popular promotion of the work led many in the New York scene to suppose that the opera would be just as incendiary as Blitzstein's earlier works, reception was mixed, and the show closed after 56 performances.[82] Producer Cheryl Crawford convinced a group of theatregoers and composers to pull together and try and save the work through public advertising in New York City newspapers, but the effort ultimately failed. Both the venue and the musical setting confused audiences into thinking that the work was a musical rather than an opera; Leonard Bernstein — Blitzstein's close friend and devotee — wrote for an otherwise-glowing preview in the *New York Times* that he had trouble calling the work an 'opera': "I suppose that I should have just relaxed once or twice and said, 'opera' . . . but the particular stigma which has attached itself to this term in America has prevented me."[83] A lingering affection the theatre-going public had for the work on which *Regina* was based further complicated the opera's reception. The

[81] Mark Blitzstein, *Regina* (New York City: Chapell & Co, Inc., 1949).
[82] Gordon, *Mark the Music,* 335–9.
[83] Leonard Bernstein, "Prelude to a Musical," *The New York Times*, October 30, 1949, X, 1.

review in the *New Yorker*—which, like Bernstein's, was largely positive—does not refrain from questioning the very wisdom behind a musical setting of *The Little Foxes.*[84]

An especially bitter review appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*:

> I could not help wondering why the Hellman drama of Southern Chivalry's obverse side should have been chosen at all for a musical play. If that question is waived, I guess everyone has done pretty well.[85]

Other reviewers varied in their interpretation of the dramatic choice, with the socialist *Daily Worker* applauding the revolutionary content and the *New York Daily News* wondering how music and singing "got in the way of what used to be a good play called 'The Little Foxes.'[86]

Blitzstein spent much of the next few years attempting to revive *Regina* in other, more serious opera houses and festivals. In a series of increasingly desperate letters to Bernstein — who was on a conducting tour in Italy and Western Europe in late 1954 and early 1955 — Blitzstein asked his more successful protégé to look into staging promises at Milan's La Scala and Zurich's Stadt Theatre, among other European houses. Finally, after months of vague stalling, La Scala's director Victor de Sabata, emphatically denied Blitzstein's petition for inclusion in a future opera season: "Regina does not conform to La Scala's atmosphere, tradition, taste, etc." de Sabata wrote. "It would be a great mistake to raise a production of *Regina* at La Scala."[87] Bernstein encouraged Blitzstein's

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[84] Wolcott Gibbs, "The Theatre: Boston, Alabama, and Johannesburg," *The New Yorker* Vol. XXV, No. 38 (November 12, 1949), 56.
[85] Richard P. Cooke, "Vixen's Serenade," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 1949, 8A: 3.
[86] Folder 2, Box 24. Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[87] Victor de Sabata to Mark Blitzstein, March 27, 1955, Folder 1: Correspondence (*Regina*), Box 23, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. Blitzstein noted this failure in an angry red scrawl on the side of an earlier note, scribbling "NOTE: It NEVER was," on the side of a November 9, 1954 letter from Anotonio Ghiringhelli to Bernstein suggesting that a future production of *Regina* was definitely in the works.

European optimism writing a letter in mid-March 1955 from Italy that warned happily that he'd be "a dill pickle if I won't see it 'somewhere' in Europe next year."[88]

That Blitzstein spent much of the gestational period for *Regina* anticipating political repression in the form of a subpoena (that never arrived) to the House Un-American Activities Committee for his blatant communist sympathies no doubt influenced some of the protest in his work.[89] But Blitzstein's true works of protest already formed a part of the liberal musical canon. His efforts with *Regina* walk a thin line between serious musical theatre and light opera, and his drift towards opera likely diminished the lasting effect of his cautionary tale of capitalism.

Blitzstein nursed a sense of determined operatic optimism after his *Regina* misadventure. His April 22, 1956 Forum Lecture at Boston's Ford Hall spelled out the results of the previous decade in music and theatrical performance. He did not place himself in his explanatory calculations, but it is possible to read a bit of defiance among the glorified recognitions of other's accomplishments:

> The fact that opera has changed over the years doesn't bother me at all. You will see that I feel the form to be a living form, which shifts emphasis, adopts itself and sometimes makes innovations, according to time, place…The mists of inner compulsions in the composer plus the social and historical mores in which he finds himself usually are reflected in a work if only in protest or rebellion…We seem dreadfully confused, insecure and spent, and we lack courage. I don't ask for a return to the character of the cultural thirties, although that decade did at least show a genuine dynamic; no, this is a different time. But all times call for courage, and we do protest too little…I am urging in our art something like a resumption of the essential current and spirit of or cultural inheritance, which has always had to do with challenge and even protest.[90]

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[88] Leonard Bernstein to Mark Blitzstein, March 23, 1955, Folder 1: Correspondence (*Regina*), Box 23, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[89] Gordon, *Mark the Music,* 32–1.

[90] Mark Blitzstein, Untitled Ford Hall Forum Speech, given April 22, 1956, Folder 4: Ford Hall Forum, Box 9, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

Between the lines, one can find Blitzstein: beaten by his personal failures and battered by the changes of the postwar period that rendered the popular arts markedly different from the "dynamic decade of the 30s" that were so creatively fruitful for him, yet resolutely encouraged by future prospects.

These two stunted attempts at revitalizing or reforming the American opera serve as helpful portents of the era yet to come. While American in subject and musical orientation, both works neglected to consider changes in audience preferences already well underway in the immediate postwar period. As artistic protests subsided or were forced into secluded abstraction, the artist's role as potential socio-cultural lightning rod became more obvious. After their respective experiences in the war, both Blitzstein and Thomson were well versed in the kinds of rosy domestic themes required to win over the rapidly growing American audience. That they each turned instead to the blunt protest aesthetic from their pre-war years suggests the dangers of protest through honest, earnest social critique were not yet so apparent as to be patently obvious.

Ch 3: Trouble in the Tender Land: Bernstein and Copland in the Cold War Cultural Crisis

In June 1953, Leonard Bernstein opened his second annual creative arts festival at Massachusetts' Brandeis University with a printed welcome, nestled within a neatly designed program. While not nearly as arrogant as the lofty speech he gave at the debut festival's celebrity laden opening night a year before, the introductory comments offered visitors to the Waltham, Massachusetts campus a clear vision of the popular conductor's continued plans for his new festival series:

> I sometimes think that Man's capacity for laughter is nobler than his divine gift of suffering. Laughing cleanses a man; it restores his sanity and balances his sense of value. Now, in a time of caution and fear, in an atmosphere frigid with non-direction and non-expressivity, let us laugh and let laugh, lighten the air we breathe, and feel clean.[1]

Like the printed schedule for the upcoming festival, Bernstein's comments were light. They drew attention to the supposed 'high art' inherent in some of the comic festival's more low-brow attractions — which included presentations by Broadway tap dancers and popular radio comedians — and helped to bridge the gaping cultural chasm between the festival's second run and its glamorous and artistically significant opening the year prior.[2]

In Bernstein's eyes, the first festival had been a public success and personal wash. While the 1952 event had clearly drawn national attention to the tiny and relatively young liberal arts college in Boston's suburbs — it featured many well-known figures from Bernstein's creative cohort as headliners, including composers Aaron Copland and Marc Blitzstein and dancer Merce Cunningham, among others — the festival failed to

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[1] Program, 1953 Festival of the Creative Arts, Folder 1, Box 335, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[2] Sheryl Kaskowitz, "All in the Family: Brandeis University and Leonard Bernstein's 'Jewish Boston,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3 (2009), 88-89. On the serious side, the second festival also included the American premiere of French composer Francis Poulenc's charming light opera, *Les mamelles de Tirésias*.

expose the composer's first attempt at the operatic genre into wider popular awareness. Reviews of that work, the one-act *Trouble in Tahiti*, were largely negative; more than a few critics openly wondered if the suburban satire was a poorly executed attempt at social comedy.[3] Such lukewarm, dismissive commentary likely hurt the ambitious Bernstein, whose opening comments for his first festival spoke glowingly of the power of creative dialogue:

