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The Erosion of the American Arts

Cultural Memory versus "Social Acceleration"

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Abstract A tidal continuum submerging the arts with entertainment may be traced in stages from silent film to film with sound, then color; to TV with its laugh and applause tracks; to YouTube, with its loud and irrelevant ads; to social media and the segmentation of Americans into consumers of political and cultural pabulum. The ease with which entertainment pays commercial dividends, the alacrity with which it can today be produced and acquired, are fatal enticements. At every stage, engagement grows ever more supine. Are these impediments deeply rooted in the American experience, even within the very ethos of democracy and freedom? Certainly there is an impressive lineage of writings analyzing an American aversion to artists and intellectuals. An enduring philosophical argument against the American arts was launched by Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Much more recently, positing "a new theory of modernism," the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls the governing dynamic "social acceleration"—and his prognoses are grim. With so much at stake, where does hope lie? Contrary to what might be thought or assumed, it cannot be said that America was never a fit home for the arts. During the Gilded Age, no one pondering issues of shared American identity would consider omitting the arts. In the decades after World War I, the arts were more widely but also more superficially acquired. I emphasize the possibilities for innovation in my own field: orchestras. They were once an American bellwether. Two recent controversies drive home the moment—the resignation of Esa-Pekka Salonen as music director of the San Francisco Symphony, and the engagement of Klaus Makela as music director of the Chicago Symphony. Curating the American musical past, comparable to the efforts of art museums, remains unattempted. A case in point is the Charles Ives Sesquicentenary, ignored by the major US orchestras.

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I – "What the Hell Happened?"

The gripping cover story of the 2024 December issue of *The Atlantic* is "How the Ivy League Broke America." David Brooks, its distinguished author, characteristically adapts a purview broader, more based in political and cultural memory, than that of other pundits. Here, he applies a fresh historical perspective to our current national crisis, arguing that an exaggerated emphasis on intellectual aptitude, traceable to the educational priorities of Harvard President James Conant (1933–1953), fostered a new "meritocracy"—an American ruling class defective in other human virtues. "Is your IQ the most important thing about you?" Brooks asks. He answers: "No. I would submit that it's your desires—what you are interested in, what you love. We want a meritocracy that will help each person identify, nurture, and pursue the ruling passion of their soul" (Brooks). Brooks is addressing the rampaging malaise that all acknowledge—friendlessness and depression; opioid addiction and rage; political and governmental dysfunction. The diagnoses he adduces (packed with social science statistics) are more compelling than the remedies he glimpses. And one obvious source of remediation is hiding in plain sight: Amid a dozen pages of dense argumentation, Brooks only once drops the word "art." And yet, it seems to me obvious that a rapid erosion of the American arts as previously experienced—in child-rearing, education, and higher education; in civic identity; in media and social media; and in our daily lives—is a crucial impediment to nurturing "what you love" and pursuing "the ruling passion" of the soul. And I find myself ever more mindful of how fundamentally exposure to the arts has diminished during my own lifetime.

No viewer could possibly glean the hypnotic impact of Marian Anderson from watching the 2022 public television documentary *Marian Anderson: The Whole World in Her Hands*. Over the course of one hour and 53 minutes, Anderson rarely performs or speaks for as long as a minute without some form of interruption—a photograph, a film, a voice-over advisory. When the moment comes for "My Country 'Tis of Thee" on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—a mesmerizing newsreel clip—she sings for 17 seconds before

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a re-enacted commentary takes precedence ("I as an individual was not important on that day—it happened to be the people I represented"), accompanied by an inter-racial gallery of American faces; the singing continues as a backdrop.

One has to go back to 1957—to Edward R. Murrow and "See It Now"—to encounter a fundamentally different approach.[1] Documenting Anderson's recent tour of Asia, this twenty-five-minute commercial TV show is sufficiently patient that one can engage in the moment. Her performance of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" unfolds gloriously in six contrasting verses. And we feel privileged to see her sing a four-minute operatic aria, "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix," from Saint-Saens' *Samson and Delilah*, with the fledgling Bombay City Symphony. No one feels impelled to inform us that Marian Anderson is a great artist. What Murrow does have to say, at the close, is: "This is the moment in our show when normally we would insert a commercial. There will be none" (*The Lady from Philadelphia*). A tidal continuum submerging the arts with entertainment may be traced in stages from silent film to film with sound, then color; to TV with its laugh and applause tracks; to YouTube with its loud and irrelevant ads; to social media and the segmentation of Americans into consumers of political and cultural pabulum. The ease with which entertainment pays commercial dividends, the alacrity with which it can today be produced and acquired, are fatal enticements. At every stage, engagement grows ever more supine.

