Homophobia in Twentieth-Century Music: The Crucible of America's Sound

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Abstract: Challenging notions of the composer as solitary genius and of twentieth-century homophobia as a simple destructive force, I trace a new genealogy of Coplandian tonal modernism – "America's sound" as heard in works like "Rodeo," "Appalachian Spring," and "Fanfare for the Common Man" – and glean new sociosexual meanings in "cryptic" modernist abstraction like that of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's opera "Four Saints in Three Acts." I consider gay white male tonalists collectively to highlight how shared social identities shaped production and style in musical modernism, and I recast gay composers' close-knit social/sexual/creative/professional alliances as, not sexually nepotistic cabals, but an adaptive and richly productive response to the constraints of an intensely homophobic moment. The essay underscores the pivotal role of the new hetero/homo concept in twentieth-century American culture, and of queer impetuses in American artistic modernism.

Around 1938, following decades of anxious fretting over the lack of a distinct American voice in concert music, something fresh and new emerged and at last defined an American national sound. It was elegantly clear and stately while also broadly appealing and *tonal*, and it became best known through Aaron Copland's music, especially in such works as *Appalachian Spring*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *Rodeo*, and *Billy the Kid*. By now we have heard it in Hollywood westerns and dramas, car and airline commercials, and campaigns for the American Beef Council. We have learned to conjure rugged cowboys, vast golden prairies, and pioneer lives of hardship and simple faith whenever we hear Copland or his many imitators. We may not even know we are hearing Copland, for the sound is now practically public domain. But we know what it means.

This music means *America* – in its most beloved, idealized, simple-but-dignified form. It is the soundtrack of our national rituals. Copland's music represents the American spirit in times of celebration – the opening ceremony of the 2002 Olympics in

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Salt Lake City, for example – and it gives voice to our national mourning: think of the memorial services following 9/11. (Copland's setting of "At the River" was espcially powerful.) How did it happen that this cherished national music, what I am calling America's sound, came to be composed by a gay man in the most homophobic period in U.S. history? And what does it mean that the America of prairie cowboys and pioneer newlyweds was rendered musically by this leftist, Jewish homosexual from Brooklyn?

But let me back up a step. I don't think it is quite right to say that there was "a gay composer" behind the creation of America's sound. Rather, there was a whole posse of gay composers – and a famous lesbian author, to boot. This is not entirely a new idea. For decades, rumors churned in the classical music world about the "gay mafia" that ruled American composition. These rumors were deeply homophobic, but I want to pay close attention to them nevertheless. They speak to us of what was feared and loathed in this context and period, roughly the 1930s through the 1970s. There was fear and loathing not just for the notion that influential gay composers were on the scene, but for the idea that they constituted some sort of group. This did not jibe with the prevailing heterosexual and patriarchal ethos. A real man is a rugged individualist. A real composer is a solitary genius. And conventional wisdom held that behind every great man stood a loving and devoted woman.

Gay tonalists indeed functioned as a group, and in ways that affected the course of history. The circle of gay American composers that included Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland as the elders, plus Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, David Diamond, Leonard Bernstein, and Ned Rorem, interacted with and influenced each other in various dimensions: professional, social, artistic, and at times sexual. But until very recently, only enemies would have spoken of the gay tonalists' group-ness or "tribalism." During the group's 1940s heyday and for decades after, the mere suggestion of a link between one gay composer and another sufficed to discredit the composers and their work. Relations of collegial and familial support were expected, and respected, among straight composers. The same relations among composers identified as homosexual, however, were taken as proof of conspiracy and of the illegitimacy of their achievements.[1]

Musicologists today can acknowledge the queerness of various composers (and the connections between them) without automatically inciting homophobic reaction and dismissal. But if we view this information within the frame of heteronormative historiography – which decrees, for example, that composers be men of individual genius – then we still do not get at the story, or the significance, of the gay Americana tonalists. In other words, for purposes of U.S. musical and cultural history it is crucial, not incidental, that these guys were queer – but we can perceive that only if we take a queer-attuned perspective in our analysis. We need a queer eye, historiographically speaking, to see how the American histories of sexualized social identity and national cultural identity converged and shaped one another within the Thomson-Copland circle of gay white male composers in 1930s and 1940s New York.

The very fact that there was a Thomson-Copland circle of gay Americana tonalists had everything to do with queerness. These artists banded together as members of a minoritized group that had been newly defined in the twentieth century by the authority of medical science and law, and that was subject to intense scrutiny and social stigma. We can readily imagine why queer composers might have linked up in this era of psychosexual pathology,

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Hollywood's censorship code, sex-crime panics, anti-sodomy statutes, and vice raids. And there is little left to the imagination in some of the homophobic rumors, libels, and conspiracy theories that surrounded these composers, as with French-born Edgard Varèse's comments to fellow composer Carl Ruggles about Copland: "use your arse as a prick garage – or your mouth as a night lodging and . . . N[ew] Y[ork] is yours."[2] So, in this milieu, gay composers often connected with each other, both within and across generations – as in gay life. They shared contacts and resources, knowledge and critique. They mentored and apprenticed, nurtured and competed with one another. They performed and programmed, admired and envied each other's work. They influenced each other personally, professionally, and aesthetically. In fact, the boundaries between these categories, here as in gay life generally, were often blurry to nonexistent.

