

Copland's Styles: Musical Modernism, Middlebrow Culture, and the Appreciation of New Music

CHRISTOPHER CHOWRIMOOTOO

518

For the first time in history . . . [readers] want to be told how to read and what to read; and their teachers—the reviewers, the lecturers, the broadcasters—must . . . make reading easy for them; assure them that literature is violent and exciting, full of heroes and villains; of hostile forces perpetually in conflict; of fields strewn with bones; of solitary victors riding off on white horses wrapped in black cloaks to meet their death at the turn of the road. A pistol shot rings out. “The age of romance was over. The age of realism had begun”—you know the sort of thing.¹

—Virginia Woolf, “A Letter to a Young Poet,” 1932

Among the many striking anecdotes in Copland biography, newspaper criticism and scholarship alike, one vignette recurs again and again. After conducting the 1925 premiere of Aaron Copland’s *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra*, Walter Damrosch reportedly turned to the audience and said: “if a young man can write a symphony like this at twenty three, within five years he will be ready to commit

I would like to thank Kate Guthrie, Nicholas Mathew, Matthew Mugmon, Richard Taruskin, and the journal’s editors for helping to improve this article.

¹ Virginia Woolf, “A Letter to a Young Poet,” in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 210.

murder.”² When the symphony later premiered in Boston, the sticking of some organ keys yielded an even more satirical response. One commentator joked that the mishap “introduced the audience to a new angle of the modernistic,” while another jeered that audiences were unable to tell the difference.³ Such vignettes have proven compelling not just because of their star-studded casts but also because they appear to reaffirm key fault lines of twentieth-century culture. From the perspective of Copland criticism, they bolster the so-called “two Coplands” thesis; indeed, Juan Orrego Salas, writing in 1948, traced the composer’s supposed conversion from “modernism” to “populism” back to the already-mythic Damrosch event.⁴ But the episode also implicates broader oppositions between middlebrow culture and musical modernism, and (broader still) between the “social” process of distributing, mediating, and receiving music and the “aesthetic” domain of new musical composition. For here we have Damrosch, a middlebrow mediator—star conductor, director of NBC’s music division, and presenter of the network’s *Music Appreciation Hour*—figuratively outlawing “modern” music.

This is how the gesture has traditionally been interpreted. Jennifer DeLapp-Birkett, for instance, has cast Damrosch’s comments as the first signs of a reactionary middlebrow culture that would come to stifle the composer’s modernism.⁵ Yet, as she herself concedes, the situation was never that straightforward. After all, Copland was very much part of the middlebrow milieu that appears to have rejected him in this episode and was adept at negotiating its characteristic markets and media. In addition to writing criticism for influential newspapers and periodicals, he involved himself with concert organizing, publishing, and lobbying record companies. Perhaps even more telling was Copland’s long-standing investment in music appreciation, arguably the middlebrow medium par excellence. His introductory lecture courses at the New School for Social Research—on topics ranging from “intelligent listening,” through “symphonic masterpieces,” to “modern music”—sustained him throughout his leanest economic years (1927–38). They

² “Boulanger and the Symphony Society,” *New York Post*, January 12, 1925. For a similar account, see Lawrence Gilman, “Music by Young and Old at the Damrosch Concert: Aaron Copland’s Symphony,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 12, 1925.

³ “Symphony Organ Goes on Strike,” *Boston Post*, February 22, 1925; and “Organ Note Sticks: Delays Symphony,” *Boston Globe*, February 22, 1925.

⁴ “Who knows whether that first contact with the public did not . . . serve as a starting point for what was later on to be defined as the essence of [Copland’s] music [i.e., populism].” Juan Orrego Salas, “Aaron Copland: A New York Composer,” *Tempo* 9 (1948): 8–16, at 10. The solidification of the “two Coplands” is often attributed to Arthur Berger, *Aaron Copland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

⁵ Jennifer DeLapp, “Speaking to Whom?: Modernism, Middlebrow and Copland’s *Short Symphony*,” in *Copland Connotations: Studies and Interviews*, ed. Peter Dickinson and H. Wiley Hitchcock (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2002), 85–102.

also provided the blueprints for his best-selling textbooks, *What to Listen for in Music* (1939) and *Our New Music* (1941).⁶

While Copland's activities as a new music advocate have attracted much scholarly attention, his music appreciation lectures have not, which reflects the dubious reputation of the genre. Yet the oversight also speaks to a sore spot in the composer's musical image. If Copland's pedagogy fell within the bounds of America's burgeoning middlebrow culture, his music has traditionally been assigned to a separate aesthetic domain—one sorted reductively into “modernist” and “populist” works, as if to embody the Schoenbergian dictum that “the middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome.”⁷ Even those commentators who have lamented this crudely dualistic approach to Copland's music—as the composer himself did—have had a much easier time denouncing it than theorizing viable alternatives.⁸

In this article, I recover this “middle road” in Copland's musical pedagogy, composition, and reception, and—more importantly—in the relationship among these putatively separate domains. I examine Copland's unpublished lecture notes and music appreciation books within the context of middlebrow pedagogy and trace their connections with his compositional style. In doing so, I focus on the works of Copland's “early” period, which coincided with his teaching at the New School, but my observations have implications for his oeuvre as a whole. At the center of my investigation is the concept of “style,” which brings together Copland's compositions and pedagogy in ways that promise to illuminate middlebrow cultural appreciation at large.⁹

By probing Copland's relationship with middlebrow culture, then, my aim is not simply to offer an alternative to the “two Coplands” thesis but also to stage a series of wider scholarly interventions. The first is to demonstrate how this much-maligned midcentury category can help to make sense of key tensions in musical historiography. While middlebrow scholarship has blossomed into a vital branch of literary studies, musicologists have only recently begun to realize the concept's potential

⁶ Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939); and Aaron Copland, *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1941).

⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, “Foreword to *Three Satires for Mixed Chorus*, Op. 28 (1925–1936),” in *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life*, ed. Joseph Auner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 186.

⁸ See, for example, Judith Tick, “The Music of Aaron Copland,” in *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective*, by Gail Levin and Judith Tick (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2000), 128–64, at 130.

⁹ Most of Copland's lecture notes (and some transcripts) are preserved in the Aaron Copland Collection at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter CCLC), specifically boxes 210–30: “Lectures and Speeches.” This article draws extensively on this collection, referencing the course name and box and folder numbers where possible.

to muddy the waters of the modernist critical tradition.¹⁰ As well as encouraging this process along, I intervene in middlebrow studies more broadly. If a number of recent scholars have suggested that modernism and middlebrow culture were not as oppositional as previously imagined, I go further to highlight the significant overlap and, more importantly, to clarify the stakes.¹¹ This involves challenging loaded associations of middlebrow culture with the straightforward commercialization of high culture, and excavating a characteristic middlebrow commitment instead to compromise, synthesis, and breadth. After drawing out the tension between Copland's "middlebrow" approach to modern music and a "higher," purer form imagined by Arnold Schoenberg and Theodor W. Adorno, I show how these distinctions often threatened to collapse. On a broader methodological level, I use Copland's activities as composer and pedagogue to steer my own middle course between a methodological divide that has, ironically, opened up within middlebrow studies itself. More specifically, I mediate between aforementioned "social" conceptions of the category—as a means of distributing, mediating, and receiving high art—and "aesthetic" discussions, which understand the middlebrow as a compositional style. By illuminating the reciprocity between composition and pedagogy, I sketch a fuller picture of the middlebrow.

Middlebrow Stereotypes and the "Appreciation-Racket"

When Copland delivered Harvard's Norton Lectures in 1952, he took the opportunity to survey a range of interwar cultural initiatives, which scholars now associate with the rise of the middlebrow.¹² The period's concerted efforts to make "highbrow" music more widely available through print culture, radio programs, records, and music appreciation were, in

¹⁰ See Christopher Chowrimootoo, "Reviving the Middlebrow, or: Deconstructing Modernism from the Inside," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 139 (2014): 187–93; John Howland, "Marketing to the Middlebrow: Reconsidering Ellingtonia, the Legacy of Early Ellington Criticism, and the Idea of a 'Serious' Jazz Composer," in *Duke Ellington Studies*, ed. John Howland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 32–75; Pauline Fairclough, "Was Soviet Music Middlebrow? Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, Socialist Realism, and the Mass Listener in the 1930s," *Journal of Musicology* 35 (2018): 336–67; and Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

¹¹ Daniel Tracy, "Middlebrow Modernism: Professional Writing, Genre, and the Circulation of Cultural Authority in U.S. Mass Culture, 1913–32" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2008); Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon* (New York: Pickering & Chatto, 2014); and Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*.

¹² For the rise of middlebrow culture, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

Copland's estimation, a blessing and a curse. While the musical audience expanded exponentially, he worried that listeners were being primed to revere a narrow canon of aging masterworks in ways all too passive and conventional. "The big public," Copland complained, "is now frightened of investing in any music that doesn't have the label 'masterwork' stamped on it."¹³ Apart from discouraging the audience's natural curiosity and independence, these interventions banished modern composers to the periphery.¹⁴

In decrying the pernicious influence of the new cultural mediators, Copland was echoing modernist critiques of the middlebrow. Originally coined as an insult directed at popularizers who sought to make elite culture available to mass audiences, the term was often associated with the commercialization of art and all the problems and pitfalls that this entailed. In 1932 Q. D. Leavis defined middlebrow as a synonym for "middlemen," the functionaries of the Book-of-the-Month Club, The Book Society, lecture circuits, and newspapers, who intervened in the relationship between author and reader.¹⁵ The following year, Margaret Widdemer associated it with the middling consumers to whom these middlemen catered.¹⁶ By the time Russell Lynes published his "brow" survey in 1949, the concept of the middlebrow had expanded to encompass both contingents.¹⁷ The upper-middlebrows were the sellers: the museum directors, publishers, lecturers, and critics, charged with balancing artistic concerns with profit.¹⁸ The lower-middlebrows were their buyers: the book club members, theatergoers, course takers, and readers of self-improvement books, magazines, and criticism.¹⁹

In most discussions, it was this transactional relationship—as Richard Taruskin has described it—that stood out, undermining modernist ideals of aesthetic autonomy.²⁰ For detractors, the effect of middlebrow initiatives was less to raise audiences up than to drag high culture down, reducing it to the status of a commodity. "Midcult," as Dwight Macdonald protested, "has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except

¹³ Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 17–19.

¹⁴ See Copland, *Our New Music*, 134.

¹⁵ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), 19.

¹⁶ Margaret Widdemer, "Message and Middlebrow," *Saturday Review of Literature* 9 (1933): 433–34.

¹⁷ Russell Lynes, "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow," *Harper's*, February 1949; reprinted in *Wilson Quarterly* 1 (1976): 146–58, at 152.

¹⁸ Lynes, "Highbrow," 153.

¹⁹ Lynes, "Highbrow," 157.