Arts skeptics will argue that these impediments are deeply rooted in the American experience, even within the very ethos of democracy and freedom.[2] Certainly, there is an impressive lineage of writings analyzing an American aversion to artists and intellectuals. Alexis de Tocqueville, nearly two centuries ago, observed in his *Democracy in America* that "Democracy [...] gives men a sort of instinctive distaste for what is ancient" (834). Assessing "Democratic institutions and the democratic social state," he discerned the human mind's tendency "toward the useful rather than toward the beautiful as regards art" (788).[3]

No less than ascetic Calvinism, Republican rationalism could spurn creative achievement. If popular government demanded a virtuous and pious citizenry, monarchies linked to sensuality and decadence. Were the arts an aristocratic luxury? Or could they alternatively embody virtue? Even the likes of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson—cosmopolites of humbling intellectual attainment—expressed ambivalence toward the cultivation of painting and sculpture. “Too expensive for the state of wealth among us,” opined Jefferson (405). Conducive to “luxury and effeminacy,” wrote Adams (22).[4] Both men well knew pre-revolutionary Paris.[5]

Many decades later, American politicians of note included no Adamses or Jeffersons. Edward Shils, a widely influential sociologist, in 1960 regretted that in the US “the political elite gives a preponderant impression of indifference toward works of superior culture” (297). In 1963, the historian Richard Hofstadter produced a Pulitzer-Prize winning study of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. He adduced an enduring New World stereotype of the effete intellectual: impractical, artificial, arrogant, seduced by European manners. A related American stereotype, Hofstadter reported, holds the “genius” to be lazy, undisciplined, neurotic, imprudent, and awkward. He blamed democratization, utilitarianism, and evangelical Protestantism. These critiques registered aversion to the Red Scare and also to the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, who once told Leonard Bernstein “I like music with a theme, not all them arias and barcarolles” (quoted in Burton 316).

The subsequent Kennedy Presidency split intellectual opinion. That Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger were Harvard alumni, that Press Secretary Pierre Salinger had once aspired to become a concert pianist, that the White House hosted Pablo Casals and Igor Stravinsky contributed to a high-toned aura seductive only to some. Christopher Lasch, in 1965, looked back at the 1950s and wrote: “The intellectual’s cosmopolitanism [seemed] un-American, his sophistication snobbery, his accent affectation, his clothes and his manner the badge, obscurely, of sexual deviation.” Though Lasch added that the allure of Kennedy’s “Camelot”—of a suave intellectual surrounded by intellectuals—registered changing American perceptions (Horowitz, *Propaganda of Freedom* 16), he also wrote:

> The cult of the Kennedys showed that culture had become practically synonymous with chic . . . Looking at the Kennedy administration from a distance, one could not avoid the suspicion that what liberals called his style consisted largely of a Harvard education, a certain amount of conscientious concertgoing, and a feeling, never very precise, that the arts ought somehow to be officially encouraged. The desperate gratitude with which intellectuals welcomed even these few crumbs from the presidential table was disheartening. (31)

An enduring philosophical argument against the American arts was launched by Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School. This was a tirade against the "atomized" premises of Anglo-American empiricists who in separating the individual from society spurned a vigorously "holistic" dialectic. "Affirmative" American culture was bland and homogenized, rather than bristling with "negative" attributes igniting an engaged interactive response. Packaged and merchandized for mass consumption, affirmative culture was a feature of twentieth-century capitalism. Concomitantly, capitalist society embraced a mistaken notion of the artist as a distant actor, unfettered and autonomous. The very DNA of American democracy—its very notion of "freedom"—was in the Frankfurt view a naïve myth.[6]

The contemporary pertinence of all this philosophizing is everywhere around us: increasingly, our democratic world of social media and mounting, ever multiplying gadgetry swims in bits and pieces, in disconnected dots, in superficia and ephemera—an ontology of fragmentation.[7] And, far from being the product of any philosophy or ideology, the cause is global: technological. Looking at the big picture, positing a "new theory of modernity," the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls the governing dynamic "social acceleration"—and his prognoses are grim. In *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (2015), first published in German in 2005, Rosa lists three "fundamental dimensions" of social acceleration: technological (including transportation, communication, and production), social (fashions, lifestyles, family structures, political and religious ties), and pace of life (a "scarcity of time resources"). He predicts "the unbridled onward rush into an abyss," possibly including nuclear or climatic catastrophes (Rosa 322). He also predicts—accurately—"the diffusion at a furious pace of new diseases" and "new forms of political collapse" (321). He foresees "eruptions of uncontrolled violence" among "masses excluded from the processes of acceleration and

growth" who "take a stand against the acceleration society" (321–22). A complimentary perspective on atomization—more personal, less theoretical—comes from the global warming activist Bill McKibben: *The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened* (2022). "Suburban Americans produce about twice as much carbon as their urban brethren," McKibben reports (192). But his central topics are "suburbanization" and "hyper-individualism." A car-centric habitat, with vacant sidewalks and yards, grows ever whiter and more affluent. Concomitantly, church membership dwindles while an accelerating "right-wing evangelism" promotes "a personal and almost mercenary relationship to God," a self-described "accountable individualism" that abandons citizenry and community (192–94).