> Through performance we can provoke thought and free discussion; through discussing we can learn; and through learning we can rediscover our culture and ourselves.[4]

Bernstein's transition from coordinator of high-minded cultural breakthroughs in 1952 to head court jester of a simpler attempt at comic play in 1953 is one fraught with personal and political significance. As the Truman years morphed into the Eisenhower decade, well-regarded cultural figures like Bernstein, Copland, and their ilk began to face intense scrutiny for previous allegiances to discredited activist movements from the prewar period. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous 'Red Scare' tactics of Congressional anti-communist intimidation infiltrated a wide swatch of public discourse; artistic works that suggested deviation from the norm were regularly treated as suspect by default.[5] If artistic protests were noticed at all in the early years of the 1950s, they were highlighted as proof of an ominous, dissident strain bleeding red with Soviet allegiance.[6]

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[3] Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York City: Doubleday 1994), 220.
[4] Program, 1952 Festival of the Creative Arts, Folder 18: Personal Writings, 1952, Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[5] Elizabeth B. Crist, "Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era: Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide,*" *The Journal of Musicology* 23 (Fall 2006), 485-486.
[6] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York City: Vintage Books, 2008), 29-34.

As noted in Phillip Max Gentry's thoughtful 2008 dissertation, "The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954," the musical world's participation in politics was always fraught with blurred lines and confused appropriations of meaning, especially in the fluid period that sprang up after the war. Bernstein's political activism at Harvard in the 1930s and in New York City in the 1940s could perhaps be written off as youthful opportunism, but Gentry notes Bernstein's place in the larger field of politically engaged composers. He presents Bernstein as yet another socially conscious musician forced to choose between public statements of intent and vaguely referenced private convictions, rendered in obscure musical passages. Bernstein's political "otherness" rendered him a potentially dangerous subversive, making any protest quality in his work particularly telling in retrospect.[7]

As he planned for the 1953 festival, Bernstein told friends his choice of comedic arts as subject matter stemmed from a childhood love of practical jokes and light humor to relieve tense situations; such discourse created an obvious parallel between the composer's own political difficulties and the turn to laughter as a kind of quiet answer to the rising tide of the Red Scare paranoia in Washington, Hollywood and across the country.[8]

Bernstein was not alone in making strategic adjustments to his artistic and political work during the tumultuous and loosely defined period that linked the direct end of World War II and the gradual beginning of the Cold War. Guided by the failures of the American Left in the immediate postwar period and pushed into deliberate caution

[7] Phillip Max Gentry, "The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954," 5-30.
[8] Sheryl Kaskowitz, "All in the Family," 89.

by the decline of Henry Wallace's Progressive Party and the related cultural idioms that went with the movement, liberal or leftist artists gradually turned inward for cover. In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* — a deft collection of essays and commentary from more than a dozen artistic and pop culture historians — cultural historian Larry May articulates the subtle shift in values after the end of the war and before the rise of the affluent and garish "1950s" so nostalgically referenced today. According to May, the united Leftist front of the prewar decades was too slow to morph into the anti-communist, liberal faction that has dominated American political thought in the half century since.[9] In the arts, this reluctant move rightward affected some artists more than others; Bernstein and Copland's individual reactions to this shift represent a final attempt to embrace the utopic visions of social cohesion that seemed so possible in the depths of the Depression. Many composers looked backward for artistic inspiration, "rejecting the populist aesthetics of the World War II era and rededicat(ing) themselves to the musical priorities of a prewar avant-garde."[10] Yesterday's avant-garde had morphed into an after-the-fact liability, particularly when considering thematic choices.

The newly moneyed and rapidly expanding middle classes turned to mass consumption, mass culture and mass housing, now readily available on a scale once thought impossible. Rows of suburban homes filled with modern consumer comforts and exciting pictures on personal television screens satisfied private family needs at lower costs, creating a huge public more demographically unified and culturally aware than in any

[9] John May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1-5.
[10] Judith Tick, "The Music of Aaron Copland," in *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective,* Gail Levin and Judith Tick, eds. (New York City: Watson-Guptil Publications, 2000), 160.

other period of American history.[11] This cultural awareness did not extend to the outer fringes of high art. For composers like Bernstein and Copland, stunted exposure at the box office or in the review pages owed more to wider socio-political factors than to mere public ignorance of traditionally elite arts like opera. In failure, their operatic efforts also missed the chance to woo and win a broader audience for the form. The traditionally elite social strata who attended these premieres saw the works as curious distractions with vague and personally incompatible themes, leaving the middling segment of the American populace who might have found a sense of recognizable thematic truths in the operas excluded from the performance spaces and lacking a role in the conversation framing the works. The most successful operas are those that speak to the internal monologues of their audiences; Copland and Bernstein narrowly missed the chance to present their works to working class farmers or middle-class suburbanites who would have seen bits of themselves in *The Tender Land* or *Trouble in Tahiti*. Instead, the elite audience that did see the works misinterpreted or misrepresented the critiques within, seeing only controversy and none of the gradated thematic subtlety so present in each work.

By examining the cultural and political environments that surrounded — and in some sense, helped to create — Copland's *The Tender Land* and Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti,* it is possible to discern a subtle transition from the prewar cultural front to a nebulous new period in the arts. If 1949 and the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace at the Waldorf Astoria served as the period's fulcrum, 1952 — and by

[11] John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and in Peace, 1941-1960* (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company,1988), 177-183.

extension, 1954 — were among the death knells of explicit protest on the cultural front. Political realities made manifest through the reaction to the Waldorf Astoria conference reveal how much seemingly unrelated general events could critically influence operatic reception. The complaints lodged in each of these works are hybridized critiques, combining present social structures counter to each composer's personal tastes with individual life experiences. That composers as significant and well connected as Bernstein and Copland failed to recognize the transition at hand reveals the truly personal nature of their protest themes.

McCarthyism Moves Mainstream: Paranoia, Populism and Domestic Subversion

Senator Joseph P. McCarthy is often given a tremendous deal of credit for creating the American postwar consensus on subversion and anti-Communism. The fiery, demagogic Republican from Wisconsin is used as a cultural buzzword, immediately calling to mind all manner of acrimonious Congressional hearings and angry public political takedowns.[12] While this study has and will continue to explore the way in which Senator McCarthy's cultural politics influenced American musicians of the postwar period, it must be noted that the degree of intention often attributed to the senator is usually inflated.

McCarthy stumbled into anti-Communism as his token wedge issue in 1950, and invocation of his supposed "dominance" of the House Un-American Activities Committee is highly falsified; as this study has already noted, the HUAC committee had already alleged Communist infiltration in American society as far back as 1938, and

[12] Gary A. Donaldson, *Abundance and Anxiety*: *America*, *1945-1960* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 51.

McCarthy was a senator, not a representative.[13] However, McCarthy's keen ability to tap into recurrent strains of American paranoia accounts for widespread adoption of his theories. In a restless period of transition, McCarthy appropriated the tactics and techniques of political demagogues from throughout history —anti-Catholics, anti-Masons, white supremacists, et. al. — in his much-publicized crusades. Historian Richard Hofstadter's masterful 1963 essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," clearly articulated the enduring legacies of vague fear of the other in the United States. By lending an outsized degree of power and influence to the supposed-"other," accusers like McCarthy serve a double purpose, legitimizing their own rhetoric and cementing power in opposition to the loosely defined threat.[14]

The concerns made manifest in the words of firebrands like McCarthy had deeper and more complicated roots. As the postwar economic boom continued apace in the early years of the 1950s, an almost unchecked anxiety took hold of much of the newly wealthy American middle and upper classes, based on a peculiar belief that this new prosperity was fragile or undeserved. In turn, that sense of tenuous economic success affected a diverse cross-section of politics and culture, pushing the country towards strong-armed diplomatic dominance and supremacy in the business world. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith attempted to comprehend this pattern in his 1960 essay, "The Affluent Society":

> The effect of affluence goes beyond economics to influence politics and political behavior and further on to influence our view — or lack of view — of the world at large…increasing and more general affluence has

[13] David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 23-25.
[14] Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."