²⁰ Richard Taruskin, "Which Way Is Up? On the Sociology of Taste," in *Cursed Questions: On Music and Its Social Practices* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 340–99, at 369.

popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf.”²¹ The problem was not just cultural commodification but passivity and conformity imposed from above: “We have, in short, become skilled at consuming High Culture when it has been stamped PRIME QUALITY by the proper authorities,” Macdonald explained, “but we lack the kind of sophisticated audience that supported the achievements of the classic avant-garde, an audience that can appreciate and discriminate on its own.”²²

While these charges were leveled at most cultural initiatives, music appreciation became a symbol of the burgeoning middlebrow. With its roots in the late nineteenth century, the genre was—as Julia Chybowski has explained—catapulted to the status of a “cultural movement” in the twentieth century’s early decades.²³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, it became a focus for modernist ire, drawing extended criticism from Virgil Thomson, Adorno, and Schoenberg, among other highbrows. In the year Copland published *What to Listen for in Music* (1939), Thomson denounced the “appreciation-racket” with language echoing contemporary critiques of the middlebrow. “It would be a legitimate advertising device,” he conceded, “destined, with luck, to swell the number of possible concert-customers,” were it not for “the large number of reputable musicians, philanthropic foundations, and institutions of learning connected with it and the large amounts of finance-capital behind it.”²⁴ This mixture of altruism and vested interest, education and profit, threatened cultural hierarchies and invited a defensive response. Adorno, for example, directed his vitriol at the *Music Appreciation Hour*—a popular radio series presented by Damrosch from 1928 to 1942. After describing the program’s “promotional bias” as a “permanent obstacle” to its pedagogical goals, he declared: “shrewd, propagandistic purpose prevails over the cultural veneer.”²⁵

For Thomson, no less than for Copland, these commercial priorities were evident, above all, in the focus on “classics” or masterworks. “The symphony orchestras are the king-pin of the international music-industry,” he grumbled, and “the Appreciation-racket is a cog in their publicity

²¹ Dwight Macdonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” in *Against the American Grain: Essays on the Effects of Mass Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962), 37.

²² Macdonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” 61.

²³ See Julia Chybowski, “Developing American Taste: A Cultural History of the Early Twentieth-Century Music Appreciation Movement” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008).

²⁴ Virgil Thomson, *The State of Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1939), 123.

²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Analytical Study of the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour*” (1938–41), in *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 166, 203.

machine”; “limited repertory is a part of their standardization.”²⁶ According to Thomson, this meant tacitly restricting “music” to the introspective, symphonic works of the nineteenth century that had already proven popular with concert audiences.²⁷ Yet this “standardization of repertory, however advantageous commercially, is not a result of mere supply and demand,” as Thomson went on to explain.²⁸ It was, rather, the product of the calculated “collusion” among conductors, managers, critics, and pedagogues—the bureaucratic, middlebrow mediators that Thomson and other highbrows loved to hate.²⁹

Although Adorno also worried about repertoire, he saw the most pernicious commercialism in the pedagogical tendency to fetishize music’s material objects and external aspects. On the most literal level, this meant requiring students to identify instruments by sight as well as sound, a focus at odds with modernist idealism. After denouncing *Music Appreciation Hour*’s “almost exclusive emphasis on external objects,” Adorno attacked its externalism of a more metaphorical kind: the tendency to champion “outer” musical surface—timbre, melody, style—over “inner” structure.³⁰ This “external” focus also included music’s programmatic side: a person’s “real living relation” with music, Adorno jeered, does not begin “because as a child he liked to see a flute, then later because music imitated a thunderstorm.”³¹

Aside from missing what modernists saw as music’s “real” structural content, music appreciation’s “external” focus was said to erode “active” listening ideals. In Thomson’s opinion, the rot set in with music appreciation’s foundations, when pedagogies of “mere listening” sanctioned a passive alternative to composing and performing.³² Schoenberg and Adorno took a similar line when they advocated a form of listening that transcended the receptive activity of listening itself and aspired to a kind of compositional creativity instead. Schoenberg took this quite literally, casting composition as the antidote to music appreciation.³³ Meanwhile, Adorno fleshed out the metaphorical side with his “structural listening” ideal, in which audiences aspired to follow the “*specific* logic of any *specific* piece” in real time, as if creating it anew. Declaring opposition to any kind of mediating

²⁶ Thomson, *State of Music*, 128.

²⁷ Thomson, *State of Music*, 85.

²⁸ Thomson, *State of Music*, 128.

²⁹ For more on the idea of the middlebrow as collusion between mediators, see Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 15–16.

³⁰ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 169.

³¹ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 167.

³² Thomson, *State of Music*, 84.

³³ Arnold Schoenberg, “Eartraining through Composing” (1939), in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 377–82.

scheme or framework, Adorno explained: “This means an education from the inside, not the outside.”³⁴

Music appreciation apparently risked upending this hierarchy, redeeming the listener’s “passive,” outer experience as valuable in its own right.³⁵ However, at the same time as appreciation teachers were criticized for abdicating their pedagogical responsibilities and pandering to the lowest common denominator, they were charged with the opposite: dogmatically overriding individual experience with second-hand judgments and knowledge. “Instead of providing space for spontaneous reaction, [the listener] is forced into pre-arranged patterns and is made to follow clichés from above,” Adorno sneered.³⁶ Some of the concern centered on the teachers’ dogmatic tone and narrow tastes, as we have seen: “Music is neither taught nor defined. It is preached,” Thomson griped.³⁷ But music appreciation’s categories and parameters came under fire too. Schoenberg denounced the “ready-made judgments, wrong and superficial ideas about music, musicians, and [popularized] aesthetics,” while Adorno described music appreciation as “a fictitious musical world ruled by names of personalities, stylistic labels, and pre-digested values which cannot possibly be ‘experienced’ by the audience.”³⁸

For modernists, this abstract preoccupation with biography, genre, and style missed great music’s essence: the innovations, transgressions, and idiosyncrasies through which composers upended conventional forms.³⁹ If the ideal form of listening was supposed to foreground these transgressions, schematic models were said to have the opposite effect, prejudicing listeners against modernism. Acolytes saw modernism’s significance in its ostensible capacity to model individuality, freedom, and subjectivity to audiences—autonomously through its formal properties—at a time when these hallmarks of liberal democracy were under the threat of state capitalism.⁴⁰ By “foster[ing] conventional, stereotyped attitudes,” the “appreciation-racket” was said to subject “serious music” to the very rationalization and control it was supposed to guard against.⁴¹

³⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “What a Music Appreciation Hour Should Be: Exposé, Radio Programmes on WNYC and Draft” (1938–41), in *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 218, 220.

³⁵ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 193.

³⁶ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 212.

³⁷ Thomson, *State of Music*, 85.

³⁸ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea” (1946), in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 114; and Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 165.

³⁹ Adorno, “What a Music Appreciation Hour Should Be,” 220.

⁴⁰ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 8.

⁴¹ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 165.

The Middlebrow Practice of Music Appreciation

Evidently keen to consign music appreciation to the “wrong” side of the cultural divide, opponents dismissed it as a straightforwardly commercial enterprise masquerading as cultural edification. Those familiar with Adorno’s writings will recognize the binary oppositions—passive versus active, surface versus depth, convention versus innovation—as those with which his famously dualistic hierarchies were propped up. Yet just as with criticism of the wider middlebrow, these assertions obscured as much as they revealed. The very fact that music appreciation was subject to paradoxical critiques—at once too dogmatic and not dogmatic enough—suggests the problem was less the simple subordination of artistic to commercial concerns than music appreciation’s ability to connect these putatively separate domains.

The middlebrow’s more complex side was particularly apparent when it came to the question of independent judgment. On the one hand, pedagogues saw themselves as distinguishing “everlasting works of genius” from the “trivial and meaningless jingles” of the commercial music industry, as Daniel Gregory Mason put it, guiding listeners toward “good taste”; on the other, they were subject to the market forces they purported to resist.⁴² Mason spent half his time holding forth on “great” music and the other half waxing lyrical about the need for independent judgment: “[a man] expressing an honest preference,” he proclaimed—with little sense of irony—“is in a far healthier state aesthetically than the snob or ‘highbrow’ who slavishly follows authority or fashion.”⁴³ Others opted for compromise instead: the student, Laurence Adler conceded, “must be given some guidance, some balance wheel, which will help him in forming an opinion.”⁴⁴

In swapping modernist ideals of absolute immediacy and autonomy for middlebrow incrementalism and compromise, Adler was emphasizing a core music appreciation principle. Perhaps the most famous instance of incremental pedagogy was the *Music Appreciation Hour*. Far from rejecting or even reversing modernism’s value-laden metaphors of inside and out, NBC pedagogues structured their four series (A to D) around them—plotting a gradual journey from “outside of music to inside.” While Adorno framed internal and external approaches as incompatible, for NBC pedagogues they coexisted on a sliding scale.⁴⁵

⁴² Daniel Gregory Mason, *A Guide to Music: For Beginners and Others* (New York: H. W. Gray, 1910), 15. See also Daniel Gregory Mason, *From Song to Symphony: A Manual of Music Appreciation* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1924), 4.

⁴³ Mason, *From Song to Symphony*, 5.

⁴⁴ Laurence Adler, *New Values in Music Appreciation* (New York: Roerich Museum Press, 1935), 16.

⁴⁵ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 168.

Just as unsettling to modernists as this dedication to incrementalism and compromise were middlebrow pedagogues' commitments to comprehensiveness and breadth. "[The student's] conclusions," as Adler, for example, explained, "must come rather from multifold experience, from searching thought and self-examination, and from the study of various attempts at aesthetic conclusions."⁴⁶ This multiplicity applied not just to listening strategies but to repertoire too, encouraging familiarity with a broad range of styles. Rejecting musical evolutionism, Adler echoed a common call for "a new perspective" on musical development without succumbing to old-fashioned progress narratives.⁴⁷ This priority was shared by the *Music Appreciation Hour*, whose final series focused not on underlying formal structures but on a broad stylistic survey. Beginning with "Early Polyphonic Composers," moving through Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven programs, and ending with "Modern European" and "American" concerts, the series was spun not as a Darwinian progression but as a "glorious panorama of mountain peaks," each with its own unique charms.⁴⁸

Whether on the level of approach or repertoire, music appreciation was clearly more complex than modernist detractors implied. Portrayals of the genre as being concerned with fashioning a narrow and unified canon of nineteenth-century "masterpieces" focused on only one side of the story, which stood in tension with an equal and opposing impulse toward musical catholicity and breadth. What is more, pedagogues cast this broad knowledge of different perspectives and repertoires as the necessary basis for making independent judgments, appropriating modernist self-conceptions for themselves. In doing so, music appreciators laid bare perhaps the most threatening aspect of the middlebrow. For even as detractors denounced midcult as narrow-minded and dogmatic, it also garnered the opposite reputation—as a sprawling eclecticism that undermined modernism's rigid boundaries and hierarchies. "Unlike the [old-time pulp, dime novel], which has its social limits clearly marked out for it," Clement Greenberg famously explained, "middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere."⁴⁹ Altogether more sympathetic, J. B. Priestley spun this eclecticism as the middlebrow's greatest strength, setting it apart from the surrounding

⁴⁶ Adler, *New Values*, 20.