> The story of choosing private over public has been the crucial philosophical shift of my lifetime....On average, a suburban American lives in a bigger home, sharing with fewer people. And on average they spend more of their time looking at a screen—most likely the smallish rectangle in their palm. The average American has gone from having three close friends in 1970 to two now. Only a quarter of Americans have managed to become friends with *any* of their neighbors. The average American adult hasn't made a new friend in the last five years. We consume more, and we do more privately: that is what the suburban experience amounts to, in purely physical terms. (156–57)

Neither Rosa nor McKibben highlight the arts. But atomization plagues accusations of "cultural appropriation" that today bedevil the creative act. All art is appropriative; it defies the notion that, locked in our disparate identities, we cannot know or speak for one another. Also: a privatized, atomized lifestyle promotes neither arts patronage nor production. Rather, its diversion mode is the soundbite: particulate cultural matter; stranded arts particles.

In my world of classical music, nothing here resounds more loudly than Rosa's "scarcity of time resources" (301). The cafes and salons, trains and ocean liners that once opened windows for reflection are long forgotten. The violinist Felix Galimir, who knew Webern, Berg, and Schoenberg abroad, made historic recordings of new music by Berg and Ravel as a member of the Galimir Quartet. In the United States, he became a member of Toscanini's NBC Symphony, and then a distinguished teacher of chamber music. He

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once told me: “I can’t understand it. When I was in Vienna, there was always time. Here, everyone is always busy.” Lazar Gosman was a prominent Soviet chamber and orchestra musician before joining the St. Louis Symphony. He once told me: “When I was in Leningrad, after a concert everyone would get together after a concert in someone’s home, to eat and drink. We needed to talk about the concert. Here they all run for their cars.” Galimir in Vienna and Gosman in Leningrad were members of a densely bound community of culture.

In my “other” world of music history, atomization takes the form of disciplinary boundaries and ideological restrictions. Meanwhile, the arts are disappearing altogether from mainstream American historical narratives. Allen Guelzo, the rare present-day historian deeply versed in the American arts, is most recently the author of a biography of Robert E. Lee. He reports: “Nothing surprised me more than tripping over the odd fact that when Lee was Superintendent of West Point, the faculty got together to play Schumann and Mendelssohn string quartets.”[8] Guelzo terms classical music a “foreign country” for those who write about the United States.

> If any thought is given to classical music at all, it’s as a social representation of elite class identity. And yet classical music is an enormously supple conveyer of social meaning.

Guelzo considers our current understanding of the American past “desperately shortchanged” even by those who professionally study it (“Lost and Found”).[9]

As for music itself: can it still remember its own past? A distinguished music historian of my acquaintance reports that he can no longer teach sonata form to undergraduate Music majors. The glory of Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony, movement one, is neither its tunes nor its temper, but its structure. To appreciate the rightness of the majestic three-minute coda—an unprecedented inspiration—the full trajectory of the movement must be absorbed and retained. For centuries, a defining feature of classical music—a lineage—has been the complex organization of time: articulating and shaping long-range structures.

The concert pianist who today plays more American music than any other pianist ever has happens to be an Italian based in Italy. Emanuele Arciuli is a shrewd and fascinated observer of American identity. In a recent conversation, he pondered the indispensable role of memory in listening to music. You can read a novel in the present moment. But processing sonata form, brain and ears must remain attuned to what has gone before. For Arciuli, the opposite extreme is the music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, in which "no matter how hard you try, you cannot even recall what you heard a moment ago." Their compositions, he declares, are "really American" (from a conversation with the author).

Among the freshest voices in American music today belongs to a composer in his seventies: John Luther Adams, who spent formative decades in Alaska. The shifting sonorities of his vast nature tapestries subvert cliche. Adams' lineage connects to such self-made mavericks as John Cage and Henry Cowell. I cannot think of a less atomized musical intelligence. Its anthesis is the impulsive eclecticism of many a young American composer—fast food music that proclaims untethered lightness a virtue.

America's master musical eclecticist, Lou Harrison, invested a lifetime of study mastering, and only then fusing, disparate musical cultures, East and West. As of this writing, the most performed contemporary American concert work may be *Strum* by Jessie Montgomery. She is a violinist turned composer who shoots from the hip. Performable by any number of strings, *Strum* invokes popular string idioms. In the right context, its happy energy delights. In the wrong context, its strumming and plucking vigor becomes tiresome. On the web, you can see a rendition by the strings of London's Philharmonic Orchestra—and reflect that these players are long familiar with Edward Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* and Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*: mainstays of the British string-orchestra repertoire. It would be reckless to present such compositions alongside *Strum*. Among recent operas on Black topics, Terence Blanchard's *Champion*—about the boxer Emile Griffith—may be the most prominent. The libretto, by Michael Cristofer, tells a good story skillfully. The inadequate musical underpinning largely comprises a series of harmonically static sonic tableaus. I infer, a

gifted jazz artist bravely but prematurely embarking on unfamiliar terrain. Comparisons to *Porgy and Bess* are inescapable. It, too, attempts a new kind of opera invoking the Black vernacular. But Gershwin, quite obviously, is cognizant of *Carmen*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Wozzeck*. Blanchard omits the operatic past. Gershwin studies and uses it; this homework fortifies innovation.