> changed political and social attitudes and behavior…[there is] a marked tendency to indignation when someone suggests that change has altered the substance of our economic and political life.[15]

Not every American acutely felt the limits of the roaring postwar economy and therefore adopted a deliberately selfish and isolated frame of mind. Rather, the sense of affluence as a concept formed much of the ideological backbone of the era while not necessarily dominating conscious contemporary dialogue. Galbraith makes a point to highlight this subordinate dominance as indignant. His landmark essay identified major trends present in the era — a rise in production-centered domestic consumption, the growth of a mass leisure class qualified by education, disregard for poverty, fear of a poorly defined 'other' — and laid out the ways in which the nation's economic growth helped produce massive change across all sectors of society.

Already a frequent traveler of society's fringes, the artist saw his work take on heightened and often unintended levels of meaning throughout the period. Musicians, in particular, remembering the faux folk pastiche that served them so well during the war years, seemed unable to take a firm direction forward. Caught between the mid-century modernism of starkly simple composers like the radical John Cage and the folksy regionalism inspired by Copland's 1940s ballets, the postwar composer still had no clear answer as to what an "American" sound constituted.[16] Even the vastly expanded popular

[15] John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Affluent Society," in *The Affluent Society and Other Writings, 1952 -1967*, ed. James K. Galbraith, (New York City: Literary Classics of the United States, 2010), 603- 605.
[16] Gail Levin, "Aaron Copland's America," in *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective,* Gail Levin and Judith Tick, eds. (New York City: Watson-Guptil Publications, 2000), 52-54.

access to these works did not help composers make their work more mainstream or thematically unified.[17]

In popular culture, this period of economic consumption played out on remarkably conformist terms. As more and more American families vaulted into the comfortably complacent middle classes, cultural exposure funneled into the narrowly defined channels of television, radio and mass-market periodicals, now more widely available than ever before in history.[18] Widespread exposure to the white-linen domestic purity of such popular sitcoms as *Leave it to Beaver, Ozzie and Harriet* and *I Love Lucy* created a sense of shared aspirations; these families, with their simple problems and elegant yet affordable homes were to be emulated, or at least admired and referenced if at all fiscally feasible.[19]

Cultural historians who examine this period often note the false sense of unity regularly attributed to the period. In discussions of suburban tract homes and the New York and Pennsylvania Levittowns that inspired such developments, for example, little space is given to the real and qualified debates that boiled alongside the mass exodus from American cities to the suburbs.[20] In the Kodachrome decade we know today, dissent and debate festered beneath the glossy surface, but the extent and efficacy of such dissent was admittedly slight. Henry Luce's "American Century" of American-centric glory and

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[17] Copland, surprisingly, found considerable success in the film industry. His style of "imposed simplicity" became standard in film soundtracks, and his work during the 1940s garnered four Academy Award nominations and one Academy Award. That success did not extend to the musical theatre, but did give Copland an aura of popular authority in American music. Thomson, too, had some success in the form. See Neil Lerner, "Copland's Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood," *The Musical Quarterly 85* (Fall 2001), 477-515.
[18] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York City: Villard Books, 1993), 496-518.
[19] Greg Castillo, *The Cold War on the Home Front*: *The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 105-123.
[20] William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *The 1950s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 25.

global economic domination based along traditionalistic conservative capitalist lines was well on its way. As mentioned above, Luce's enthusiastic and roaring endorsement of American prominence in the postwar era hinged on the continued global promotion of American styles of commoditized living. On the home front, that model could only be sustained through a culture of conspicuous consumption expressed in both quantifiable goods and an expanded slate of leisure activities.[21]

The production apparatuses that created the traditionally elite, or 'high' arts in American cities found themselves stranded in an era that would come to be defined on a largely mass-culture axis. Middlebrow cultural tastes gained surprising traction as emblematic of true "American" culture, even though actual American culture was and has always been too vague and nonlinear a construction to hold any true, lasting meaning.[22] The lack of sharply defined *American* art — in music, painting, literature, et. al. — left the label relatively devoid of meaning. This freedom of association allowed all manner of disparate artists to hold up their work as token examples of raw American folk-nationalism. In practice, however, the art that one considers to be 'American' today is only that work which garnered enough attention during its production period to be either controversial or popular enough to achieve cultural parity for years to come. Copland's ballets and symphonic works of the early 1940s are examples of such work; popular but vaguely foreign at the outset, gradually becoming synchronous with an American idea of

[21] Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 150-153.
[22] Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York City: Basic Books, 1974).

modern music. Such stark ironies play a central role in any retroactive interpretation of American art, particularly American opera.[23]

Until the sense of urgent anti-Communist purging calmed down in the later years of the decade, the only real attention granted an elite cultural a producer was often in the form of suspicion or patent distrust. If mass arts and popular tastes were commercially viable and politically acceptable, opera, ballet, classical music and other such high art forms were distant and generally alienated.[24] That such art forms had their historic roots in the capitals of Europe and frequently elevated foreign-born or foreign-sounding artists to positions of power only increased general discomfort with both creation and creator. Indeed, the very idea of opera in America remained and remains a distant and decidedly foreign mystery.[25] The financial difficulties that plagued the Metropolitan Opera in New York during the postwar transitional period also did not help the form win fans.[26]

Politically, the false — or at least, imagined and perceived — sense of domestic unity was amplified by the anti-Communist, anti-foreign rhetoric of people like McCarthy and his Republican counterparts in Congress and the 48 state capitols. It is a historic irony that many of the artists so frequently accused of harboring Soviet sympathies were, in fact, former or actual Communists, or at least Democratic Socialists. As demonstrated earlier, Copland and Bernstein were active participants in many of the political debates of the 1930s and early 1940s, preaching international cooperation and

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[23] Gail Levin, Aaron Copland's America," in *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective,* Gail Levin and Judith Tick, eds. (New York City: Watson-Guptil Publications, 2000), 9-12.
[24] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love With Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36-42.
[25] Analysis of American Opera Themes, 6-9.
[26] Irving Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera: 1883-1966, A Candid History* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967),
23.

social justice throughout the years surrounding the war and well into the transitional period in which such sentiments were no longer popular or politically possible.[27] Public cultural discourse in the decade, and particularly between the disastrous 1949 Waldorf Astoria Peace Conference and the second year of President Eisenhower's first term, was defined on a particularly narrow spectrum; the limits of 'permissible' debate did not move terribly far to the right or left of the domestic, consumer-oriented center.[28] Furthermore, as the participants in that center grew in size and scope, the legitimacy of incorporating such stunted debate in common argument grew in equal proportion. By considering the world beyond the American borders as ripe for social harmony and modern harmonious debate, Copland and Bernstein crossed a rather impermeable boundary.

As much as we might like to imagine the postwar years as an era of extremes, the majority of domestic political and cultural negotiation from 1948 to 1952 remained in the broad center, all the while imagining vast swaths of dissenting extremities. The social historical narrative of the period matched the "ideology of consensus" that spread from the halls of Congress to the display rooms of consumerist America, based on consensus principles of unity and pragmatism.[29]

This consensus framework made dissent more noticeable in the public market of ideas, if not more punishable in the legal system. Because the stakes in this legal and social struggle were bound by a near-universal distrust and revulsion of Soviet influence, the punishments became all the more devastating in their ability to permanently cripple a

[27] Elizabeth B. Crist, "Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era: Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*," 485-490.
[28] John May, *Recasting America*, 47-54.
[29] Phillip Max Gentry, *The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954,* 5.

career. Loyalty oaths, industry-wide "purges" and anti-Communist scare tactics became a fact of American life, especially in professions with a particularly public or government-backed nature. The performing and musical arts were one such profession.[30] Just as Hallie Flannegan's Federal Theatre Project had difficulty convincing its politically paranoid sponsors that its work was significantly less radical than it seemed, so too were composers in the 1950s made to declare their devotion to Western values as a matter of course.