⁴⁷ Adler, *New Values*, 18.

⁴⁸ Charles H. Farnsworth, "Introduction," in *1938–1939: NBC Music Appreciation Hour—Series D (Student's Notebook)*, ed. Charles H. Farnsworth and Lawrence Abbott (National Broadcasting Company, 1938), 1.

⁴⁹ Clement Greenberg, "The State of American Writing" (1948), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 257.

“brows.”⁵⁰ After rebranding the middlebrow as “broadbrow” in order to reverse the modernist view, Priestley elaborated: “[Broadbrows] do not denounce a piece of art because it belongs to a certain category but only ask that it shall be well done.”⁵¹

Copland in the Classroom

While scholars have sought to distance Copland from the middlebrow, his course descriptions, lecture notes, and published books reveal investment in its characteristic values and tensions. At the New School, where Copland cut his pedagogical teeth, he was tasked with introducing “serious” music to the kind of broad-minded constituency that modernists loved to deride. In his first semester, his “Evolution of Modern Music” course (1927–28) was offered alongside a variety of evening classes, which included “Finance and Investment,” “The Psychology of the Emotions,” “Dominant Ideals of Western Civilization,” and “Style and Form in American Poetry.”⁵² As Copland made clear in a *New York Times* advertisement: “No technical knowledge is required for this course and registration is open to any man or woman.”⁵³ His description for his “Symphonic Masterpieces” course (1938–39) spoke even more directly to his target audience: “This course is designed for those whose contact with music is limited to a casual listening acquaintance obtained through the radio, the phonograph, or occasional concert.” “It is based on the assumption,” he elaborated, “that the layman can enrich his musical experience through closer contact with actual musical materials, presented in nontechnical language.”⁵⁴

While skeptics viewed music appreciation as irredeemable, Copland evidently sought to mediate between artistic ideals and market concerns. Although the New School often imagined itself as a pedagogical “oasis,” exempt from the pressures of the educational market—a myth scholars have tended to reaffirm—the reality was more complex.⁵⁵ As Peter Rutkoff and William Scott have explained, the adult education courses were the New School’s most dependable source of income, expected to break even,

⁵⁰ J. B. Priestley, “High, Low, Broad,” in *Open House: A Book of Essays* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), 166.

⁵¹ Priestley, “High, Low, Broad,” 166.

⁵² See Announcement 1927–28 (New York: New School for Social Research, 1927).

⁵³ “Copland on Modern Music,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1927.

⁵⁴ “Symphonic Masterpieces, 1938–39,” CCLC, box 214, folder 40.

⁵⁵ For the New School’s “progressive” musical agenda, see Sally Bick, “In the Tradition of Dissent: Music at the New School for Social Research, 1926–33,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66 (2013): 121–90.

if not garner a surplus to finance the research institute.⁵⁶ When Copland threw caution to the wind and planned a “modern piano music” survey—devoted to the most recent pieces within this niche genre—the course was canceled due to under-enrollment.⁵⁷ This revealed the limits of the New School’s commitments to pedagogical “freedom” and “progress,” at least in its public-facing work: “I took this as yet another sign that the public was in no mood for modern music,” Copland reflected bitterly many years later.⁵⁸ At the other end of the spectrum was the aforementioned “Symphonic Masterpieces” course, which evinced a stereotypically commercial approach.⁵⁹ Aside from deploying the “masterwork” rhetoric that Copland often denounced, the course was—according to Howard Pollack—focused mostly on the romantic stalwarts he accused of sucking all the oxygen out of the repertoire.⁶⁰ In general, however, Copland’s pedagogy lay between these extremes, and he was not adverse to drawing on the “masterwork” language to sell “modern music” to canonic devotees: notably, he rebranded his course “The Evolution of Modern Music” in its second year of running as “Masterworks of Modern Music.”⁶¹ Copland’s pedagogical practice was, in other words, the very model of Lynes’s middlebrow balancing act: “tak[ing] the measure of public taste and cater[ing] to it at the same time that [one] tries to create a taste for new talent.”⁶²

In addition to these obvious hallmarks, Copland’s pedagogy was marked by deeper middlebrow tensions and ambivalence; he was characteristically torn between championing specific methods and repertoires, and allowing listeners to judge for themselves. He sought to promote “serious” music to a wider audience, but he often began courses with an anxious disavowal of this promotional role. This was particularly important in his modern music courses, which attracted the most explicit charges of bias. After observing that “a critical work about music by a composer is likely to be, and perhaps should be, a book of musical polemics,” Olin Downes, for example, insisted that Copland’s *Our New Music* was no exception to this rule: “It is, in a word, the book of an exponent of certain tendencies in modern music and a composer of

⁵⁶ Peter M. Rutkoff and William B. Scott, *New School: A History of The New School for Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 251.

⁵⁷ “Modern Piano Music, 1938,” CCLC, box 213, folder 3.

⁵⁸ Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 through 1942* (New York: St. Martin’s/Marek, 1984), 265.

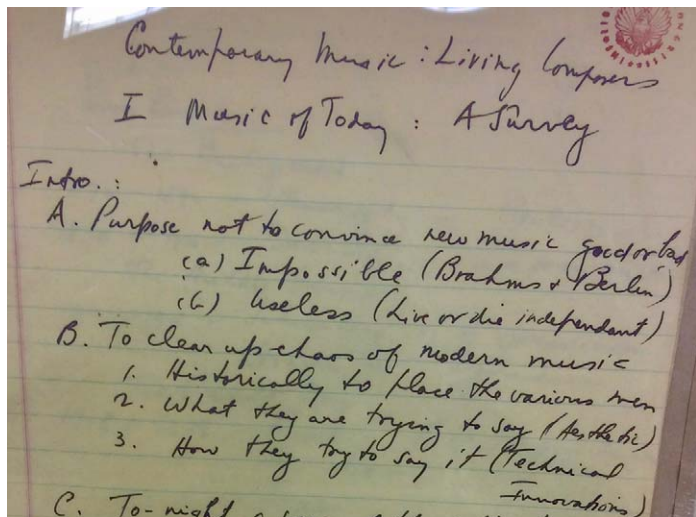
⁵⁹ “Symphonic Masterpieces, 1938–39,” CCLC, box 214, folder 40.

⁶⁰ See Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 58.

⁶¹ “Masterpieces [sic] of Modern Music, 1928–1929,” CCLC, box 212, folders 23–24. The oxymoronic slogan, marketing “modern classics,” was one that Copland specifically bemoaned. See Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 19.

⁶² See Lynes, “Highbrow,” 153.

FIGURE 1. "Contemporary Music: Living Composers," Lecture I. New School for Social Research, 1938. Copland Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Used by permission of The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc.



special purposes and special theories.”⁶³ Much like the lectures on which it was based, Copland’s book included chapters about close friends and colleagues, not to mention an “autobiographical sketch.” “My book is not a plea for any kind of musical modernism,” Copland snapped in response to Downes. “It is quite simply a statement of my picture of what modern music is and how it got that way.”⁶⁴

Such disclaimers were not merely reactive but were present in his teaching at the New School and elsewhere. As can be seen in figure 1, Copland’s outline for the first lecture of his 1938 course, “Contemporary Music: Living Composers,” begins: “Purpose not to convince new music good or bad.”⁶⁵ The extant typescript for a “Survey of Contemporary Music,” delivered at Toledo Museum of Art in 1940, helps to flesh out Copland’s reasoning, rendering the fragmentary lecture notes as prose: “In the first place it is impossible to really prove that [modern music] is good: There is no absolute way of proving that a Brahms’s [*sic*] symphony

⁶³ Olin Downes, “A Composer States His Position,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1941.

⁶⁴ Copland, letter to Olin Downes, date unknown, cited in Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 316.

⁶⁵ “Contemporary Music, Living Composers, 1938,” CCLC, box 211, folder 2.

is more important than a song by Irving Berlin” or “Stravinsky [is] greater than Bach.”⁶⁶ In the second place, Copland insisted “great” music would “live or die” independently of this kind of pedagogy anyway, contradicting the complaints he later articulated in his Norton Lectures about the cultural mediator’s power.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Copland clarified that his “purpose [was] not to convince, [but] to demonstrate.”⁶⁸ By framing his courses as “surveys,” “panoramas,” or “bird’s-eye views” (descriptions implying elevation, distance, and impartiality), Copland was hardly subtle in inviting students to resist the promotional agenda that Thomson and others associated with the music appreciation genre. Yet this was, paradoxically, a shrewd business move too; for, much like other middle-brow goods, music appreciation’s market appeal depended on the semblance of separation from the market.⁶⁹

In touting his courses with metaphors of elevation, Copland was not merely emphasizing objectivity but also comprehensiveness. This was a common middlebrow strategy of laying claim to a different kind of cultural elevation from that of the highbrows—one based not on aesthetic originality or purity but on the synoptic ability to see beyond any single repertoire or style.⁷⁰ In this, “What to Listen for in Music” (1936–37; 1937–38)—his most popular lecture course, attracting as many as three hundred students—exemplified a wider principle of his pedagogy.⁷¹ Instead of promoting “masterworks” from any single period or style, the course drew self-consciously on a variety of sources. “Unlike the usual appreciation course, which begins at Bach and ends at Brahms,” Copland explained, “this course will give equal consideration to old and new music.”⁷² In the actual lectures, Copland cast his net wider still, including illustrations from Monteverdi to Schoenberg, Cuban music to Duke Ellington. This is unsurprising, for Copland’s ideal listener was not an aesthetic purist or ideologue but a “person with the broadest tastes.”⁷³ “A healthy musical curiosity,” he later elaborated, “sharpens the critical faculty of even the most talented amateur.”⁷⁴

⁶⁶ “Survey of Contemporary Music,” typescript for lecture given at Toledo Museum of Art, January 16, 1940, CCLC, box 214, folder 37. The Stravinsky-versus-Bach comparison is taken from the UCLA lecture, “Appreciation of Modern Music, 1927,” CCLC, box 210, folder 21.

⁶⁷ “Contemporary Music, Living Composers, 1938,” CCLC, box 211, folder 2.

⁶⁸ “Aesthetics of Modern Music, 1927” CCLC, box 210, folder 8.

⁶⁹ See Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 38.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Priestley, “High, Low, Broad.”

⁷¹ For student numbers, see Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 275.

⁷² “What to Listen for in Music, n.d.,” CCLC, box 215, folders 16–17.

⁷³ “What to Listen for in Music, n.d.,” Lecture VII, CCLC, box 215, folders 16–17.

⁷⁴ Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 19.