Even when not "makeshift," the cross-cultural symphonic adventures of gifted young Americans to my ears do not much appeal to cultural or musical memory. What I find missing is the challenging organization of structure (of time) that has historically distinguished Western classical music. Consider, for instance, the later symphonies of Jean Sibelius, which combine an ingenious mastery of ambient texture—somewhat kindred to John Luther Adams—with self-generating structures so subtly engineered that the music seems to discover itself. That is: Sibelius equally challenges ear and brain. He builds on past achievements studied and internalized. Today, the dialectical tension between past and present, long the mainspring for musical creativity, has seemingly gone slack.

The etymology of "classical music," at least in the United States, is pertinent. It's a story I have told before: When John Sullivan Dwight, in *Dwight's Journal of Music*, influentially defined this term for Americans in the 1850s, he was valorizing music distinct from popular entertainment—music, that is, that had endured or would endure because embedded in lineage and tradition. And a "classic," concomitantly, was a high exemplar of such musical production (Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, 26–27).

Does social acceleration in fact herald a new arts moment? Does the pronounced disassociation of so much new music from a lineage of shared cultural inheritance signify a fundamentally different way of doing things? Or does it more simply signify a movement to ignore or minimize the cultural past as irrelevant or tainted?

A pastlessness mutually enforced by woke activism and social acceleration is a volatile arts phenomenon that may or may not ignite a backlash.

II – What to Do?

With so much at stake, where does hope lie?

The notion of folk roots engendering a nation's arts, buttressing national identity and pride, is universal. The most famous Finn is Sibelius, whose symphonies feast on runes and crags. The most famous Colombian is a novelist: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose magic realism seizes the frisson of intermingled Indigenous and European influences in remote South American habitats. The most famous Englishman is William Shakespeare, whose plays equally relish the groundlings and aristocrats onstage and off. Some of Schubert's most famous songs are practically indistinguishable from folk tunes. Verdi's "Va pensiero" became a patriotic anthem. The iconic Russian opera, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, is saturated with Russian liturgical ceremony.

Contrary to what might be thought or assumed, it cannot be said that America was never a fit home for the arts. It is true that compared to Old World nations, the United States lacks a consolidation of folk roots. It is true that (as I have arguably over-stressed) currents in American religion, thought, and government—an ideological predilection to extol the unfettered individual; a populist Jacksonian inheritance in tension with Jeffersonian legacies of European Enlightenment—complicate the prospective role of American novelists, composers, and painters. And, most pertinently, it is true that the American memory is short. All the more reason to recall that, during the Gilded Age, no one pondering issues of shared American identity would consider omitting the American arts. Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Willa Cather, Henry James, Charles Ives, Thomas Eakins, and Louis Sullivan were some of the creators who long ago furnished formidable mirrors on the American experience—as did Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Fisk Jubilee Singers.[10]

In the decades after World War I, the arts were more widely but also more superficially acquired.[11] Nevertheless, they punctuated the national moment when Marian Anderson sang from the Lincoln Memorial, when Norman Cor-

win's "We Hold These Truths" was broadcast on every national network in the wake of Pearl Harbor, when the plays of Clifford Odets gave voice to victims of the Depression. Hollywood's most expensive silent film, Buster Keaton's *The General*, was a supreme artistic achievement. Leonard Bernstein's televised Young People's Concerts, on CBS, tutored a generation of listeners to classical music (but two decades later proved too esoteric for public television).

Americans who paid to scrutinize Frederic Church's "Heart of the Andes" (1859) brought along magnifying devices. Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) was read aloud by the fireside for decades. When movie palace audiences, imagining words they could not hear, shared the World War I combat trauma visualized by King Vidor in *The Big Parade*, when an NBC announcer described Arturo Toscanini dropping to his knees in response to Mussolini's fall, or singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" facing a Carnegie Hall audience, a community of experience was clinched. "Social capital" was instilled. And so, to a notable degree, was faith in the future, and in humankind.

Stranded in the present moment, how can we connect the dots? How to link the atoms? An incipient movement to ban cell phone use in schools is one place to start. But for an umbrella concept, how about: Use the past. Reconnect with cultural memory. It can still furnish roots, anchorage, and ballast. An American inheritance veritably exists but is, in the blink of an eye, being suddenly forgotten.

Two obvious priorities are educational and financial. Renewed arts education would mean both studying cultural realms swiftly receding from memory, and counteracting diminishing active arts engagement: making music, theater, painting, writing, and dancing as amateur pastimes of consequence. And our artists themselves, finally, need a new form of assistance: government subsidies on the European model. These are great aspirations requiring a caliber of national leadership that seems inconceivable for now. Better to start with individual institutions of culture susceptible to genuine innovation.