"Too Real to Be Funny": The Anti-Suburban Ethos of Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*

One way to avoid public shaming at the hands of McCarthy and his anti-Communist attack dogs was to be especially popular or talented in a profession.[31] For his youth, good looks and obvious spirit of musical invention, Leonard Bernstein managed to escape many of the period's nastier purges in the artistic fields. Although he was Jewish, a vocal supporter of liberal and leftist causes and regularly engaged in illicit — and sometimes torrid — homosexual affairs, Bernstein used his considerable charm and raw talent to avoid serious condemnation beyond his June 1950 blacklisting in the anti-Communist periodical, *Red Channels*.[32]

Bernstein also took an active role in managing his public image; in an undated 1942 letter to Aaron Copland — with whom Bernstein had a brief sexual affair in the late 1930s and early 1940s — the younger composer wrote:

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[30] John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades*, 165.
[31] Phillip Max Gentry, *The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954*, 27-30.
[32] Barry Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of An American Musician* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 50.

> The private life has given way, in most part, to getting that mythical job. Patience and control.[33]

Letters such as this suggest that Bernstein was acutely aware of his native city's struggle to come to terms with its celebrated symphony's aging and quietly homosexual principal conductor, Dimitri Mitropoulos.[34] The young composer's subsequent appointments to major principal and assistant conducting positions in the New York City Symphony, the New York Philharmonic and dozens of guest positions around the world suggest that he was largely able to control his homosexual 'urges' — or at least sequester them from the public view enough to be considered a leading candidate for distinguished musical positions.[35]

On the political front, however, Bernstein could not escape a certain degree of scrutiny. Leading Bernstein biographer Joan Peyser went so far as to credit Marc Blitzstein as the political and theatrical inspiration behind many of Bernstein's early projects.[36] Though Bernstein would prove to be far more public and infinitely more popular than his mentor, he continued to use Blitzstein's methods of socially engaged composition and theatrical conceptualization to frame his works for the stage throughout his career. It is not without coincidence that Bernstein's first major theatrical success was his Harvard performance of Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, or that Bernstein's 1952 opera was dedicated to Blitzstein.[37]

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[33] Leonard Bernstein to Aaron Copland, undated 1942, Folder 1: Bernstein, Leonard, Box 247, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[34] Nadine Hubbs, "Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* Volume 13 (2009), 35.
[35] Paul Myers, *Leonard Bernstein* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 52-62.
[36] Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography* (New York City: Billboard Books, 1998), 222-223.
[37] And not to Bernstein's new wife, Felicia Montrealegre.

Analyzing Bernstein's cultural legacy remains a difficult proposition. He had a habit of shifting his opinions to fit the mood of a particular time, and the musician's tortured internal conflict over his sexuality often clouded his political ambitions, as he looked to imagined normal heteronormativity as a palliative for his troubled private life.[38] Musically, he was a product of his own heady and varied life, moving from new nationalism to modernism to musical theatre just as quickly as such forms gained traction in the popular arts. His political convictions were often loudly articulated but meekly defended; only the artful manipulations of an excellent team of lawyers kept Bernstein from the profound public embarrassment of delivering testimony before the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations after his initial passport renewal was denied in 1955.[39] Just as prominent a sponsor of the 1949 Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace as Copland and Lillian Hellman, Bernstein somehow avoided serious public repercussions for his participation in the notorious event.[40]

His private letters, essays and unpublished articles reveal a genuinely curious young man, full of talent yet ultimately unable to choose a cultural or political sphere in which to permanently operate. The rhetorical journey from his optimistic and nationalist 1939 honors thesis at Harvard to a stern and staunchly universalist unpublished dialogue composed in a personal notebook in 1948 reflects the sweeping changes the composer

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[38] Nadine Hubbs, "Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* Volume 13 (2009): 32. For a more damning condemnation of the composer's later dynamic and volatile political life, Tom Wolfe's landmark 1970 *New York* magazine article, "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's."

[39] Leonard Bernstein, "Affidavit: Application for U.S. Passport," 1955, Folder 2: Application for US Passport, Box 1029, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Bernstein's affidavits and private testimony reveal a man far less-willing to go to bat for his convictions than his more vocal composer associates, Blitzstein and Copland chief among them.

[40] Elizabeth B. Crist, "Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era," 487-489.

made in order to keep with the fashion and fit of the time: "Don't you recall the great Soviet slogan in the '30s?" the fictional Bernstein asked himself. "Cultural Nationalism — political internationalism. I'd say they had something there."[41] (This and other hypothetical conversations stored among Bernstein's papers show the composer at his plainest and most unadorned, working through difficult questions of identify, politics and music theory. Some are playful and others are introspective, but each conversation lends Bernstein a surprising note of reflective candor not seen in his more public documents and speeches.) Although Senator McCarthy's April 1953 campaign to remove "troubling" music and books from overseas State Department libraries included Bernstein on a list of unacceptable American composers, that list also included Copland, George Gershwin and Virgil Thomson. As the latter two were hardly paragons of outspoken political dissent, the list seemed to be more indicative of McCarthy's own paranoia than a catalogue of politically active musicians.[42]

Bernstein's decision to write his first opera started out of a desire to explore a compositional form that was "intrinsically more difficult, challenging and vital to the long-range history of American music."[43] Just as Copland stressed the importance of operatic theatre to a country's national musical development, so Bernstein sought to develop a distinctively American sound for a genre typically reserved for languages other than English.[44] The work's genesis took place during a period of great personal and

[41] Leonard Bernstein, "Imaginary Conversation, re: Nationalism," May 1, 1948, (unpublished), Folder 42: Personal Writings, Box 71, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[42] Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York City: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 454.
[43] Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York City: Doubleday 1994), 205.
[44] Aaron Copland, *The New Music*, 135.

professional change in Bernstein's life. As his long, often interrupted engagement to Peruvian actress and socialite Felicia Montealegre drew to a close, he also was subject to intense public scrutiny after his appearance in *Red Channels*. Despite his rising popular stock, thanks to a series of popular ballets, films scores and theatrical productions in the late 1940s, Bernstein did not receive a permanent conducting post with a major orchestra until 1958, and he instead left the country twice in 1951, to finish his opera and to enjoy a honeymoon with his new wife.[45]

Much of that honeymoon was spent completing *Trouble in Tahiti,* a piece meant to be the highlight of his festival of new works at Brandeis University in June 1952.[46] The work is a dark, bitter portrait of American family life in the decade's new suburban landscapes. It is not clear whether Bernstein intended the work to be a meditation on the married life he had just entered into with Montealegre, but the timing is suggestive. In rosy, slightly sarcastic tones, the opera tells the story of Dinah and Sam, an unhappily married couple living out the limits of their troubled relationship in "Any American city, and its suburbs."[47] The only other characters in the piece are the members of Greek Chorus-style trio, who narrate the seven short scenes and serve as a harmonic ensemble for the two principals. There is no real resolution to the central conflict of martial discord, and the result is an unsettling critique of the American middle class, sung in an ironic imitation of popular musical idioms. The opening number (a cheery tribute to the

[45] Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein,* 57.
[46] Burton, *Leonard Bernstein,* 215.
[47] Leonard Bernstein, *Trouble in Tahiti*: *An Opera in Seven Scenes* (New York City: G. Schrimer, Inc., 1953).

wonders of suburbia sung in the fashion of a radio jingle) and Dinah's passionate mockery of a film musical serve as markers of the work's character.