The Coplandian sound itself was inspired by and modeled on musical simplicities invented by Thomson, who himself was inspired after reading the work of the lesbian American author Gertrude Stein. Copland in his first eighteen years of composing showed little inclination to step outside the Stravinskian dissonant modernism he had learned from Nadia Boulanger. Thomson was a very different sort of character from the serene, regular Copland: a Dada sympathizer both serious and irreverent in his aesthetic judgments, he was a sharp-witted brilliant queen of the highest order. Thomson decided while still in his twenties that he did not need the sanction of the compositional establishment or what he called its "correct facade of dissonance." In 1926 in Paris, under the influence of Stein's avant-garde writings and artistic theories, this former Kansas City church organist began composing music just as simple as he pleased.[3] "Plain as Dick's hatband," Thomson called his harmonies. "Darn-fool ditties," he dubbed his tunes. His music was so forthright and simple that some cognoscenti thought it was dum-dum and fled, in terror and befuddlement. That it was often pretty was also unsettling in this modernist context. Perhaps most audaciously, Thomson's music was tonal.

Thomson and Copland drew close in the early 1930s, when both were occupied with mentoring the young Paul Bowles, with whom Copland was madly, unrequitedly, in love. By the end of the decade Copland had given up on courting the elusive Bowles but had come to know a lot of Thomson's music, in which he found, by his own description, "a lesson in how to treat Americana."[4] In 1938, Copland himself would adopt tonal simplicities and, inspired by Thomson's example of the previous year, would attempt an American ballet. The result was *Billy the Kid*, Copland's breakthrough Americana work and the first in what would be a series of tonal, populist megahits.

In the 1990s especially, certain musicologists, some quite prominent and well placed, declared for the record that a composer's sexuality cannot have any relevance to his or her work, or to legitimate musicological inquiry.[5] I do not doubt that it is possible to sincerely believe that – but only if one has no clue as to how modern sexuality functions, or what it comprises, as an erotic, affectional, and social positioning. But if, in our music histories, sexuality is assumed to encompass only bedroom acts, if official authoritative discourses are all we know, if composers are studied one self-contained male genius at a time, then it is not sexuality that is rendered irrelevant, but *homo*sexuality – because the frame of observation is already overwritten by heterosexual norms, straight ways of knowing and being in the world.

Relatedly, twentieth-century music scholarship and cultural commentary

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never breathed a word about the remarkably queer lineage of America's sound. Nor have these discourses been known to celebrate the productivity of pederasty in U.S. national culture. Yet it was enormously productive in the case of Copland, whose legendary mentoring of younger composers was crucial to establishing a long-awaited American music culture, and was self-consciously aligned with a tradition of erotic man-youth mentoring going back to the Greeks. Pederasty was a venerated pillar of the radically male-dominated culture of ancient Greece. It had similar importance in the radically male-dominated culture of twentieth-century American classical music and, from there, in U.S. national culture – though it has been buried, rather than venerated, in our critical and historical accounts. In the interest of remedying this situation at last, I have proposed that Copland, long known as "the dean of American music," should be known instead as its gay daddy.[6]

One thing I am suggesting by all of this is that there are ways in which tonal Americana music is gay – whether or not it "*sounds* gay," to borrow the terms in which sensational media coverage has sometimes mocked the question. But let us consider whether this music somehow does sound gay. First, surely, we can say that the Americana music of Thomson, Copland, and company sounds consonant and tonal. It sounded that way to its original audiences, too – perhaps even more so to them, by contrast to the dissonance and atonality that were then prevalent. Second, tonal Americana sounded simple; and this characterization almost certainly belongs more to the music's original context than to our own. Past audiences took in more modernist "complexity music" than many of us do now and would have heard tonal Americana as simple by contrast. Another reason the Coplandian idiom does not tend to strike us as especially simple is that it became so ubiquitous. Its formal transparency and folkish qualities are thoroughly familiar and normalized to our ears.

Finally, tonal Americana sounded French. Does it still sound French? Probably not so much. Understandings like these are completely contingent on the reception context. In the 1930s and 1940s, Austro-German music was the standard of "great" music and of classical music generally. Thomson, Copland, Diamond, Bowles, and Rorem, especially, self-consciously positioned their work against German music and its dominance. Whether or not their music sounds French to us, or even sounded French to its original listeners, labeling it as French in the mid-twentieth century could convey coded meanings about the music and its creators, including feminizing and queering connotations. These same sex/gender connotations also attached to tonality and simplicity amid a modernist musical culture in which dissonance, boisterousness, and complexity were coded as daring, advanced, and original – hence, manly.