I am mainly thinking of my own field: orchestras. They were once an American bellwether, actually an American invention in contradistinction to the pit orchestras of Europe. Theodore Thomas, whose barnstorming Thomas orchestra crisscrossed the nation for decades, said: "A symphony orchestra shows the culture of the community" (Horowitz, *Classic Music in America*, 32–37). And so it did, in cities large and small. But over the course of the twentieth century, American orchestras languished in the past, burdened by spiraling costs, diminishing audiences, labor problems, and managerial passivity. Their marginality is today so obvious that fundamental change should logically become feasible. Surely pilot projects for innovation will materialize.

Two recent controversies drive home the moment. Last March, Esa-Pekka Salonen resigned as conductor of the San Francisco Symphony after three years on the job. He blamed the board for failing to support his artistic initiatives. The board claimed financial exigency. The story resonated because Salonen is the rare "music director" who does much more than wave a baton. As he showed during his tenure with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he possesses a rare capacity to project and animate institutional vision. He looked for Americans he could champion and came up with two first-rate West Coast composers—John Adams and Bernard Herrmann—and a magnificent Mexican: Silvestre Revueltas. He inquired into the LA sojourns of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. He reshaped the Philharmonic as a cultural institution distinctive to southern California and in synch with contemporary cultural mores.

Far more common is the "music director" in name only who presides over two or more orchestras and spends ten weeks with each. Hence the second recent controversy: last April, Klaus Makela was named music director of the Chicago Symphony. He will concurrently become the music director of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra. He will retain relationships with the Oslo Philharmonic and the Orchestre de Paris. He will be all of thirty-one years old.

What is Chicago forfeiting? Take a look at art museums and you will find out.

In 2018, New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art produced an exhibit called "Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings." Cole was the teacher of Frederic Church. He was himself a landscape artist of note—but not, like Church, a top-drawer iconic American. The exhibit explored (and displayed) European influences on Cole, including major works by J. M. W. Turner, Claude Lorrain, and John Constable. A video, produced by the museum, called Cole "a torchbearer who created a defining [New World] aesthetic"—epic canvases of mountains and plains inhabited not by peasants and farmers, but by Native Americans. The exhibit linked to nine exhibition tours, two concerts, and a major publication. In short: this was an exemplary curatorial initiative.

In the world of American orchestras, this example is mainly irrelevant, because curatorial initiatives have rarely been attempted. Were an orchestra to undertake something like "Thomas Cole's Journey," it would tell the story of the beginnings of the American symphony. The relevant early symphonists, corresponding to Cole and Church, would be John Knowles Paine and George Whitefield Chadwick. The pertinent period is 1875 to 1894. But these composers remain unperformed and unknown. If Paine's formidably realized symphonies draw direct inspiration from Beethoven and Schumann, that is part of the story at hand. If Chadwick's are the first American symphonies to "sound American," that, too, is part of a necessary tale.

That is: because American classical music remains fundamentally Eurocentric, because the standard repertoire basically ignores the American experience, going forward will also require going backward—cultivating American cultural memory, especially of artworks insufficiently appreciated or newly pertinent. The present emphasis on diversity and inclusivity impelled a belated start of sorts. Florence Price (1875–1953), in particular, has been raised from obscurity: orchestras everywhere are programming her interwar symphonies and piano concertos. But this startling initiative more discloses the problem than the solution: a minor African American composer has been elevated to a high symphonic pantheon, lowering the bar for future entrants. What remains absent is a considered curatorial initiative.

Unremembered is that a considered curatorial initiative was in fact once prominently attempted. In a remarkable memo outlining his inaugural year as music director of the New York Philharmonic (1958–59), Leonard Bernstein wrote: "The season is divided into seven periods of four weeks each, except for the final period, which is six weeks. I will conduct periods 1, 3, 5, and 7. The overall point of my eighteen weeks is a general survey of American Music from the earliest generation of American composers to the present" (Horowitz, "A Wunderkind"). And so it was. Bernstein's first subscription program—comprising William Schuman's *American Festival Overture*, Charles Ives' Symphony No. 2, and Beethoven's Symphony No. 7—encapsulated his supreme aspiration: that American orchestras would prioritize American works. They would belatedly clinch an American canon. And they would honor European progenitors.

The ensuing weeks presented forgotten turn-of-the-century Americans: George Chadwick, Arthur Foote, and Edward MacDowell. These—plus Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, and Wallingford Riegger, all of more recent vintage—comprised Bernstein's "Older Generation." Then came "The Twenties" (Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Edgard Varèse), "From the Crash through the Second World War" (Samuel Barber, Randall Thompson, Roy Harris, Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, Virgil Thomson), and "The Young Generation" (Kenneth Gaburo, Lukas Foss, William Russo, Easley Blackwood Jr.). On top of all that, sixteen of Bernstein's twenty-nine soloists for the season were born in North America (Horowitz, "Leonard Bernstein").