In the work's original manuscript, Bernstein added a underlined note that later became part of the printed score: the Greek / Radio chorus must "never stop smiling."[48] It is possible that he meant the dramatic note as a kind of kitsch homage to popular music of the period, but when the constantly cheery chorus is thrust against the dark and angry tones at the family breakfast table in the work's opening number, it becomes clear just how serious a satirist Bernstein was. The physical psychology of the work's dramatic development is also significant. After several revisions — many of which included a variety of spoken characters beyond Sam, Dinah and their omnipotent and invisible radio choir trio — Bernstein ultimately decided on the sparse and lonely stage in the final version.[49] As Dinah and Sam wander about the comically exaggerated suburban landscapes, their inherent isolation is patently clear. Theirs is a domestic prison of consumerist excess, and the only sounding board is the mocking "consensus" chorus that surrounds them at every turn. For all its jazz/swing vitality and musical theatre references, the work is ultimately bleak.

Trouble in Tahiti was not well received. Though the festival at Brandeis was a moderate success, critics called the quasi-protest piece "too real to be funny."[50] While the music press trumpeted the opera's premiere for months in advance, the opening night on June 12, 1952 was widely panned (due in part to the work's presentation in a noisy

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[48] Leonard Bernstein, *Trouble in Tahiti* (printed score), Folder 21: Trouble in Tahiti, Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[49] Leonard Bernstein, *Trouble in Tahiti* (drafts), Folder 22: Trouble in Tahiti (drafts), Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[50] Burton, *Leonard Bernstein,* 220.

outdoor amphitheater at the end of a lengthy evening of talks, musical performances and dedications).[51] A later review in the *New York Times* called the piece "a skillful study" for future operatic efforts; the music was said to lack variety and the plot was described as too thin to sustain a work of even its already restricted length.[52]

Many critics also seemed to take Bernstein's criticism of suburbia as a failed attempt at humor, rather than serious protest, and some completely ignored the composer's more masked attempts to question American nation building abroad in Dinah's tribute to the titular South Seas movie extravaganza near the end of the opera.[53] Other reviews were even harsher. The April 30, 1955 issue of *The New Yorker* includes a passing mention of a restaging of the work, calling it musically distinct but ultimately lacking in dramatic content —a blow to the composer, who intended the work to be an example of how distinctly American subject matter could carry an opera.[54] *Trouble in Tahiti* lived on in a televised version in November 1952 on NBC's Television Opera Theatre program, and later as a flashback in Bernstein's larger late-period opera, *A Quiet Place*, but the failed premiere seemed to suggest that Bernstein's attempt at open cultural criticism was too obvious to be taken seriously.[55] The true source of failure remains unclear. Bernstein meant his work to call into question the staid suburban social mores of the period, but his inability to convey that message of protest and dissent lent the work a half-baked feeling. It was, indeed, too real to be funny, and also too funny to be truly credible commentary.

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[51] Peyser, *Leonard Bernstein,* 77-78.
[52] Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: 'Trouble in Tahiti,' "Draper,' '27 Wagons,'" *The New York Times*, April 20, 1955, A, 40.
[53] Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein*, 66.
[54] Wolcott Gibbs, "The Theatre: Mixed Bag," *the New Yorker* Vol. XX1, No. 11 (April 30, 1955), 70-71.
[55] Ross Parameter, "Bernstein Opera on Video Theatre*," the New York Times*, November 17, 1952, A, 21.

This failure stood in stark contrast to Bernstein's other theatrical enterprises of the period and seemed to directly contradict the composer's own sentiments on the role of the American public in promoting and developing new operatic works. In a pair of lectures given at the University of Chicago in May 1952, Bernstein called for new works meant to engage a broad public on shared themes of national interest and domestic originality. Perhaps most significantly, the composer suggested that such operas would arise as a natural outcome of the country's musical and social evolution; he cited the popular Broadway musicals "Oklahoma!" and "Finnegan's Rainbow" as indicative of the kind of musical innovations that would surely lead to an original and uniquely American operatic form.[56] He described the role of any composer as grounded in social concerns, noting that "A composer's function is society: — he expresses his society, or he revolts against it."[57] Bernstein was outwardly optimistic about musical prospects in the theatre, suggesting that the American composer had begun a special and even "natural" journey into the theatre. His own work's inability to gain traction in a time apparently ripe for the genre offers a telling display of the period's fragile cultural politics.

Bad Years for "America's Composer": Responsive Protest in Copland's *The Tender Land*

If the early years of the 1950s were professionally difficult for Bernstein, they were beyond abysmal for his friend and contemporary Aaron Copland. Repeatedly accused of harboring illicit Soviet sympathies, removed from a inaugural music festival in

[56] Leonard Bernstein, "You, the Public," lecture outlines, 13 May, 1952, Folder 17: You, the Public, Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[57] Leonard Bernstein, "The Composer and the Performer" lecture outlines, 20 May, 1952, Folder 18: Misc. Writings, Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., and recorded in the *Congressional Quarterly* multiple times as an inconsistent and radical revolutionary, Copland struggled to find traces of his prewar success in the years after his disastrous appearance at the Waldorf Astoria Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in 1949.[58] The composer continued to look back to many of the 1930s-era folk-populist methods that had won considerable praise in years before. More than any other composer explored in this study, Copland remained stunted in a prewar personal construction of musical reality; his relatively advanced age (compared to Bernstein and Blitzstein) no doubt had an influence on his firm cultural mindset.[59]

Of course, while Copland finished the postwar transition period relatively unscathed, his touchstone work, *The Tender Land*, was a critical and personal failure and remains one of the iconic composer's last major works of any populist significance. Political innuendo and the ominous threat of public disgrace dealt Copland a devastating emotional blow, consigning the aging composer to a kind of elder statesman role rather than as a continued source of musical and theatrical innovation.[60]

What is most surprising about this period in Copland's life is the near-constant obstinacy with which the suddenly controversial composer attempted to argue away his detractors. Speeches, letters, state department affidavits and other personal writings from 1949 through the late 1950s all show a man convinced of his own place in the American musical landscape. Assured without being arrogant, Copland tried — and largely failed — to use his decades of American-centered music as proof of his modern relevance.

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[58] Elisabeth B. Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Number 56 (2003), 457.
[59] Morris Dickstein, "Copland and American Populism in the 1930s," in *Aaron Copland and His World*, Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 82.
[60] Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 515-516.

"There is a [natural] preoccupation with the "Americanness" of our music," he wrote in an unpublished, undated draft of a periodical article from the late 1940s or 1950s. "The postwar period marks the beginning of new growth."[61]

Copland had been planning to write an "American" opera for many years before the 1954 premiere of his *The Tender Land*. Critical writings from the period indicate his belief in the importance of opera as an aspirational and advanced musical form, and his 1938 children's opera, *The Second Hurricane*, was an early attempt at the genre.[62] However, as Copland prepared initial rehearsals of *Tender Land*—an opera he saw as informed by the same folk idioms that influenced his earlier ballets, *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid* — the politics of the era and his own past caught up with him. The negative press that surrounded such public criticism perhaps influenced the content and tone of *The Tender Land*.

Nineteen fifty-three was perhaps the worst year in Copland's professional life. As the nation's capital prepared for the inauguration of the first Republican president since 1928, Copland found himself subject to a new and unwelcome degree of press scrutiny. On January 3, Republican Rep. Fred Busbey of Illinois made a statement from the floor of the U.S. House, requesting that Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* be removed from the official Eisenhower inaugural program. After a flurry of indignant press coverage, the Representative later explained his logic in the *Congressional Record* on January 16:

> My objections were based on but one thing: the known record of Aaron Copland for activities, affiliations and sympathies with and for causes that

[61] Aaron Copland, "American music and the American Scene, 1940/1950" (unpublished draft), Folder 14: Personal Writings, Box 202, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[62] Aaron Copland, *The New Music* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1968), 135-136.