Copland maintained this emphasis on breadth even—or perhaps especially—when his focus was limited to modern music. This meant disavowing modernism’s chauvinistic rejection of the past, as if to reassure prospective students that modern music was not incompatible with canonical pleasures and works. In the aforementioned *New York Times* advert, Copland explained: “The [modern music] lectures will constitute, in effect, a course in the appreciation of present-day music by helping the student who understands and enjoys Bach to understand and enjoy, let us say, Paul Hindemith.” “The most important productions of the last quarter-century,” he continued, “will be conducted in order to show how modern composers have reinterpreted the old laws of harmony, melody and rhythm.”⁷⁵ In this, Copland drew on a common strategy in the burgeoning “modern music” appreciation genre.⁷⁶ Occasionally, however, he suggested that the illumination could work the other way around: “the classics themselves must be reinterpreted in terms of our own period if we are to hear them anew.”⁷⁷ At the same time as Copland championed modern music for adding variety and vitality to existing musical fare, he touted the diversity within modern music itself.⁷⁸ One of the principal selling points of his modern music surveys was a promise to replace the essentialized clichés about “modern music” with a more plural, variegated view.⁷⁹

Copland’s catholic approach to repertoire was also replicated on the level of methodology. Although his penchant for a “bird’s-eye view” remained constant, he set his sights on different features with each course he taught. While “Evolution of Modern Music” (1927–28) was originally structured around technical innovations and stylistic concerns—polytonality, atonality, new counterpoint, postimpressionism—it was soon reorganized according to genre (“Forms of Modern Music,” 1929–30).⁸⁰ In “Music of Today” (1935) and “Contemporary Music: Living Composers” (1938), Copland divided the same repertoire along national lines.⁸¹ He began with Russians (Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich) in the first lecture; moved through classes on Germans (Mahler, Hindemith, and Weill) and the French (divided into the post-Debussy

⁷⁵ “Copland on Modern Music.”

⁷⁶ See, for example, Marion Bauer, *Twentieth Century Music: How It Developed, How to Listen to It* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1933), 4–6.

⁷⁷ Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 20.

⁷⁸ After describing the importance of a “well balanced symphonic diet,” Copland described contemporary music as “vitamin C.” See Aaron Copland, “Serge Koussevitzky and the American Composer,” *Musical Quarterly* 30 (1944): 255–69, at 259.

⁷⁹ Copland, *Our New Music*, v–vii.

⁸⁰ “Forms of Modern Music, 1929–30,” CCLC, box 211, folders 35–36.

⁸¹ “Music of Today, 1935–1936,” CCLC, box 212, folders 17–18; and “Contemporary Music, Living Composers, 1938,” CCLC, box 211, folder 2.

period and the Satie tradition); and concluded with composers from Mexico and the United States (Chavez, Revueltas, and Harris).

Through all these structural variations, “style” served as a conceptual red thread. On the most basic level, this meant relating specific works to the general conventions and characteristics of a composer’s style and—broader still—to their respective epoch or school.⁸² While this was important to Copland’s pedagogy as a whole, it was indispensable to his modern music survey. In the last of a series of public lectures delivered at Harvard in 1944, Copland insisted the “problem” of modern music was ultimately a “problem of style.”⁸³ After identifying Schoenberg and Shostakovich as the outer poles of a period marked by dizzying variety, he implied that stylistic taxonomy was the only way to clear up modern music’s “chaotic picture.” In between the two extremes, he listed Stravinskian neoclassicism, Satie’s naïve simplicity, and Scriabin’s mysticism among the many stylistic routes a young composer could take. Yet Copland’s New School courses had already fleshed out this “modern” stylistic overview. In “Music of Today” (1935–36) Copland devoted his final lecture to a “bird’s-eye view” of modern styles (see fig. 2), spanning from “Mussorgsky—Realism,” “Debussy—Impressionism,” and “Schoenberg—Expressionism” all the way through to the “new simplicity” of his own day.⁸⁴ Other iterations of the course worked the other way around, using style as a point of entry at the very beginning of the course.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most telling example, however, was “Masterworks of Modern Music,” in which style categories appear to have been both the starting point and end goal, not to mention a marker of all the steps in between. Even the class overview (fig. 3) undercut the course’s principal selling point, spinning the titular “masterworks” as case studies of broader stylistic trends. “Each lecture,” as Copland later confirmed, “illustrat[ed] a subject or a style of music with a major work.”⁸⁶ An examination of his lecture notes bears out this priority. Not only did Copland begin his introductory lecture (“Aesthetics of Modern Music”) with his signature overview of musical styles, but he ended his final lecture with it too.⁸⁷ He also used this overview to organize his intervening classes,

⁸² In his introductory lecture to his “Intelligent Music-Listening,” Copland defines “style” as the “reflection of a composer’s personality” and “reflection of [the music’s] age,” giving “classical, romantic, nationalist, [and] contemporary” as examples. See “Intelligent Music-Listening, 1937,” Lecture I, CCLC, box 212, folder 5.

⁸³ See “The Problem of Style: Schoenberg vs. Shostakovich,” 1944, CCLC, box 214, folder 15.

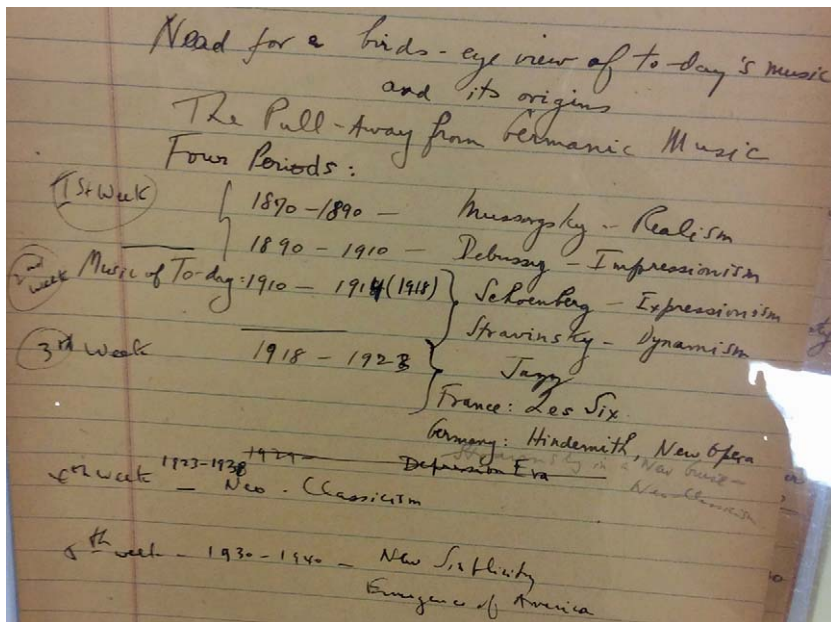
⁸⁴ “Music of Today, 1935–1936,” CCLC, box 212, folders 17–18.

⁸⁵ See “The Evolution of Modern Music, 1927,” CCLC, box 210, folder 21; and “Contemporary Music, Living Composers, 1938,” CCLC, box 211, folder 2.

⁸⁶ “Masterpieces [*sic*] of Modern Music, 1928–1929,” CCLC, box 212, folders 23–24.

⁸⁷ “Aesthetics of Modern Music, 1927,” CCLC, box 210, folder 8.

FIGURE 2. "Music of Today," Lecture VII. New School for Social Research, 1928–29. Copland Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Used by permission of The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc.



fleshing it out at different levels throughout the course. After establishing his initial bird’s-eye view, Copland’s first lecture descended to a medium altitude, running through each category in a little more detail. In subsequent classes, each devoted to a single style, Copland descended even further into a checklist of associated characteristics and techniques. Only after being primed to listen for these dense catalogs of musical features were students finally introduced to the representative “masterworks” that were supposedly the focus of the course.

As a product of the New School lectures, *Our New Music* was cast in a similar mold. The largest part is devoted to a quasi-positivistic survey of modern styles: Mussorgsky’s realism, Schoenberg’s expressionism, Stravinsky’s dynamism, and so on—now under the banner of “contemporary european composers” (part I).⁸⁸ This is followed by a revision of the original “lesser masterworks” lecture, now expanded into exclusively

⁸⁸ Copland, *Our New Music*, 3–125.

FIGURE 3. “Masterworks of Modern Music,” Course Overview. “Course Brochure, Back Cover.” New School for Social Research, 1928–29. Copland Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Every effort has been made to trace the *copyright* holders and obtain permission to reproduce this material.

1. General Survey (Aesthetics of Modern Music).
2. Boris Godounov (Realism of Moussorgsky).
3. Pelléas et Mélisande (Impressionism of Debussy).
4. Das Lied von der Erde (Post-Romanticism of Mahler).
5. Daphnis et Chloé (Post-Impressionism of Ravel).
6. Pierrot Lunaire (Expressionism of Schoenberg).
7. Le Sacre du Printemps (Dynamism of Stravinsky).
8. Prometheus (Mysticism of Scriabine).
9. Creation du Monde (Lyricism of Milhaud).
10. Das Marienleben (Neo-Classicism of Hindemith).
11. Oedipus Rex (Objectivism of Stravinsky).
12. Summary. Lesser Masterworks.

American “composers without a halo” (part II).⁸⁹ The point of this two-part division was admittedly to distinguish between the established “styles” of European modernism and the fledgling, experimental composers in America—as if to differentiate the recent past from the present, the old “modern” music from the genuinely new. Yet Copland occasionally slipped into the same retrospective stylistic overview that he used in the first, “historical” part of the book. In doing so, he revealed not just how central style was to his conception of music appreciation but also—and more importantly—how rapidly this kind of pedagogy could convert new music into established “styles.”

“The Problem of Style”

In foregrounding style in his modern music teaching and incorporating this growing list of styles into established surveys, Copland was part of a much wider pedagogical trend. The *Music Appreciation Hour* devoted the last two concerts of its most advanced series to European

⁸⁹ Copland, *Our New Music*, 129–232.

and American modern music, respectively, and students were tested on the differences between “impressionism” and “neoclassicism,” among other styles. For those working within modern music appreciation specifically, stylistic surveys were an even more common concern. Soon after Copland took up his New School position, the composer Marion Bauer released *Twentieth Century Music* (1933), insisting—much like Copland—that the only way to clear up modern music’s “chaos” was to chart its incremental development (“by easy stages”) out of the music of the past.⁹⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such stylistic overviews were relatively successful in bringing “modern music” in from the cold, offering middlebrow audiences a familiar lens through which to appreciate it. Indeed, by distilling recent music into a recognizable set of styles, appreciation teachers helped to canonize it alongside older, more established styles. For high modernists, however, this was at best a double-edged sword. If they balked at the middlebrow’s supposedly conservative opposition to modernism, this kind of stylistic acceptance was apparently even worse.