Am I therefore claiming that, say, Copland's *Appalachian Spring* or Bernstein's score for *On the Town* (1944) "sound gay"? No. I am saying that they *did* sound gay, according to signifying codes that operated in a certain period (from as early as the 1920s through the 1970s or 1980s) and in a certain setting (among American music-world insiders of the time). There is a wonderful story that illustrates how Thomson understood the sexual coding of modernist musical styles. In his first meeting with the younger composer Ben Weber – probably in the early 1940s – he immediately gave Weber the third degree. Upon confirming that Weber was a) a homosexual, and b) an atonal composer, Thomson croaked, "Well, you can't be both. Now which is it?"[7]

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With Thomson's witty riposte, two big bad binarisms – hetero/homo and atonal/tonal – rear their heads and appear as crucially defining and (by whatever means) mutually determining. Assuming the role of sexual and stylistic boundary enforcer, the veritable homo-tonal police, Thomson highlighted some of the governing laws of his musical-political realm in a way that also hints at their oppressiveness, and certainly their arbitrariness. Yet identity binarisms were something Thomson had to learn to negotiate. He was born into an era obsessed with classifying human identity types and defining exact boundaries among them. Both Thomson and Copland were born at the turn of what would come to be called "the American century," at a moment that also witnessed the birth of artistic modernism and (for U.S. purposes) the birth of the homosexual.[8]

Scarcely earlier, in 1895, Oscar Wilde had endured his trials and judgment. Wilde's suffering in Reading Gaol and his extraordinary response in *De Profundis*, his long letter out of the depths of his imprisonment, established a model for twentieth-century homosexual subjectivity. The first modern homosexual, in his brutal martyrdom, showed that creating art could be the response to queer suffering and persecution, and artistic experience the basis of queer spirituality. Many twentieth-century queers followed Saint Oscar into the artistic priesthood, and Stein and Thomson's abstract, supposedly indecipherable opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* is a tribute to this very phenomenon, in its staging of sixteenth-century Spanish nuns and monks – in same-sex pairings and groupings – to represent twentieth-century American artists like Stein, Thomson, and their comrades. Artistic modernism's fascination with abstraction owed much, I believe, to the profusion of homosexuals in the arts at this time and their need to maintain ambiguity around their desires, identities, and preoccupations.

No artist commanded ambiguity like the composer. And music offered its listeners ambiguity as well: it seemed to blur the bounds of conventional selfhood, to afford an escape from identity, even as it sharpened sensations and crystallized emotions. These facts provide cultural-historical explanation for the prevalence of queers in twentieth-century American classical music, but they certainly do not suffice to explain the remarkable success of Copland and his gay circle. Sure, U.S. classical music was a queer magnet in the decades following the advent of homo/hetero classification. But that by no means guaranteed that queer composers would succeed where generations of composers had already failed – in creating a widely embraced, distinctly American musical idiom. The members of the Thomson-Copland circle succeeded not just in spite of their homosexuality, but in direct relation to it. Does this mean that they derived some sort of inherent advantage from their deviant sexuality? Perhaps their story evinces the presence of a tonal chromosome orbiting the gay gene?

If someone wants to make that argument, then go ahead; knock yourself out. But it should be clear by now that it has nothing to do with my argument, which examines the cultural-historical conditions that surrounded the gay tonalists, and how these talented and resourceful artists worked within and against such conditions to fashion their lives, art, and personas. Central here are the structures of self-formation and subjectivity that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century, and how gay composers navigated them. The structures have changed somewhat, but we are all still obliged to navigate them and thus to "compose ourselves" in relation to gender and sexuality, race and class.

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Salient among the determining conditions for Copland and his cohort was homophobia. It erupted acidly in Varèse's correspondence with Ruggles, and it circulated in rumors and conspiracy theories throughout the mid-century U.S. music world. Homophobia was a destructive impulse, but gay composers' responses to it were often productive. Many modern queer subjects in various walks of life found solace and self-expression in music. But the queer music devotees in the Thomson-Copland circle also closely associated with one another, shared knowledge and resources, and thus created a rich musical subculture that gave birth to an important national music culture. Homophobia contributed to the rise of tonal Americana in the late 1930s: it was the crucible in which gay composers forged such strong personal and professional bonds.

But homophobia also contributed to the fall of Coplandian music in the 1950s, when rumors went aboveground and headlines warned that a homosexual cultural takeover was Stalin's plot for destroying America. The Cold War tenor of the times favored the strains of atonal serialism – heard not only as quasi-scientific, but as more virile.[9]

ENDNOTES

1 See Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 7, 101 – 102.

2 Ibid., 156. Compare also the reported purges of homosexual students and faculty from the Eastman School of Music in the 1930s and 1940s; see ibid., esp. 225 n.25.

3 Concerning this "correct facade" and Thomson's 1926 epiphanies, see ibid., 43, 11 – 12.

4 The quote is from a 1942 letter from Copland to Thomson concerning Thomson's film score for *The River*; see ibid., 197 n.63.

5 See especially the "Schubert and Sexuality" special issue of *19th Century Music* 27 (1) (1993).

6 See Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 11, 85 – 89.

7 Ibid., 128.

8 On this last periodization see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

9 See ibid., chap. 4; also Michael Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

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