> seemed to be more in an interest of an alien ideology than representative of Abraham Lincoln…I insist that as the number of such activities increase, assumption of the innocence of such a person must necessarily decrease.[63]

Copland allowed his legal representatives to denounce the accusations in demure but certain terms, yet he privately fumed over the insult of being accused of anti-American. Letters to and from the composer in the early weeks of 1953 show Copland enraged, indignant and confused. An undated letter addressed to President Eisenhower revealed the source of the composer's anguish:

> I was taught in a Brooklyn school to believe that an American had the right to speak his mind on controversial subjects and even to protest any action he believed unfair. I will not trade performances for the price of my right to freely express my opinion. Much as I dislike being smeared as a Red, I would still prefer my so-called questionable affiliations…my 'politics,' tainted or untainted, are certain to die with me, but my music, I am foolish enough to imagine, might just possibly outlive the Republican Party.[64]

While the tone of the letter suggests that Copland would remain irritated throughout his public outing as a "Communist sympathizer," his behavior throughout 1953 and well into the 1954 premiere of *The Tender Land* suggests the composer decided to hunker down more into abstract suggestion than into overt indignation. He did not retreat from his deeply rooted faith in the American qualities of his musical catalogue, nor did he avoid the pleasure of gently scolding the federal government for its seemingly counterintuitive stance on free speech and political expression. He did back off, however, in his open-throated defense of his previous — and, at the time, likely current — political preferences.

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[63] Rep. Fred E. Busbey, "Statement," *Congressional Record*, Jan. 16, 1953, Appendix, A178, Folder 7: Congressional Record, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[64] Aaron Copland to President Dwight Eisenhower (undated), Folder 8: Writings, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Just as the inaugural debacle began to fade from memory and the April State Department library ban ran through the press cycle, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations summoned Copland. He was ostensibly meant to testify as part of an ongoing investigation into the allocation of federal funds for the State Department's international teaching program, but the true 'witch-hunt' nature of the hearing was obvious to all involved.[65] The printed testimony from the May 25 hearing is a curious and lively document. Copland presented himself as a simple musician, and seemed to believe that the American qualities so universally acknowledged in his popular musical pieces would spare him any kind of suspicion or disregard. But the committee was not interested in Copland's deftly playful logic.

In one particularly terse and circular exchange, Senator McCarthy held Copland to task for a list of the composer's previous or current subversive affiliations; the committee produced the list independently and did not allow Copland time to prepare a response. "You have what appears to be one of the longest Communist-front records of anyone we've had here," McCarthy told Copland early in the proceedings.[66] McCarthy was mostly correct; the organizations appearing in the list — the Waldorf Astoria Conference, the Music Committee of the Council of American-Soviet Friendship — were all clubs or societies with which Copland had had at the very least a donation-based financial relationship in the past. McCarthy's chief objection was that many of those organizations appeared prominently on the State Department's poorly vetted yet powerful

[65] Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 457.
[66] Transcript, Copland hearing before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, 26 May 1953, Folder 3: Transcript, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

list of subversive organizations, making membership or involvement a vague but unacceptable liability for anyone in the public eye.[67]

What followed was a circuitous back and forth parry, with Copland insisting that his participation in most of the noted groups ended after the initial publication of the State Department's list, and McCarthy insisting that any kind of participation in any kind of group would make the participant subject to suspicion. Though Copland seemed to be aiming for some modicum of personal victory over his interrogators, the committee was not amused. Between the lines of circular logic and half-statements, Copland managed to lodge a few key one-liners that indicated his true sentiments:

> I am not a political thinker. My relation to politics has been extremely tangential…Musicians make music out of feeling aroused out of public events. A musician makes his muse out of emotion, and you can't muse unless you are moved by events…[but] I don't know what you mean by 'revolutionary music.'[68]

It is worth underlining just how starkly this statement contrasted with much of Copland's earlier life. Copland was a conscious and active promoter of "revolutionary music" during the Great Depression. His "Into the Streets: May First!" remained a noted Socialist anthem beyond its publication in the 1930s. The Aaron Copland of 1934 saw music as "a powerful weapon in the class struggle."[69] The Aaron Copland of 1950 told the graduating class of the Toronto Conservatory that "a composer is, after all, a man who

[67] Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, 208-216
[68] Transcript, Copland hearing before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, 26 May 1953, Folder 3: Transcript, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[69] Elisabeth B. Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front."

wants to communicate something."[70] The Aaron Copland of 1953 still believed this statement, but the Senate committee was not interested in such controversial sentiment. In all likelihood, Copland had not actually changed his personal politics, but the socio-political circumstances of the new decade made public ownership of those ideas increasingly distasteful and risky.

Copland survived the committee, but his application for a passport renewal later in the summer was held for further review.[71] Copland's efforts to secure a passport — for a cultural diplomacy event with the U.S. State Department, no less — suggest the extent to which he was willing to bend his politics to continue his career. "It is precisely because I have never thought of myself as politically engaged that I have no record of anti-Communist activities," he wrote in a November 2 letter to a passport office official. "I was not afraid of controversial issues," he insisted, "and did not believe controversy sufficient reason to steer clear of endorsements."[72] In a later letter, Copland's lawyer repeated the composer's constant musical argument in the face of pending political recrimination: "Although music probably has no political content, the subject matter of Mr. Copland's musical works…demonstrate his preoccupation with the American Scene and his efforts to compose a significant contemporary American music out of American themes or idioms."[73] Such half-arguments — Copland's music wasn't inherently political, but if it did have political meaning, it would be unquestionably American — fill

[70] Aaron Copland, "Address to Toronto Conservatory of Music, 1950," Folder 1: Speeches, Box 210, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[71] Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 458.
[72] Aaron Copland to Ashley Nicholas, November 2, 1953, Folder 4: Correspondence, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[73] Cox, Langerford, Stoddard and Luther to U.S. Passport Office, November 16, 1953, Folder Folder 4: Correspondence, Box 427, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Copland's public statements surrounding his eventful 1953. While these comments are a departure from his earlier vocal enthusiasm, they are surprisingly similar to the composer's aversion to any conversation or interview pertaining to romance or sexual preferences.

However contradictory, Copland's belief in the inherent 'Americanism' of his work carried over to the development of his new opera. Hinging on common 'folk' idioms and populist American themes, the work struck a distinct balance between radical progressivism and nationalistic mythos.[74] Copland's lifelong preoccupation with musical Americana extended into the operatic theatre; the composer often spoke and wrote on the "operatic problem," seeing the genre as the highest aim for any true composer, yet strangely beyond the reach of most modern American musicians of his day.[75] He also recognized the distant nature of the form, admitting to audiences that he grew up "thinking of the opera as a low-class affair."

Additionally, Copland often struggled to find an acceptable libretto and librettist for his mid-career dive into the operatic stage. The musical praise and textual critique that had greeted his "Second Hurricane" in 1937 served as Copland's constant reminder that a poorly formed dramatic arc could doom even the most accomplished composers.[76] The libretto Copland eventually chose — written by his sometime-lover and literary neophyte Erik Johns under the pseudonym of Horace Everett — was loosely based on James Agee and Walker Evans' 1941 folk-populist documentarian book, *Let Us Now*

[74] Elisabeth B. Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," 412.
[75] Aaron Copland, "The Operatic Problem," lecture given at Tanglewood Festival, 1954, Folder 6: The Operatic Problem, Box 214, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[76] Ryan Patrick Jones, "*The Tender Land*: Aaron Copland's American Narrative," unpublished PhD dissertation, Brandeis University, 2005, 30-32.

Praise Famous Men.

The libretto tells the story of an isolated farming community and its celebration of a graduating high school student, Laurie Moss. The young Laurie, who has been shepherded through life by her doting mother and grandfather, seeks wider horizons in the form of a pair of well-meaning drifters. While the community gathers to toast her pending graduation, Laurie falls in love with the drifter Martin, and as she kisses him, her grandfather accuses the man and his partner, Top, of raping another local girl. The family shuns Top and Martin, even when it is discovered that the rapists have been caught in another county, and Laurie leaves home in search of some other destiny and some new love. While not explicitly critical of the new nuclear family structure of the suburban 1950s, the fictional family's sense of larger communal cause and unified, harmonious effort can be read as nostalgic longing for a prewar collectivist aesthetic.