The most obvious sticking points were the easily digestible summaries, which apparently allowed audiences to claim musical expertise without listening for themselves. Mocking an imaginary student for parroting generalizations about Schumann’s “gloomy and unclear” orchestration style, Schoenberg explained: “At the end of the term she will have acquired a knowledge of music history, aesthetics, and criticism, plus a number of amusing anecdotes; but unfortunately she may not remember even one of those gloomily orchestrated Schumann themes.”⁹¹ For Schoenberg, such stylistic generalizations were especially problematic because they overshadowed the musical “idea”—the fingerprint unique to every great artwork.⁹² While Schoenberg invested this elusive “idea” with quasi-theological significance, Adorno cast it as the locus of music’s philosophical truth content: “philosophical treatment of art,” he insisted, “is concerned with the idea, and not with notions of style.” “The truth or untruth about Schoenberg or Stravinsky,” Adorno elaborated, “is to be encountered not in mere explication of categories such as atonality, twelve-tone technique, or neoclassicism, but only in the concrete crystallization of such categories in the structure of the music itself.”⁹³

As these discussions make clear, modernist critiques drew strength from a logocentric tradition of elevating “inner” thoughts or concepts

⁹⁰ Bauer, *Twentieth Century Music*, 3.

⁹¹ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 113–14.

⁹² Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 121–23.

⁹³ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 8.

over the “outer” forms of speech or writing through which they were voiced. Where in literature and philosophy the inner content was associated with the conceptual logic or principles underpinning the external form, music’s philosophical “content” was understood in purely formal—though no less idealistic—terms, as the inner structure of the musical artwork conceived in its totality. Style was relegated to music’s devalued “outer” surface, with all the superficial, immediate, and ephemeral associations of mere packaging.

By elevating style into prime position, music appreciation teachers seemed to undermine this hierarchy. Some did so explicitly, championing style’s immediacy and accessibility as an antidote to highbrow formalism.⁹⁴ Yet more frustrating to modernists was when pedagogues mistook one for the other, a charge Adorno leveled at the *Music Appreciation Hour*. One egregious example was when sonata form’s internal divisions were spun as alternations between “intellectual” and “emotional,” “head” and “heart” parts—according to Adorno, mistaking cause for effect.⁹⁵ Following a performance of the Overture in C from Damrosch’s arrangement of Bach’s first *Orchestral Suite*, NBC students were similarly quizzed on whether the overture was written in “symphonic style,” “fugal style,” or “dramatic style”—reducing everything to the level of style.⁹⁶ When it came to the treatment of modern music, the complaints were even louder and more predictable. Responding to a description of “dissonance” as an earmark of the “modern” style, Adorno lamented: “the *Hour* apparently gives no consideration to the structural necessity for ‘discord’ in modern music.”⁹⁷ This sentiment was, unsurprisingly, shared by Schoenberg. After sneering that “to identify the style is easier and procures for one the glory of a connoisseur,” Schoenberg explained: “I personally do not find that atonality and dissonance are the outstanding features of my works.”⁹⁸

As a pedagogue, Copland was very much implicated in all this. Although he routinely started out with a rejection of superficial stylistic clichés about “modern music,” he simultaneously used these same clichés as a way in. And they were not altogether different from his own essentialized definitions, which boiled modern music down to a gradual “pull-away” from nineteenth-century German romanticism (see fig. 2,

⁹⁴ See Adler, *New Values*, 13.

⁹⁵ In this, NBC pedagogues echoed what Donald Tovey, on the other side of the Atlantic, had already dubbed “sonata style.” Donald Francis Tovey, “Sonata Forms” (1911), in *The Forms of Music: Musical Articles from the Encyclopedia Britannica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 208–32. For Adorno’s complaint, see “Analytical Study,” 182.

⁹⁶ *1938–1939: NBC Music Appreciation Hour*, 6.

⁹⁷ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 209.

⁹⁸ Schoenberg, “A Self-Analysis,” in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 77.

above).⁹⁹ On another level, too, the broader “modern” stylistic checklists upon which the course was based arguably differed from the clichés he railed against in degree and not kind. It is perhaps telling that, when it came to Schoenberg, Copland’s lectures focused on those “superficial” features that high modernists disavowed: pared-down orchestration, awkward melodies, rhythmic asymmetry, dissonance, and atonality.¹⁰⁰

Subordinating large-scale form to stylistic markers was an attempt to democratize and demystify it. This also had the effect of redeeming style as a shortcut to the underlying structures (the so-called “ideas”) that modernists held supreme. At the same time, it raised the prospect that the stylistic surface was all there is, as if to foreshadow later poststructuralist critiques: “for a work of art to have ‘content’ is, in itself, a rather special stylistic convention,” Susan Sontag remarked.¹⁰¹ Yet, from the vantage of midcentury debates, the problem was not that stylistic listening reversed reigning hierarchies, reducing everything to the musical surface. It was, rather, that it revealed alternative—even competing—priorities associated with the middlebrow. More specifically, these pedagogical initiatives rejected modernist reductionism and hierarchy and aspired toward a more synoptic view. Instead of breaking music down into its constituent parts of form, rhythm, melody, and texture, middlebrow pedagogues aimed to synthesize distinct parameters and perspectives into a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts.

538

New Music, Modern Music, Style and Idea

Copland conceived of style as having a broad purview, synthesizing not just “technical” parameters but also “aesthetic” and “historical” concerns (see fig. 1, above). This meant relating the sum of musical characteristics to broader questions of aim and ideology, as well as to previous traditions and styles. After admitting that “composers are not by nature aestheticians,” Copland declared it important “to consider the basic human attitudes” that shaped their works nevertheless.¹⁰² For him, this was the most effective way of cultivating broadmindedness, especially when it came to modern music: “When approaching a present-day musical work of serious pretensions, one must first realize what the objective

⁹⁹ See Copland, *Our New Music*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ “The Evolution of Modern Music, 1927,” CCLC, box 210, folder 21, Lecture V (Schoenberg, Webern & Berg); see also “The Aesthetic Climate of Today,” 1963, CCLC, box 210, folders 4–7, Lecture IV (“Dodecaphony and the Viennese School”).

¹⁰¹ Susan Sontag, “On Style” (1965), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 20.

¹⁰² Copland, “The Aesthetic Climate of Today,” 1963, CCLC, box 210, folders 4–7, Lecture I.

of the composer is and then expect to hear a different treatment of the elements of music—harmony, melody, timbre, texture—than what was customary in the past.”¹⁰³ This was borne out by Copland’s pedagogy in the tendency to preface stylistic checklists with aesthetic principles and draw connections with broader movements across the arts.¹⁰⁴

Copland was not alone in tying style to aesthetics. Adler, for example, distinguished between “idiom”—the technical expression of style—and style’s “larger and more metaphysical aspect.”¹⁰⁵ For him, no less than for Copland, style’s technical characteristics were only meaningful alongside the aesthetic principles that gave rise to them. “Style,” as Adler concluded—with characteristic expansiveness—“is man’s reaction to design, nature and life, plus his reaction to all the experience and tradition of the past.”¹⁰⁶ As these comments suggest, moreover, a composer’s “aesthetic” was deemed inseparable from his or her historical context—that is, from the wider development of musical style. Although Adler criticized music appreciation for traditionally imagining style periods in deterministic terms—as if composers could never deviate from the traits of their epoch—historical periodization remained central to his conception. Copland’s modern music survey was, as we have seen, organized into four discrete periods (see fig. 2 above), with each new style reacting against and superseding the previous one. “Each period has its own character,” Copland observed, before casting “an awareness of musical history” as the key to musical style.¹⁰⁷

Far from endearing music appreciation’s surveys to modernists, this “perspective” provoked even more vitriolic complaints. Modernists worried that “popularized aesthetics”—to borrow Schoenberg’s description—would not only detract from more practical concerns but undermine the ideological commitment upon which “progress” was said to depend.¹⁰⁸ This was only exacerbated by what modernists saw as the shallow historicism that middlebrow pedagogues wielded over old and new composers alike: “a great number of pseudo-historians,” Schoenberg protested, have sought to “gain influence in the development of the art of music and to organize it in advance . . . , predicting the future of music.”¹⁰⁹ It is for this reason that Schoenberg viewed attempts to incorporate his music into long-standing style surveys as acts of

¹⁰³ Copland, “A Modernist Defends Modern Music,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1949.

¹⁰⁴ See Copland, “The Aesthetic Climate of Today,” 1963, CCLC, box 210, folders 4–7, Lecture IV (“Dodecaphony and the Viennese School”).

¹⁰⁵ Adler, *New Values*, 53.

¹⁰⁶ Adler, *New Values*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Copland, *Music and Imagination*, 14.

¹⁰⁸ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 113.

¹⁰⁹ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 114.

condescension, if not downright hostility. By naming, codifying, canonizing, and even venerating modernism's styles, pedagogues consigned them to the past.

Schoenberg was candid about his personal stakes in this debate, admitting that a stylistic focus made his own music seem more like the sunset of nineteenth-century romanticism than a new musical dawn. When lashing out at those who considered "composition with twelve tones as an end to the period in which chromaticism evolved" instead of as the beginning of a new era, he likely had Copland in mind.¹¹⁰ Where Schoenberg famously imagined his twelve-tone system "guarantee[ing] the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years," Copland insisted that the pendulum had already swung the other way.¹¹¹ This prompted Schoenberg to cast Copland as one of his principal detractors, eliciting a defensive response: "my respect and reverence for the ideals you have upheld for so many years," Copland insisted, "are such that I find it painful to discover that you think of us as so far apart."¹¹² Elsewhere Copland was even more candid about his own role in what Schoenberg saw as the all-too-premature, middlebrow canonization of his work: "I have disseminated [Schoenberg's music] in lectures and in arranging concerts for more than twenty years."¹¹³

540

There were also wider philosophical differences at stake. According to Adorno, the style surveys marked not only Schoenbergian progress but progress itself as a throwback to the nineteenth century: "Naïve faith in style goes hand in hand with rancor against the concept of progress in art."¹¹⁴ Bauer, confirming Adorno's suspicions, insisted that "music does not 'progress,'" while Copland's quasi-positivistic survey emphasized "continuous change" instead.¹¹⁵ With his suggestion of overarching oscillation between romantic and classic impulses throughout the centuries, Copland even went so far as to cast music history in cyclical terms.¹¹⁶ Although he set out to distinguish the established and now-outdated styles

¹¹⁰ Schoenberg, "New Music, Outmoded Music," 120.

¹¹¹ Schoenberg's declaration was made to Josef Rufer, who in turn relayed it to Hans H. Stuckenschmidt. See Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg: His Life, World, and Work*, trans. Humphrey Searle (New York: Schirmer, 1977), 277; for Copland's cyclical view of history, see Copland, *Our New Music*, 3–4.

¹¹² Copland, letter to Arnold Schoenberg, February 13, 1950, in *The Selected Correspondence of Aaron Copland*, ed. Elizabeth Crist and Wayne Shirley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 197.

¹¹³ Copland, letter to Virgil Thomson, published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, September 25, 1949.

¹¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 272.

