

United States of America

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Founded largely by religious refugees, the country resounded to their psalms before there was much other music from new arrivals. The **Bay Psalm Book** (1640) was the first volume printed in the British colonies; its ninth edition (1698) included the first printed music. Even a century later the first notable US composer, William Billings, was a psalmist, though secular music had started to make inroads with performances of ballad operas in Charleston, New York and Williamsburg in the 1730s.

In the early 19th century musical life began to be more thoroughly established, if almost entirely as an import business: the organization founded in Boston in 1815 was the Handel and Haydn Society (which survives), while in the operatically alive city of New Orleans the repertory was French and Italian. US composers of the period — Heinrich, Gottschalk — tended to be brilliant eccentrics on the sidelines. They and their successors — Fry, Bristow — were still largely ignored when US orchestras were founded, beginning with the ancestor of the New York Philharmonic in 1842. Nor was native music of much interest to the impresarios who brought in European stars to perform to immense audiences.

Certain traits in US music were thus well established before the Civil War (1861–5). Like any society of colonizers and immigrants, the country found itself with a mish-mash of traditions: from Britain came psalms and theatre songs, from the Mediterranean opera, from central Europe orchestral life, from all these places folk music of many kinds, and from Africa the less well recorded inheritances of slaves. **NEW YORK** — the main port of entry and internally a magnet by virtue of its work opportunities — had a particularly diverse culture. Moreover, as citizens of the first colonized territory to have established its independence, US musicians faced the questions of whether and how their music should be nationally distinctive. Also, as democrats, they had to consider how a musical culture of aristocratic origin could be made widely available. Education and showmanship were immediate issues.

More orchestras, opera companies, conservatories and concert societies date from the late 19th century, when a new generation of US composers appeared: Paine, MacDowell, Parker, Chadwick. All were trained in Germany and artistically stamped there. Dvořák, teaching in New York in the early 1890s, encouraged his pupils to listen to music nearer home, and his views were echoed in the work of Farwell, Cadman, Gilbert and, most extraordinarily, Ives. But indigenous music was already taking on a life of its own in ragtime, and the immense growth of **POPULAR MUSIC** in the 20th century — through jazz, show tunes and rock — gave forceful answers to the old questions, for here was music that could not have come from anywhere else and was universal in its appeal.

Indeed, the components of what is generally held to sound 'American' come largely from popular music: jazz rhythms, strong melody and emotional frankness, bold scoring and vigorous presentation, but also at times the quieter affirmations of hymns and blues.

Yet many US composers persisted in seeking other solutions, outside the commercial realm and in music of more ambitious scale. Coinciding with the emergence of the USA as a world power, around the time of the First World War, varieties of radical modernism began yielding results particular to the USA. Ives was godfather to this multifarious tradition, which embraced Varèse, Cowell and Ruggles, with Charles Seeger an important instigator.

But where Varèse had come from Europe to start afresh in New York, many composers in the 1920s and 1930s went in the reverse direction, not only to Germany but now also to Paris, where Boulanger taught Carter, Copland, Harris and others. Their music became marked by Stravinsky and the French tradition, while ties with Europe were further strengthened by the arrival of composers fleeing Nazism and war, among them Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Wolpe, though all worked differently in the USA, responding to popular music, opportunities for change and democratic ideals.

Stravinsky, Copland and Harris were among the last composers to be embraced by the country's mass culture, before that culture found its match in rock 'n' roll in the 1950s. The remaining (if diminishing) prestige of classical music as an educational good allowed many composers subsequently to find a place in academia; others gained support from patrons and foundations, and from working with dance or theatre companies. Babbitt and Cage are the cardinal examples of these alternatives, the one fizzing with ideas to impart, the other quietly going on saying he had none.

US music during the Cold War, from the late 1940s into the 1980s, grew in exuberant variety partly as an expression of individual liberty, in opposition to the state-led artistic policy of the Soviet Union. Composers espoused not only 12-note music (Babbitt) and chance (Cage) but also minimalism (Reich) and styles of more local reverberation, including tonal symphonism (Schuman) and post-Romantic opera (Barber), while Partch and Nancarrow continued the line of resolute independents and Carter created modernist summations. The later lack of cultural direction is sagely reflected in the postmodernism of Bolcom.

John Rockwell All American Music (1983); Richard Crawford America's Musical Life: A History (2001)

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