The music of the piece alternates between Copland's characteristic textural simplicity and a distinctive brand of pastoral folk song. The most stirring number comes at the end of the original first act, as the ensemble mixes traditional songs with a laudatory theme of unity and common effort. And a second act quasi-ballet seems to hark back to a more familiar European operatic tradition, with a large ensemble dancing to easily recognizable church hymns and folk tunes.[77]

Copland's personal response to his turbulent year of government intervention and investigation was added as the work entered an initial pre-rehearsal stage in 1954. After discussing possible changes to the original libretto throughout the final half of 1953 with Johns, Copland himself added a page in the middle of the opera's second act. "You can't

[77] Aaron Copland and Horace Everett, *The Tender Land* (New York City: Boosey & Hawkes, 1956).

trust strangers! They're guilty all the same!" Grandpa Moss tells the young Laurie on the new page, crystallizing Copland's sense of angry retribution in the face of his political critics.[78]

Cultural critics seemed to be just as displeased with the work as the composer's political detractors were with his earlier activities. The April 1, 1954 City Opera premiere of *The Tender Land* was a critical and public flop. The *New York Times* critic Olin Downes called the work "flimsy and pseudo-dramatic," with music that was "one-sided…uninteresting and insipid."[79] Copland's efforts to merge his American pastiche with the main tenets of operatic theory largely failed, despite the tasteful and well-executed City Opera staging. A *New Yorker* review blamed Copland more explicitly, calling his music "incapable of suggesting the passionate and poetic feelings of his characters."[80] Other reviewers commented on the work's simple themes, without noting the collective and hopeful message woven throughout the piece.

Despite a series of major revisions and subsequent revivals, the work failed to gain purchase, and its prospects diminished ever further as the optimistic anti-McCarthyist message became more and more anachronistic as the prosperous decade continued.[81] It is possible that Copland himself became less enamored of the work as by the close of the postwar decade: his autobiographical sketch at the end of the second edition of his book on American composers, *The New Music*, fails to include *The Tender Land* among the works he composed between the book's original publication date in 1941 (under the

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[78] Aaron Copland, "INSERT: *The Tender Land* , draft," Folder 69A: Revision for Tanglewood, Box 87, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[79] Olin Downes, "Music: Premiere of One-Act Opera," *The New York Times,* April 2, 1954, A, 24.
[80] Winthrop Sargeant, "Musical Events: A New Opera," *The New Yorker* Vol. XXX , No. 8 (April 10, 1954), 87.
[81] Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," 458.

original title *Our New Music*) and the revised version 1968.[82] In later interviews, Johns was convinced that Copland's blacklisting and pro-Soviet aura directly influenced the work's failure and the eventual cancellation of a pending contract to broadcast the opera on NBC.[83]

Music historians have called *The Tender Land* Copland's last major work. The demoralizing effect of critical failure and public distrust took a heavy toll on the aging composer. For a brief time after the opera's opening, Johns attempted to encourage Copland to reconsider the work. "I'm for scraping and simplifying. Before I rattle on, let me pass over your defeatist note of 'A flop and that's that.'"[84] Despite Johns' best efforts, Copland never changed his feelings on the initial disappointment of the work. In a possible attempt to rectify the shame of the failure, Copland lumped *The Tender Land* in with *The Second Hurricane* as "high school opera," making any structural or dramatic flaws a logical derivation from the works' simple and accessible format for young performers.

Even though later revised versions of the work moved the period back twenty years to the dawn of the twentieth century, it seems that Copland's constant frame of dramatic and cultural reference was always the 1930s. During that decade, the composer came of age politically, musically and socially. Not surprisingly, it was the era's common-cause, social crusading aesthetic that formed the narrative backbone of his 1954 opera. Unfortunately, the audiences of the 1950s were not as interested in looking twenty years behind them as Copland may have wished. The splendor, success and prosperity of the

[82] Copland, *The New Music*, 166–8.
[83] Ryan Patrick Jones, "*The Tender Land*: Aaron Copland's American Narrative," 67-87.
[84] Erik Johns to Aaron Copland, April 24, 1954, Folder 37: Johns, Erik, Box 256, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

new American age were too alluring to make any kind of removed, supposedly elitist critique of that age anything but a dismissible insult to common propriety.

Epilogue

Virgil Thomson had high hopes for American opera's prospects in the second half of the twentieth century. In a frothy and frivolous piece for his *New York Herald-Tribune* in late 1953, the reviewer and increasingly infrequent composåer suggested that "music [is] more popular than baseball."[1] Another piece from the same period posited that opera was on the cusp of a dramatic renaissance in the country:

> My prophecy (of the 1950s) is based entirely on present trends, is that in America, an expansion of the opera-producing mechanism may be expected to be comparable to that which took place during the 1930s in symphonic production. The Met cannot prevent it. In any case, the opera is America's passion today, and when America loves a thing, she usually sees that it becomes available to all at the top quality.[2]

It is not entirely clear what 'passion' Thomson was tapping into with these comments. Continued financial difficulties at the Met and other major opera houses limited the development of experimental or new productions in the 1950s, and the opera catalogue for the decade proved to mesh with earlier (real or perceived) biases against American works.[3] It is another study entirely as to whether American composers could truly write opera, or were instead destined to merely inflate musical theatre with an unnecessarily overwrought recitative. The question plagued all four of these composers and many of their serious-minded contemporaries, and continues to batter even the most beloved of American classics on the operatic stage. Virgil Thomson's famously bitter review of the 1935 *Porgy and Bess* premiere ("it is crooked folklore and halfway opera")

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[1] Virgil Thomson, "American Pulse," no date, *The New York Herald-Tribune*, Folder 213: Miscellaneous Articles, Box 82,Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[2] Virgil Thomson, untitled article, undated, Folder 210: Unidentified Articles, Box 81, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
[3] Irving Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera,* 210-240.

was one of many to question as to whether the George and Ira Gershwin really deserved to call their jazzy new work an opera.[4]

Further complicating matters was the stigma against new works in general. In his excellent 1965 Northwestern University Ph. D. dissertation, Leon Maurice Aufdemberge argues that the last decidedly accessible modern opera was *Der Rosenkavalier*, a 1911 composition by German composer Richard Strauss.[5] New works, like those of the composers featured in this essay, suffered at the hands of most company artistic managers.

Yet Blitzstein and Bernstein seemed to be struck by the same optimistic approach to American opera as Thomson. In a series of eerily similar articles, speeches and unpublished notes, each man suggested that opera in America was 'happening,' that the moment for further development and composition was the late 1950s and beyond. "Everybody fears the word opera," Blitzstein wrote in a draft of a proposed Brandeis University lecture in 1950. "The name has connoted for so long a remote theatre production sung in a foreign language, imported to the *nth* degree in a matter of works, limited to those rich enough to attend something that didn't interest them."[6] In this and other similar lectures beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the end of his life in 1964, Blitzstein stressed what he saw as a strong growth of American opera audiences, subject matter and excitement. While he frequently stepped off his soapbox to acknowledge the growing influence of musical theatre in the common American conception of operatic theatre, he remained committed to the idea that a new American

[4] Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of An American Classic* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 5.
[5] Leon Maurice Aufdemberge, "An Analysis of the Dramatic Construction of American Operas on American Themes, 1986-1958," Northwestern University, Ph.D., 1965, 82.
[6] Marc Blitzstein, "Notes on 'The New Lyric Theatre,'" May 17, 1950, Folder 3: Writings, Opera, Box 10, Marc Blitzstein Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

form of lyric theatre might result in the near future. It should be noted that Blitzstein's final, unfinished work was a revolutionary opera about the infamous 1927 execution of Italian-American Socialists Sacco and Vanzetti, which would have been likely performed at the Met had he not died.[7] It was certain to follow Blitzstein's typical patterns — using the trappings of high culture and elite art to tell a radical, controversial story.