¹¹⁵ Bauer, *Twentieth Century Music*, 10; and Copland, *Our New Music*, viii.

¹¹⁶ See Copland, *Our New Music*, 6–10.

of “modern” music from the “new” experiments, he was clear that the latter were also destined for the same fate.

According to Schoenberg, these endless cycles of “new” and “outmoded” music epitomized music appreciation’s shallow historicism. He accused pedagogues of stripping artistic innovation of its transcendental basis by confusing progress with novelty: “Therein lies the difference between a mere style and a real idea. An idea can never perish.”¹¹⁷ Adorno likewise distinguished “between composers whose principal value lies in the fact that they adequately represent their time (for instance . . . , Lully, Corelli, and to a great extent, even Händel) and such a composer as Beethoven, whose achievements are fundamentally individual achievements.”¹¹⁸ Much like Schoenberg, Adorno maintained that this distinction allowed for the appreciation of modernist progress without reducing it to the mere novelties of the fashion industry.¹¹⁹ This was particularly important at a time when “the increasing aggressiveness and the expansion of middlebrow culture” promised—as Greenberg warned—to generate a form of avant-garde kitsch, freezing, standardizing, and packaging even the most advanced modernism into easily consumable “styles.”¹²⁰

Copland’s Styles

While high modernists resented this pigeonholing of their work, the implications for new composition were apparently worse. Virginia Woolf continued the passage from “A Letter to a Young Poet” that serves as the epigraph to this article by warning that crude stylistic pedagogies were bound to elicit increased self-consciousness among young artists, not to mention a new contrivance in their art: “Once you begin to take yourself seriously as a leader or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative, then you become a self-conscious, biting, and scratching little animal whose work is not of the slightest value or importance to anybody.”¹²¹ For Schoenberg, this was already coming to pass. After recognizing yesterday’s music appreciation students were the composers of today, Schoenberg attacked the latter’s approach to their art: “so many contemporary composers care so much about style and so little about idea.” From this apparently came the tendency “to compose in ancient styles, using their mannerisms,” undermining musical progress along the

¹¹⁷ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 123.

¹¹⁸ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 202.

¹¹⁹ Adorno, “Analytical Study,” 203.

¹²⁰ Greenberg, “State of American Writing,” 255.

¹²¹ Woolf, “Letter to a Young Poet,” 210.

way.¹²² At the same time, the next generation apparently elevated novelty in its place, with even second-rate composers aspiring to invent the next “style”: “[to] be avoided: chromaticism, expressive melodies, Wagnerian harmonies, romanticism, private biographical hints, subjectivity, functional harmonic progressions. . . . In other words, all that was good in the preceding period should not occur now,” Schoenberg jeered.¹²³

As one of the next generation’s most prominent composers and pedagogues, Copland was a likely target of Schoenberg’s complaints. In a letter to Thomson, the elder composer attacked the younger along precisely these lines.¹²⁴ Evidently offended by Copland’s suggestion that his music had been superseded by newer styles—as we have seen—Schoenberg inveighed against the very idea of composing in styles.¹²⁵ In response, Copland rejected the accusations of dogmatism while reaffirming the centrality of style: “It is the teacher’s role,” he replied, “to make evident the expressive and intellectual content of music written in all styles, old and new—beyond that point the student must work out his own salvation.”¹²⁶ In his Harvard lecture on the “Problem of Style,” Copland went even further, placing the category at the center of the creative predicament. “Imagine yourself a composer in America? What style to adopt?” he asked his audience.¹²⁷ In doing so, he laid bare his own creative anxieties. For, judging from critical responses throughout his career, his works were steeped in the stylistic self-consciousness that Schoenberg, Woolf, and others denounced.

One obvious lightning rod for this complaint was the Scherzo from Copland’s *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* (1924), otherwise known as the *Organ Symphony*. As the excerpted apotheosis (see ex. 1; from figs. 33–34 in the published score) makes clear, this was a movement marked by relentless polyrhythms, bitonality, and octatonicism. If Stravinsky’s music was virtually synonymous with unfettered radicalism for many Americans in this period—as H. Colin Slim has argued—Copland was clearly staking a claim on this legacy, pulling out all the Stravinskian stops in order to dramatize the novelty of his own style.¹²⁸ Set beneath the animalistic flutes and stratospheric piccolos, an irregular two-note rhythmic motif

¹²² Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 123.

¹²³ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 120.

¹²⁴ Schoenberg, *Schoenberg Reader*, 341–42.

¹²⁵ Schoenberg, *Schoenberg Reader*, 342.

¹²⁶ Copland, letter to Arnold Schoenberg, 13 February 1950, in *Selected Correspondence of Aaron Copland*, 198.

¹²⁷ “The Problem of Style,” CCLC, box 214, folder 15.

¹²⁸ H. Colin Slim, *Stravinsky in the Americas: Transatlantic Tours and Domestic Excursions from Wartime Los Angeles (1925–1945)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 1. For discussion of the Stravinskian elements of Copland’s *Organ Symphony*, see Gayle Murchison, *The American Stravinsky: The Style and Aesthetics of Copland’s New American Music, the Early Works, 1921–1938* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 48–53.

EXAMPLE 1. Copland, *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* (1924), figs. 33–34.

Orch.

cresc. sempre

Organ

33

tr.

f

f cresc. sempre

simile

ff

(*con 8va ad lib.*)

EXAMPLE 1. (Continued)

The musical score consists of two systems, each with five staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff, and the bottom four staves are grouped by a brace, representing a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The notation includes:

- System 1:**
 - Staff 1: Treble clef, starting with a trill (tr) over a dotted quarter note.
 - Staff 2: Treble clef, accompaniment with chords and eighth notes.
 - Staff 3: Bass clef, accompaniment with eighth notes.
 - Staff 4: Treble clef, accompaniment with chords and eighth notes, including fingerings 5/3 and 1/2.
 - Staff 5: Bass clef, accompaniment with eighth notes, including fingerings 1/2.
 - Dynamic marking: *cresc. sempre* appears in the middle of the system.
- System 2:**
 - Staff 1: Treble clef, starting with a trill (tr) over a dotted quarter note, with a box containing the number 34.
 - Staff 2: Treble clef, accompaniment with chords and eighth notes.
 - Staff 3: Bass clef, accompaniment with eighth notes.
 - Staff 4: Treble clef, accompaniment with chords and eighth notes, including fingerings 5/3 and 1/2.
 - Staff 5: Bass clef, accompaniment with eighth notes, including fingerings 1/2.
 - Dynamic marking: *ff* (fortissimo) appears in the middle of the system.

EXAMPLE 1. (Continued)

The musical score consists of five systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff with a trill (tr) and a wavy line above it, and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) below. The second system continues the grand staff. The third system has a treble clef staff with a dynamic marking 'sva' and a dashed line above it, and a grand staff below. The fourth system continues the grand staff. The fifth system has a bass clef staff with a wavy line above it. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accents, and dynamic markings.

is hammered out by two antiphonal orchestral choirs, each accenting different beats of the bar. This metrical chaos is heightened by the organ's tetrachords, which work with and against the shifting meters of the instrumental choirs. Copland intensifies this cumulative *moto perpetuo* effect by thundering out an augmented version of the movement's main (Lydian) theme in the organ pedal. By layering the melody beneath the movement's rhythmic motifs, Copland emphasizes contrapuntal virtuosity even while evoking the stereotype of modernist noise.

If Copland's music appreciation surveys of modern music spotted a turn away from romantic expressivity—with its chromatic progressions, expressive melodies, and so on—critics heard musical passages like this as the pinnacle of this trend. While one critic praised the work as an “outstanding novelty . . . in the most modern manner,” another predicted outrage “against pages that are noise, not sound.”¹²⁹ And

¹²⁹ “Several Stars Applauded at the Symphony,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, February 21, 1925; and Philip Hale, “Copland and Lili Boulanger Works Heard First Time in Boston,” *Boston Herald*, February 21, 1925.

a third insisted that its boisterous rhythms and bewildering counterpoint covered up a “dearth of salient musical ideas.”¹³⁰ In describing Copland’s early works in this way, critics were preempting high modernist critiques. Having denounced the crude proscriptions against romantic characteristics, Schoenberg, for example, went on to parody the “New Music” of Copland’s generation in remarkably similar terms: “pedal points (instead of elaborate bass voices and moving harmony), ostinatos, sequences (instead of developing variation), fugatos (for similar purposes), dissonances (disguising the vulgarity of the thematic material), objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), and a kind of polyphony, substituting for counterpoint.”¹³¹

For some commentators—no less than for Schoenberg—Copland’s self-conscious attempts to reject the musical past and cultivate a “new” style limited the significance of his work: “no real progress has been achieved in any art unless firmly linked with and logically derived from the work of preceding generations,” one critic opined. “Copland,” he elaborated, “has mastered the mannerisms of the advanced writers of the day but he has not as yet fully visioned the ultimate purposes of the new style.”¹³² Much as with Copland’s pedagogical surveys, this method of composing-in-styles was said to quickly render the “new” style old.¹³³ If self-consciously new works were already dated at conception, they became even more so with each passing year. A 1946 review of Copland’s *Piano Concerto* (1926) described it as a “curiously dated work”: “it is so aggressively modern that it now sounds a little old-fashioned. It could almost do duty, without alterations, as a burlesque under the title, ‘a significant piece of modern music.’”¹³⁴

Given Copland’s commitment to breadth and novelty, it is perhaps unsurprising that these assessments—a taste of his own medicine, as Schoenberg would doubtless say—spurred him on to break out of this stylistic mold. If the *Organ Symphony*, *Piano Concerto*, and *Symphonic Ode* (1926–27) were seen as attempts to “out-Stravinsky Stravinsky,”¹³⁵ subsequent works struck a self-consciously Schoenbergian tone. In the *Piano Variations* (1931), Copland swapped the pedal points and ostinato for angular melodies, motivic concentration, and dissonance, undermining

¹³⁰ Warren Storey Smith, “Barbaric Music by Symphony: Copland’s Work Brutal—Woman Organist Soloist,” *Boston Daily Post*, February 21, 1925.

¹³¹ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music,” 120.

¹³² Stuart Mason, “Boston Symphony Concert: Most Advanced Style Lili Boulanger’s Work,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 1924.

¹³³ See, for example, Lawrence Gilman, “A Week End with the Moderns, Chaperoned by Koussevitzky and Damrosch,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 30, 1925.

¹³⁴ John Briggs, “Copland’s 1926 Concerto Is Nostalgic, in Its Way,” *New York Post*, October 22, 1946.