Plainly, Bernstein's mission was to create an American template for American orchestras—an aspiration as necessary as it was belated. And he kept at it—only to resign, discouraged, after a decade in the job. Both the attempt and its failure remain instructive. Bernstein's mentor, Serge Koussevitzky, had laid the groundwork during his long tenure (1924–1949) as music director of the Boston Symphony. Koussevitzky was convinced that America's composers were on the cusp—that "the next Beethoven vill from Colorado come" (Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, 304). He closely allied with Copland. He tirelessly championed the contemporary Americans Copland espoused. He created Tanglewood as an American music laboratory (296–304). None

of this was curatorial—Koussevitzky was not one to look back or far afield. But his was a formidable step forward—he would break the musical umbilical cord to Old World masters. He pushed for Bernstein to become his successor, but the board chose an Alsatian with no known affinity for American repertoire: Charles Munch.

The New York Philharmonic of 1958—where Bernstein landed—was an orchestra whose own board had rebelled against the 34-year reign of Arthur Judson. Judson's artistically conservative management style had led to a dead end. The board passionately embraced Bernstein's "general survey of American music" (Horowitz, "A Wunderkind"). And yet, ten years later, they chose a new music director even more divorced from American music than Munch in Boston: Pierre Boulez. Bernstein had reportedly lobbied for Lukas Foss—like Bernstein, himself an American composer of distinction. Thus, Bernstein found himself with the wrong orchestra—Boston, Tanglewood included, would have been an ideal venue for innovation. And there was a second obstacle. From Copland, Bernstein had inherited a modernist narrative for American music that discounted all composers preceding World War I. In fact, this misunderstanding was pervasive; Copland himself, it was believed, was the first American composer of wide consequence.

Most glaringly, neither Bernstein nor anyone else in the American symphonic community, as of 1958, attended to Black classical music. And yet, beginning in 1893 with Antonin Dvorak's widely noticed prophecy that "Negro melodies" would foster a "great and noble school" of American classical music (Horowitz, *Dvorak's Prophecy*, 9), a lineage of notable African American composers had emerged. The first African American composer of high consequence was Harry Burleigh, once Dvorak's assistant. It was Burleigh who was mainly responsible for turning the Black spirituals of the South into widely popular concert songs. He was also a gifted composer of art songs. But Burleigh did not compose for the orchestra. Of those Black Americans who did so during the interwar decades, the most notable was William Levi Dawson, whose *Negro Folk Symphony* (1932) is as formidable as any of the American symphonies championed by Koussevitzky or Bernstein.

But Dawson—like Price, Nathaniel Dett, and William Grant Still—was overlooked and forgotten.[12]

Even more conspicuously overlooked—by Koussevitzky and Bernstein both—was Charles Ives. Not only may Ives today be regarded as the supreme American composer for orchestra; as his essential methodology is based in retrospection, he himself curates the American past. No other composer connects more explicitly with the Transcendentalist tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. No other resonates so mightily with the Civil War and issues of race and American identity. As earlier noted, Bernstein's 1958–59 season began with Ives' Second Symphony, which Bernstein himself had premiered in 1951. But this is an early and uncharacteristic work mainly finished by 1902. Bernstein esteemed it as an exemplar of Ives the "authentic primitive" (*Dvorak's Prophecy*, 93)—a description unsuited to Ives' subsequent two symphonies or to his *Three Places in New England*: major works that for many today map the summit of the American orchestral repertoire. These are New World tapestries far superseding Dvorak's in density and complexity, in which shards of national memory—iconic songs, places, events, bidden and unbidden, conscious or subliminal—overlap and intersect, joining or dueling with one another.

Allen Guelzo, a notable historian of Lincoln and the Civil War, writes tellingly: "Ives hoped his music would re-attach Americans, in a profound and almost mystical fashion, to the moral values of democratic life he had seen affirmed in the smalltown world of his [Connecticut] upbringing, in the life of his Civil War veteran-father, and the honest simplicity of preachers and hymn-singers . . . He is veritably a voice of indignation against erasure and forgetfulness" (Guelzo, "Charles Ives's Civil War," unpublished essay).

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A parting shot: Taking as a specific case, the Charles Ives Sesquicentenary (Ives was born in 1874), what may be the specific remedial strategies at hand? How best to promote cultural memory in the throes of speeding social acceleration?

More than ignored, Ives is allegedly toxic: he bears an esoteric taint. Our orchestras shy away in ignorance and fear. He remains a fringe composer. And yet, Aaron Copland's America, so well known, is by comparison synthetic, its buoyancy more than ever cartoonish in these troubled times. Ives insists upon a density and complexity of retrospection unknown to Copland and his contemporaries. He magnificently, even truculently preaches the common good. My own recent efforts to celebrate the Ives Sesquicentenary have included a "visual presentation" and a film.