Bernstein, too, was waiting for a new Americanized form of opera to take hold in a public that was growing increasingly fond of the eager, dynamic young conductor and composer. In a 1952 lecture at the University of Chicago, he articulated that "THE PRIMARY FUNCTION OF THE THEATRE IS NEW WORKS" (emphasis original), and that the American theatre especially might offer a new and creative approach to opera in the fertile years of the dawning decade.[8] Indeed, the call for new, native American works aligned with the aesthetic Bernstein had laid out in his 1939 Harvard University thesis — uniquely American works with uniquely American themes.[9] Bernstein did offer new works in the theatre after the failure of his *Trouble in Tahiti*: *Candide* (1956) and *West Side Story* (1957), with the latter recognized as the most significant and successful of his career. *Candide* was without question a critical comment "on anti-communist redbaiting and the Cold War culture of fear." The work garnered a chilly reception, due in part to Bernstein's collaboration with liberal author Lillian Hellman. Bernstein's final reference to the noble prewar concepts of the now dead

[7] Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music*: *The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 520-540.
[8] Leonard Bernstein, "The Composer and the Performer," (notes), University of Chicago lecture ,May 20, 1952, Folder 18: Writings / Speeches, 1952-, Box
[9] Geoffrey Block, "Bernstein's Senior Thesis at Harvard: The Roots of a Lifelong Search to Discover an American Identity," *College Music Symposium 48* (2008), 62.

Cultural Front almost drew a definite closure to that production framework in the United States.[10]

Not all the composers explored in this study felt the incessant tug of operatic future as the 1950s marched forward. Copland's muted defense of *The Tender Land* and his candid thoughts on the future of the musical form in the middle of the decade closely match his earlier attempts to revise the work after its diminished opening in New York. His notes for a symposium at the Tanglewood Music Festival in 1954 seem to be a quiet acceptance that "[one] cannot hope to successfully combine all the elements so that a unified result obtains the proper sphere of 'opera'…The American Complication [remains]: Is opera for us?"[11] He calls it a "dangerous form," and openly wonders if the loosely defined theme of "America" is worth exploring through music. While Copland also pauses to highlight the "American" theme of his own work set to appear at the festival in Stockbridge that summer, he seems reluctant to accept the shift in cultural priorities.

Why did these men, each of whom was so distinctly and fundamentally burned by a foray into the operatic field, fail to grasp the full gravity of the artistic moment that was quickly passing them by? It is far easier to imagine cultural transitions and periodical change when looking backwards, but living through a nuanced and gradated evolution makes such analysis difficult. More than a few grains of comprehension flit between the lines and letters these men left behind. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that these four

[10] Elizabeth B. Crist, "Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era: Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide,*" *The Journal of Musicology* 23 (Fall 2006), 486.
[11] Aaron Copland, "The Operatic Problem," notes for symposium at Tanglewood Music Festival, 1954, Folder 6: Tanglewood Opera Symposium, Box 214, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

composers and musical giants would even consider a grouping of their works along the socio-cultural lines fault lines proposed in this study.

For that very reason that such a grouping is worthwhile. Opera is not an innate barometer of cultural change. If anything, opera today remains a proximate parody of its assumed stereotype — distant, elite, culturally stagnant and socially irrelevant to most. But whether or not Copland, Bernstein, Blitzstein and Thomson were cognizant of the expectant possibilities of their era, the open artistic environment that framed the twenty years bridging World War II to the heights of the true Eisenhower era serves as a tantalizing suggestion of the ignored hopes of American opera. These men did not compose *the* definitive American opera, try as they might — that honor could and frequently does pass to George and Ira Gershwin — but their attempts were nevertheless a completely earnest foray towards such an end.

Personal and professional memories of the introspective and probing cultural climate of the 1930s helped push these four composers into a seemingly retroactive frame of reference, looking to prior success and previous concepts of artistic liberty to shore up their operatic efforts. The excitement surrounding the theatrical and musical world in the 1930s seemed to validate some of the experimental or radical art being produced at that time. The short-lived sponsorship of the federal government through the Federal One Arts projects of the Works Progress Administration added an apparent administrative endorsement to the prewar model. Adherence to that model assumed that the new audiences nurtured through the Federal Theatre projects would continue to grow, giving new operas a wide swatch of the possible viewing public to choose from.

These assumptions, models and references were all for naught. The changing political timbre of the nation's leaders put severe limits on suggestive political dialogue, and a near-universal desire for stability and national unity curtailed the kinds of expressive content that informed the four operas at the core of this study. The music in these works may have been new, but the format and form mirrored works from the earlier and more accessible prewar years. As this study has shown, these outdated references to the past were not the only reason why *The Mother of Us All, Regina, Trouble in Tahiti* and *The Tender Land* stumbled in performance, despite their all-star pedigree.

And what of the pedigree of *Porgy and Bess,* an "epochal event in American music" and the defining opera in the already reduced American cannon?[12] *Porgy and Bess* may hold that title presently, but even that honor was at times in doubt, especially during the 1940s and 50s. Bernstein wrote one of his hypothetical conversation pieces on the very question of *Porgy and Bess'* artistic merit; he accepted it as a great work of musical theatre but suggested that "it seem[ed] to have failed as a grand opera."[13] Based on the Metropolitan Opera metric of success introduced at the beginning of this study, *Porgy and Bess* did not enter New York's most-hallowed auditorium until 1985, a full fifty years after its original New York premiere.[14] The opera's all-black casting requirement was just as controversial as the all-black cast requirement in Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

Yet what made *Porgy and Bess* easier for a mass public to accept and eventually embrace was its careful transformation of a repressed minority's culture into a national

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[12] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess,* 6.
[13] Leonard Bernstein, "Why Don't You Run Upstairs and Write a Nice Gershwin Tune?" imagined dialogue, January 1954, Folder 28: Imagined Dialogue, Gershwin, Box 72, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[14] Robin Thompson, *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess: A 75th Anniversary Celebration* (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2010), 182.

soundtrack of musical and theatrical memories. Even more, the importance of the work's perceived themes of African-American empowerment and advancement through storytelling grew in tandem with the national civil rights movement, making that which was previously unmentionable or impossible in popular theatre increasingly commonplace.[15] The 1985 *Porgy and Bess* production at the Met was overblown and expensive, but by then the work had already appeared in the major houses of Europe, been made into a movie and provided scores of pop and jazz singers with a lengthy list of well-loved standards to cover. The work had achieved "immortality," even while its status as an opera continued to be under constant reconsideration.[16]

At the beginning of the next decade, Thomson returned to the subject of opera's future with a staunch defense of its traditions. The critic felt the need to directly answer growing concern in the music press that the genre was dying. Comment on the durability of the form is a mainstay of opera criticism; *New Yorker* Alex Ross' recent essay shows the surprising longevity of such trends, as he chides the modern Metropolitan Opera for its reliance on pretentious new versions of epic Wagnerian fare instead of promoting more difficult new works.[17] In 1960, however, Thomson gave the form a hearty defense:

> The idea that art forms 'die' when they cease to evolve is one of the strangest assumptions of our century. If no new opera were to be ever written again, surely the performance of those now extant would continue to be worthwhile. The creation of new operas in our century has proved nowhere near as fruitful as has been thought. There remains a possibility that the operatic idea might eventually be accepted in English…how can one not read the rumor of [opera's] pending decease as greatly exaggerated?[18]

[15] Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*, 113.
[16] Ibid, 329.
[17] Alex Ross, "Diminuendo", *The New Yorker* Vol. LXXXVIII, No. 4 (March 12, 2012), 82.
[18] Virgil Thomson, "Is Opera Dead?" article draft, post-1960, Folder 245: Is Opera Dead?, Box 83, Virgil Thomson Collection, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

As hearty as Thomson's endorsement may be, it is impossible not to read his support of the "now extant" operas as descended from his own treatment at the hands of the opera press. Faced with personal proof that new works are more likely than not bound to be professional failures, Thomson turned inward, invoking the past for inspiration. Battered by the trials of the postwar cultural debate, he provides an elegant artistic coda to the tumultuous period. The new Metropolitan Opera House and the increased participation of African Americans and other minority voices in major productions renewed opera in the 1960s. But it was not a complete rebirth. That happened earlier, and — through international politics, personal foibles and complicated equations of thematic dissonance — was an overly nostalgic stillbirth at best.

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