¹³⁵ Mason, “Boston Symphony Concert: Most Advanced Style Lili Boulanger’s Work.”

a sense of overriding tonality. The Schoenbergian works like the *Piano Variations* and *Second* (“Short”) *Symphony* (1933) gave way in turn to a “simpler” style, and this oscillation continued throughout his career: from the “new simplicity” of *El Salón México* (1936), *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), through the jazzy idiom of the *Clarinet Concerto* (1950), to the serialism of the *Piano Quartet* (1950), *Piano Fantasy* (1957), and *Connotations* (1962). Yet even this summary masks the outliers that undermine any clear trends. While an early work like *Poet’s Song* (1927) demonstrates an interest in serialism amid Copland’s supposedly Stravinskian phase, the late *Emblems* (1964) draws on folk music in the wake of several Webernian works.¹³⁶ The trajectory of Copland’s oeuvre, in other words, shuttled back and forth constantly between disparate styles, as though the composer were chasing his own stylistic tail.

Given long-standing critical expectations of artistic purity, consistency, and progress, it is unsurprising that some commentators reacted with hostility. “A lack of a definite direction has been the glaring shortcoming of his artistic development,” David Ewen grumbled; “he change[s] his styles in chameleon fashion.”¹³⁷ Even sympathetic critics were clearly uncomfortable about these traits, defensively stressing the underlying consistency of Copland’s oeuvre.¹³⁸ Others drew up distinct style periods in an attempt to chart his “development” in more logical terms.¹³⁹ In doing so, however, they risked reinforcing the high modernist ideals that Copland railed against: “To have confined myself to a single compositional approach,” he explained in response to attempts to periodize his work, “would have enhanced my reputation for consistency, no doubt, but would have afforded me less pleasure as a creator.”¹⁴⁰ Elsewhere Copland offered a more positive defense of stylistic inconsistency: “I adapt myself to different composer situations . . . , but I don’t have a sense of changing. I don’t want to renege on any music I’ve written in the past.”¹⁴¹

Copland often credited this stylistic open-mindedness and flexibility to his pedagogical experience. Immediately after stressing the

¹³⁶ See Howard Pollack, “Copland, Aaron,” in *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002249091 (accessed June 13, 2020).

¹³⁷ David Ewen, “Modern American Composers,” *Musical Times* 80 (1939): 413–16, at 414.

¹³⁸ “Copland Gives First of ‘One-Man’ Concerts,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1935.

¹³⁹ See Paul Rosenfeld, “The Advance of American Music,” *Kenyon Review* 1 (1939): 185–93; Berger, *Aaron Copland*; and Julia Smith, *Aaron Copland: His Work and Contribution to American Music* (New York: E. F. Dutton, 1955).

¹⁴⁰ Copland, “Composer from Brooklyn: An Autobiographical Sketch” (1968), in *Aaron Copland: A Reader*, xxxii.

¹⁴¹ Aaron Copland, cited in Ross Parmenter, “Portrait of an American Composer,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1941.

significance of the New School lectures for his own engagement with serialism, for example, he cast his twelve-tone works not as an ideological shift but rather as an attempt to broaden his compositional view: “the twelve-tone method was a way of thinking about music from a different perspective. . . . It forced me into a different, more fragmented kind of melodic writing that in turn resulted in chords I had rarely used before.”¹⁴² This exploratory approach to musical style was not lost on some supporters, who praised his works along similar lines. “I suspect that he took to serial techniques,” Hugh Cole later speculated in a stylistic retrospective of Copland’s oeuvre, “not . . . to express darker, more involved meanings, but rather in a spirit of inquiry; to see what would happen if he tried, this, or that, way of composing.”¹⁴³ In a more general sense too, critics praised Copland’s oeuvre as the work of “a versatile craftsman”—as Leonard Liebbling put it—lauding his open-mindedness over ideological purity.¹⁴⁴ “We should rejoice in a composer who can move freely and confidently in so many worlds of music,” Cole elaborated. “Each of the latest works explores a particular field of action, and the mode of musical speech is adapted to the needs of the occasion.”¹⁴⁵ According to him, one needed to appreciate Copland’s works contextually—that is, with one ear fixed on the other styles in which he had composed, even if they were not present in the latest work. This not only bestowed upon supporters an aura of open-mindedness but also allowed them to enjoy old and new styles without implications of exclusivity or chauvinism.

548

Styling Modern Music

No mere sublimation on the critics’ part, this stylistic contextualism was arguably written into the scores. Responding to the apparent shift to a more “popular” idiom in *El Salón México*, some critics pointed to self-conscious traces or knowing nods to the composer’s former self: “It makes likely use of Mexican dance tunes, some of which fairly drip molasses but there is an admixture of dissonance to prove that Mr. Copland is still of this century,” one commentator observed.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, one of the central paradoxes of Copland’s discrete styles was that they simultaneously seemed to replicate within themselves the stylistic inconsistency that marked the broader trajectory of his oeuvre. It was for this

¹⁴² Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 182.

¹⁴³ Hugo Cole, “Aaron Copland (II),” *Tempo* 77 (1966): 9–15, at 11.

¹⁴⁴ Leonard Liebbling, “Music World at Concert and Recital,” *New York Musical Courier*, March 1, 1935.

¹⁴⁵ Cole, “Aaron Copland (II),” 14–15.

¹⁴⁶ Oscar Thomson, “Music of the Week End,” *New York Sun*, May 16, 1938.

reason that Arthur Berger confidently sorted Copland's music into discrete style periods, even as he recognized that this failed at the level of individual works.¹⁴⁷

None of Copland's compositions were exempt from this paradox, but the "early" works had already set this tension in relief. Part of the reason that they were cast as a cipher of the "modern" style was less on account of their aesthetic purity than the opposite—that they rolled disparate stylistic novelties into one. When it came to the *Organ Symphony*, for example, one irreverent commentator insisted that its "second-hand Stravinsky" was supplemented by a "Prospect Park Schönberg" and a number of other idioms besides.¹⁴⁸ Others understood the work more explicitly as a compendium of modern styles: "There were reminiscences here and there of certain senior modern composers of the period," one commentator enthused when assessing its later incarnation as *Symphony No. 1*.¹⁴⁹

Perhaps even more than his *Organ Symphony* (or *Symphony No. 1*), Copland's *Piano Concerto* sent listeners searching for styles, as if it were a modern music appreciation exercise. "[It] started in grandiose fashion with one of those themes which smells of Scriabine," one commentator explained.¹⁵⁰ When another critic heard traces of Schoenberg, he likely had the melodic fragmentation, self-conscious motivicism, spare textures, and attenuated tonality of the first piano entry in mind (see ex. 2).¹⁵¹ By the "second theme" (see ex. 3), the meandering melody, delicate timbres, and colorful harmony evoked Debussy, another permanent fixture of Copland's "modern" music survey. And although the piano solo at the beginning of the second movement (see ex. 4) starts out with a kind of theatrical (minstrel) jazz, it quickly splinters off into what one critic identified as "tone cluster" effects—according to Copland's lectures, the defining characteristic of Henry Cowell's style.¹⁵²

Shortly after fig. 14 in the published score, the music settles into the symphonic jazz idiom that occupies most of the remainder of the work. The ease with which critics picked up on these stylistic references substantiates Copland's later description of them as an attempt to educate listeners on the newest styles of Gershwin and Milhaud.¹⁵³ In

¹⁴⁷ Berger, *Aaron Copland*, 37.

¹⁴⁸ Gilman, "Music by Young and Old."

¹⁴⁹ Francis D. Perkins, "Boston Players Give Copland's 1st Symphony," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 1, 1935.

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Chotzinoff, "Music," *World*, February 4, 1927.

¹⁵¹ Edward Burlingame Hill, "Copland's Jazz Concerto in Boston," *Modern Music* 4, no. 4 (May–June 1927): 35–37.

¹⁵² Leslie Sloper, "Copland's Piano Concerto," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 29, 1927.

¹⁵³ Penfield Roberts, "Copland Heard at Symphony Concert," *Boston Globe*, January 29, 1927.

EXAMPLE 2. Copland, “Concerto for Piano and Orchestra” (1927–28), first movement, piano entrance, fig. 2.

accel.-----*rit.*-----*a tempo*

Piano

liberamente

Pno.

sva-----*accel.*-----*rit.*

Pno.

sva-----

Pno.

passages such as figs. 17–19, the aggressive timbres and off-kilter polyrhythms lend the jazz a distinctly Stravinskian tone.¹⁵⁴ By fig. 40 jazz fades into the background, leaving Petrushka-like syncopations and noisy

¹⁵⁴ See Smith, *Aaron Copland*, 94.

EXAMPLE 3. Copland, "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" (1927–28),
first movement, second theme, figs. 4–5.

Fl. gr. 1

Cl. 1
e ingl.
ppp

Cl. in B \flat

B. Cl.
in B \flat
p

Ob. 1, 2
in F
p

Ob. 3
in F

Cel.

Pno.
pp

Vn. 1
con sord. *V*

Vn. 2
con sord. div. *p*

Va.
con sord. *p*

Vc.
con sord. *p*

EXAMPLE 3. (Continued)

4

Fl. gr. 1
Cl. 1
e ingl.
Cl. in Bb
B. Cl.
in Bb
Ob. 1, 2
in F
Ob. 3
in F
Cel.
Pho.
Vn. 1
Vn. 2
Va.
Vc.

The musical score consists of ten staves. The first staff is for Flute (Fl. gr. 1) and includes a measure number '4' in a box. The second staff is for Clarinet 1 (Cl. 1) in E-flat, which is marked as 'ingl.' (likely indicating it is a clarinet in G). The third staff is for Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. in Bb). The fourth staff is for Bass Clarinet in B-flat (B. Cl. in Bb). The fifth staff is for Oboe 1 and 2 (Ob. 1, 2) in F. The sixth staff is for Oboe 3 (Ob. 3) in F. The seventh and eighth staves are for Cello (Cel.) and Double Bass (Pho.), respectively. The ninth staff is for Violin 1 (Vn. 1) and the tenth staff is for Violin 2 (Vn. 2). The eleventh staff is for Viola (Va.) and the twelfth staff is for Violoncello (Vc.). The score shows a complex orchestral texture with various rhythmic patterns and melodic lines across the instruments.

EXAMPLE 4. Copland, “Concerto for Piano and Orchestra” (1927–28),
beginning of second movement, piano solo.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled 'Piano', shows the right hand with a melodic line of eighth notes and the left hand with a bass line of eighth notes. The tempo is marked 'Molto moderato (molto rubato) (in tempo)'. Dynamics include 'f' and 'sff'. The second system, labeled 'Pno.', continues the piece with a 'poco rit.' marking and a 'sua' (sustained) marking. Dynamics include 'sff' and 'ff'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

polyrhythms in its place. In the run-up to fig. 41, this rhythmic chaos is superimposed over a sustained brass melody, stirring up the kind of stringent polyphony that Copland associated with Hindemith’s “new counterpoint.”¹⁵⁵

Much as with the *Organ Symphony*, then, critics heard the *Piano Concerto* as a checklist of modern styles: “[Copland] seems to have found his normal musical diet in the works of contemporary composers He has been interested in Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Honegger, Hindemith and others.”¹⁵⁶ If highbrows were irked by the inconstancy of Copland’s oeuvre as a whole, this internal stylistic eclecticism was even more provocative. Works were dubbed “none too good hodge-podge[s]” and other monikers denoting impurity.¹⁵⁷ Even those who acknowledged the eclectic’s “uncanny skill” diagnosed a lack of purpose or meaning: “the composition [First Symphony] shows the author’s skill in the employment of progressive mannerisms . . . , but as a whole it leaves the hearer wondering just what the composer set

¹⁵⁵ “Masterpieces [sic] of Modern Music, 1928–1929,” Lecture IX (Neo-Classicism of Hindemith), CCLC, box 212, folders 23–24.