Adding a screen to a symphonic concert is a dangerous practice that nearly always dilutes the musical experience. But adding something to look at can also focus the ears. In the case of Ives, "The St. Gaudens at Boston Commons" furnishes an opportunity both unique and essential. Ives' abolitionist grandparents exerted a legacy that infiltrates his creative identity—most notably in "The St. Gaudens at Boston Common," the first of his *Three Places in New England*. Ives here keys on the justly famous August St. Gaudens bas relief depicting Colonel Robert Gould Shaw's heroic but ill-fated Black Civil War regiment, with its imagery of proud Black faces and striding Black bodies. He conceives a singular ghost-dirge: music barely tangible, exempt from precedent and contemporary practice, suffused with weary echoes of Civil War songs, work songs, plantation songs, church songs, minstrel songs: a dream distillation whose hypnotic tread evokes stoic fortitude.

"The Things Our Fathers Loved"—one of Ives' best-known songs, setting his own text—begins: "I think there must be a place in the soul all made of tunes, of tunes of long ago." He also is reputed to have written: "I hate all music." Ives' mature idiom absorbs a memory cloud of blurred tunes and events. It is extraordinarily potent, but only once the listener acquires bearings. A first encounter with "The St. Gaudens at Boston Common" is likely to lead nowhere. For an Ives Sesquicentenary festival at Indiana University last October, the video artist Peter Bogdanoff created a visualization, subtly keyed to the music, which explored St. Gaudens' sculpture and also cited "Marching through Georgia" and other tunes diffused by Ives. You can see it here:

Figure 1. https://www.artsjournal.com/uq/2024/09/a-revelatory-visual-rendering-of-an-american-musical-masterpiece.html

Carnegie Hall performances of "The St. Gaudens" that I have attended—with famous orchestras and conductors—mystified sympathetic audiences. At Indiana University, Bogdanoff's visual track was transformative. Rather than a distraction, it counteracted distraction. It won converts.

Bogdanoff has also furnished a continuous visual track for a ninety-minute documentary, *Charles Ives*' AMERICA, that I produced for Naxos in 2021. For the Sesquicentenary, Naxos is streaming it on YouTube. It aspires to pitch Ives to audiences for whom, like most readers of this journal, American classical music is less familiar than American literature and visual art. And here it is:

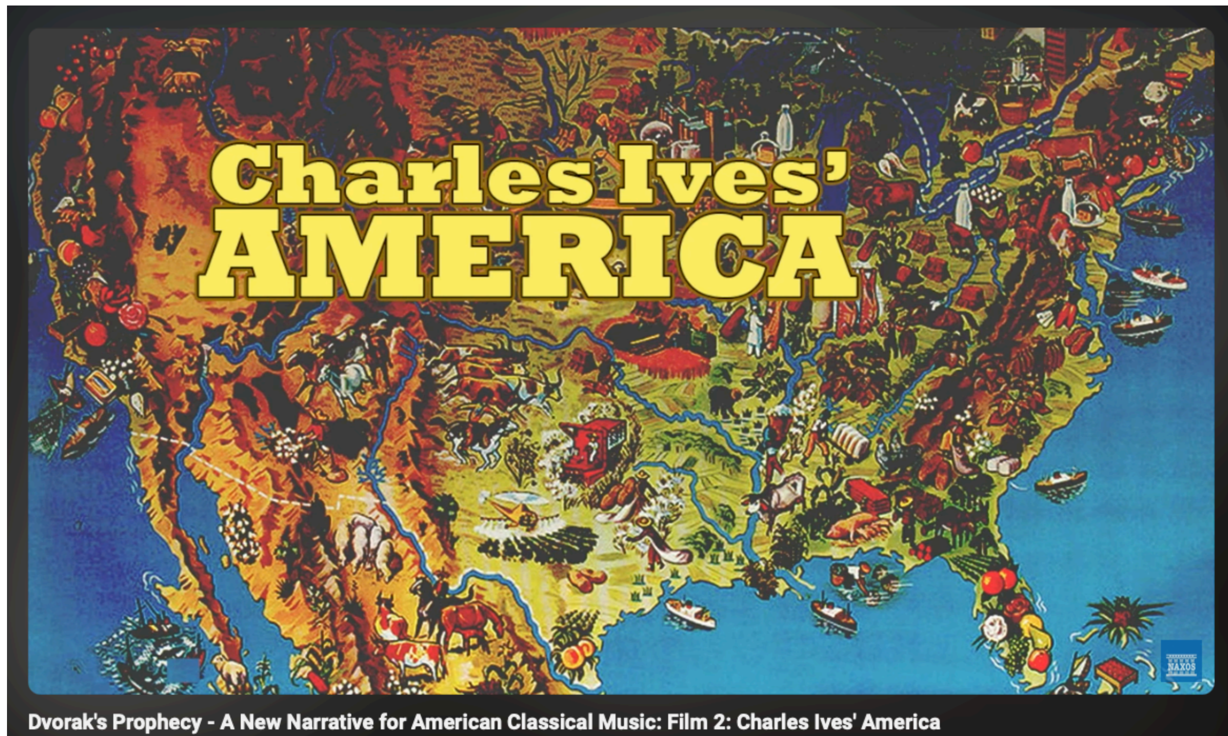

Figure 2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUMu1qisXoM

At the Indiana University festival, the 89-year-old pianist Gilbert Kalish, long an esteemed Ives advocate, reflected on Ives' fate in recent decades: what once seemed a surge of interest and appreciation has sharply dissipated. Kalish termed that a "tragedy." And the conductor JoAnn Falletta has called *Charles Ives*' AMERICA "very likely the most important film ever made about American music—for it moves Ives from the fringes squarely to his position as the seminal composer of our country."[13] The reason these assessments are not hyperbolic is that Ives exerts a moral force. As the film argues, he was long misidentified as a prophetic modernist, inventing new harmonic and rhythmic strategies. In fact, Ives was estranged by modernism and art for art's sake. Rather, he preached an uplift and a democratic ethos. His formative decades, preceding World War I and its disillusionments, were spent ensconced in what was for American artists and intellectuals a meliorist fin-de-siecle moment.[14]

And, as the film concludes, Ives embodies a signature American trope: the self-made, unfinished creative genius. He deserves to be as well-known, as iconic, as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, or William Faulkner.

He, too, forges his own way through a cultural wilderness. At the same time, he is distinctively sanguine. The jousts with darkness bedeviling Twain, Melville, and Faulkner have no counterpart in Ives. Notwithstanding the neglect of his music, notwithstanding decades of serious illness, he retained his oft-declared faith in fundamental human beneficence. He remarkably reconciles a personal and iconoclastic artistic voice with the popular mind. Despite the newness of his musical idiom, and the challenges that it posed and poses, we paradoxically feel him optimistically grounded in a nation and its voice. He remains immensely usable, immensely inspirational—should we heed his call.

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If Friedrich Nietzsche, processing decades of bewildering flux, diagnosed a condition of "weightlessness," today's affliction is "pastlessness." When Hartmut Rosa surveys evaporating family structures; when he ponders vanishing political and religious ties severed by the rocketing velocity of change; when he evokes alienated "masses excluded from the processes of acceleration and growth" who will "take a stand against the acceleration society"; when he predicts an "unbridled onward rush into an abyss," he adduces a cumulative trajectory hurtling toward memory's cancellation: a veritably Ivesian warning (321–22).

Processing the lapse in cultural memory evident all about us, we should fear losing touch with the arts as a renewable resource. Civilization requires more than air and water.

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Notes

1. To listen to Marian Anderson’s performance and Edward R. Murrow’s commentary, see: *The Lady from Philadelphia: Through Asia with Marian Anderson*, from the TV show “See It Now,” created by Fred W. Friendly and Edward R. Murrow, season 7, episode 4, CBS, 30 Dec. 1957.

2. This is a central contention in my *Propaganda of Freedom*, which similarly cites Tocqueville’s prophetic worry “about the fate of the American arts” (171).

3. These and other quotes are excerpted from my blog post, “Are the Arts Inimical to Our Democratic Ethos?” *Unanswered Question*, 23 Apr. 2024, www.artsjournal.com/uq/2024/04/are-the-arts-inimical-to-our-democratic-ethos.html.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. This is excerpted from my blog post, “Are the Arts Inimical to Our Democratic Ethos?” Adorno’s take on the popularization of high culture in the United States after World War I is considered in detail in Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini*, 229–243.

7. See “Are the Arts Inimical to Our Democratic Ethos?”

8. Guelzo commentary in the NPR documentary “Lost and Found: America’s Black Classical Music” (Nov. 2021), written and produced by Joseph Horowitz: https://www.artsjournal.com/uq/2021/11/dvoraks-prophecy-on-npr-are-the-arts-still-a-fit-topic-for-historians.html.

9. Ibid.

10. In *Classical Music in America*, I argue that classical music in the United States peaked ca. 1900.

11. This is the central thesis of my *Understanding Toscanini*.

12. This is a core argument in Chapter 6 of *Dvorak’s Prophecy*.

13. For a more in-depth analysis of this point, see JoAnn Falletta’s comment in Horowitz, “‘Very Likely the Most Important Film Ever Made about American Music,’” *Unanswered Question*, 11 Oct. 2024, www.artsjournal.com/uq/2024/10/very-likely-the-most-important-film-ever-made-about-american-music.html.

14. In my *Moral Fire*, I group Ives with Henry Higginson (who invented the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1881), Henry Krehbiel (the “dean” of New York City’s music critics beginning in the 1880s), and Laura Langford (who as head of the Seidl Society was Brooklyn’s most prominent and enterprising impresario from 1889 to

1898). All four applied a moral criterion: great music, by definition, was uplifting music. Meliorism—not decadence or socialism or incipient modernism, as abroad—was the keynote of a vibrant and distinctive American fin-de-siecle. Its dominant cultural manifestation was an uplifting New World variant of Wagnerism itself purged of nationalism and anti-Semitism (see also my *Wagner Nights*).

About the author

The most recent of Joseph Horowitz's 13 books is *The Propaganda of Freedom: JFK, Shostakovich, Stravinsky and the Cultural Cold War*. His National Public Radio "More than Music" documentaries, tracking the fate of the American arts, are archived at https://www.josephhorowitz.com.

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