¹⁵⁶ Burlingame Hill, “Copland’s Jazz Concerto,” 36.

¹⁵⁷ L. W., “Smit Soloist in Haydn Opus,” *New York Journal American*, October 22, 1946.

out to do.”¹⁵⁸ For most, the problem was less eclecticism per se than the dearth of originality that it betrayed.¹⁵⁹

Drawing on oppositions between invention and skill, innate genius and cultivated talent, these criticisms echoed broader critiques of the middlebrow. After noting that “much of Copland’s charm rests in the broad expanse of his intellectual interests,” Ewen continued: “This same quality—it is, undoubtedly, an impatience at being hemmed in by too limited an intellectual boundary—has brought a disconcerting eclecticism to his music. . . . His most recent works are often an amazing conglomeration of different styles.” “Until Copland achieves a coherent viewpoint in his music,” Ewen concluded patronizingly, “he will never be anything more than a very smart composer.”¹⁶⁰

Given the proximity of these critiques to those routinely leveled at the middlebrow, it is perhaps surprising that some spun these “faults”—curiosity, cleverness, virtuosity, and eclecticism—in more positive terms. Many highlighted the skill involved not just in distilling disparate idioms but in synthesizing them into something “new.” For such critics Copland’s stylistic facility was less an obstacle to originality than a pre-condition for it. “There is a good deal of jazz, some Stravinsky, some Debussy, a little Ravel and many classics [at the] back of the composition of ‘Music for the Theatre,’” one critic explained. “But it has all become Copland.”¹⁶¹

If some subsumed Copland’s eclecticism into a “new” personal style, others championed it along alternative lines that were even more closely associated with the middlebrow. “It may be self-conscious and manneristic,” Downes conceded, “[but it] is far better to find a composer who intends to discover what it’s all about, or know the reason why, than to witness the glib plausibilities of those who seek only to play safe and get the approval of constituted authority.”¹⁶² Still others laid emphasis on the resulting breadth: “[Copland’s] faculty for discovering unexpected resources in his material, for presenting it under all sorts of different aspects . . . amply compensate[es] for his lack of richness or abundance in initial ideas.”¹⁶³ A handful were even less apologetic, lauding Copland’s summary of “all the devices and discoveries of the

¹⁵⁸ “Boston Symphony Plays Copland Work” [source unspecified], March 1, 1935; located in “First Symphony: Clippings 1927–1969,” CCLC, box 402, folder 1.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Mason, “Boston Symphony Concert: Most Advanced Style Lili Boulanger’s Work.”

¹⁶⁰ Ewen, “Modern American Composers,” 414.

¹⁶¹ Penfield Roberts, “Copland Suite at Symphony Concert,” *Boston Globe*, November 21, 1925.

¹⁶² Olin Downes, “Leo Smit Soloist at City Symphony,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1946.

¹⁶³ Theodore Chanler, “Music Chronicle: Aaron Copland Up to Now,” *Hound & Horn* 4 (1930): 107.

twentieth century thus far internationally tested and accepted,” and elevating them over contemporary “tonal contrivances of a completely novel, unclassified and experimental sort.”¹⁶⁴

In a context in which a familiarity with a broad range of styles was an ideal to which middlebrow concert programs and music appreciation courses aspired, Copland’s eclectic summaries naturally held a distinctive appeal to certain critics and audiences. Indeed, as defenders waxed lyrical on Copland’s sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and breadth, they imagined his compositions broadening audience horizons, almost as if they were designed as pedagogical works themselves: “Copland is an authority on modern music, he has delved into the scores of Stravinsky, Honegger and the rest, learned the secrets of their technique and explained to the uninitiated their musical processes and their hidden meanings.”¹⁶⁵

Middlebrow Style, or Styling the Middlebrow

Despite the impression given by high modernists, there was clearly more to middlebrow culture than the unthinking veneration of past “masterworks.” Its supposedly narrow investment in nineteenth-century music was often matched by a contrary commitment to ever-expanding novelty and breadth. This made for a more complicated relationship with musical modernism than Schoenberg, Adorno, and others made out. By no means opposed to “modern music,” middlebrow composers, pedagogues, critics, and audiences often embraced it in all its diversity precisely because of its rejection of established traditions and norms. At the same time, they assimilated it into the canon, classifying and categorizing it into recognizable “styles.” While highbrows imagined themselves standing apart from society, as if a testament to their own purity and autonomy, middlebrows fashioned a modernism that was at home in the cultural marketplace.

Tracing Copland’s eclectic approach to “new” music helps to excavate midcentury tensions between high modernism and its middlebrow counterpart. This means accounting for the contention surrounding his disparate styles, while potentially answering questions that continue to vex scholars today: how to square Copland’s participation in the music appreciation movement with the works in austere, modernist styles that he composed at around the same time; and, more importantly, how to make sense of the stylistic inconsistency of Copland’s wider oeuvre. Like Berger, Julia Smith, and other midcentury defenders, recent scholars have been torn between establishing style periods for him and

¹⁶⁴ “Ingenuity and Invention in Music,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 5, 1927.

¹⁶⁵ Warren Storey Smith, “Symphony Plays Ode of Copland,” *Boston Post*, February 20, 1932.

recognizing the ease with which these categories broke down.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, they have developed increasingly sophisticated ways to account for the causes and meaning of Copland's changes of style.¹⁶⁷

By examining Copland's modern music and pedagogy in the middlebrow context, my intention has not been to challenge these personal and political understandings of Copland's individual "styles." Rather, it has been to offer another lens through which to view their significance. A study of middlebrow perspectives has the potential to illuminate the continuities that underpinned Copland's entire oeuvre without reducing it to a single aesthetic principle or elevating certain styles over others as the mark of his "true" voice. Where scholars have sought to explain away conflicting commitments, the middlebrow context suggests that inconsistency was precisely the point. Copland's compositions catered to widespread values of flexibility, novelty, and breadth. This interpretation also reminds us how embedded Copland's eclecticism was in midcentury cultural hierarchies and lessens the temptation to interpret it in the pluralist terms favored today. As we have seen, the middlebrow commitment to stylistic novelty and breadth—whether in music appreciation or composition—was less a rejection of cultural hierarchy than an alternative kind of cultural elevation or prestige. It was premised not on aesthetic originality, purity or formal depth, but rather on the synoptic ability to see beyond any single method, ideology, or style.

On the one hand, high modernists were clearly irked by this competition: "The cultured American," as Greenberg related disapprovingly, "has now become more knowing than cultivated, glib in a kind of fashionable *koiné*. . . , a compendium of what he or (more usually) she reads in certain knowing magazines—anxious to be . . . *au courant*."¹⁶⁸ Perhaps even more destabilizing, however, was the overlap between these oppositional models of cultural prestige. As we have seen, "middlebrows" like Copland were more committed to originality than modernists would admit, even if these qualities were framed in historicist rather than transcendental terms. Meanwhile, high modernism even—or perhaps especially—in its "purest" form proved susceptible to the stylistic listening

¹⁶⁶ See n. 140 for midcentury defenders. For more recent scholars, see Pollack, "Copland, Aaron."

¹⁶⁷ See Annegret Fauser, "Aaron Copland, Nadia Boulanger, and the Making of an 'American' Composer," *Musical Quarterly* 89 (2006): 524–54; Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Jennifer DeLapp-Birkett, "Aaron Copland and the Politics of Twelve-Tone Composition in the Early Cold War United States," *Journal of Musicological Research* 27 (2008): 31–62.

¹⁶⁸ Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 161.

that Schoenberg and Adorno decried as the mark of the middlebrow. If middlebrow appreciation seems to anticipate postmodernism's infamous flattening-out of modernism into a series of "styles," this was less the beginning of modernism's demise than the grounds on which it was canonized.¹⁶⁹ In their most candid moments, both Schoenberg and Adorno admitted as much, conceding that style was never as irrelevant to modernist progress as they made out. "Only a thorough knowledge of the styles," Schoenberg conceded, "makes one conscious of the difference between 'mine and thine.'"¹⁷⁰ It was style, in other words, that made artistic originality legible even as it compromised it at the same time.

On the other hand, modernism's susceptibility to stylistic listening raises the possibility that high modernists were complicit in this process all along. After all, if modernists idealized an "immediate" and "spontaneous" relationship between each and every listener and work, any model of pedagogy or criticism—including their own—was bound to fall short. One cannot teach without some degree of dogma or abstraction, despite Schoenberg's and Webern's claims to the contrary.¹⁷¹ This was perhaps why acolytes made so much hay out of the fact that Schoenberg was largely self-taught and insisted, almost as a ritualistic refrain, that he was no "teacher" in the ordinary sense.¹⁷² For modernists, teaching implied dogmatism and passivity, an enterprise that lived parasitically on the creativity of the artists or music that they taught.¹⁷³ At the same time, they recognized that without teachers their own music could not garner the kind of influence and legacy they sought.

At stake in the debate, then, was not music appreciation or middlebrow culture, in any discrete sense, but the power of pedagogical "middlemen" more generally. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Schoenberg and Adorno tried their hands at teaching, to a greater or lesser extent, despite their qualms; or that their experience betrayed complicity in the practices they railed against. Although Adorno rejected

¹⁶⁹ For a similar argument, made with reference to the literary world, see Tracy, "Middlebrow Modernism," ii.

¹⁷⁰ Schoenberg, "Teaching and Modern Trends in Music" (1938), in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 377.

¹⁷¹ See Schoenberg, "Problems in Teaching Art" (1911), in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 365; and Anton von Webern's contribution to "The Teacher (Collected Contributions by His Pupils)" (1912), in *Schoenberg and His World*, ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 257.

¹⁷² The pattern was set by Schoenberg himself in "Problems in Teaching Art" (1911) and bolstered in student testimonials: "The goal of education," Karl Linke explained, "can only be knowledge that the pupil somehow has to acquire on his own" ("The Teacher," 253–54).

¹⁷³ See Paul Königer's contribution to "The Teacher," 258–59.

a priori historical surveys of styles, his alternative model of music appreciation ended up in a similar place, culminating in style criticism.¹⁷⁴ Schoenberg, for his part, churned out countless students and textbooks, and was often known as the most dogmatic of pedagogues, “teach[ing] his style and forc[ing] the pupil to adopt it,” as Webern complained.¹⁷⁵ And perhaps the reason Schoenberg was so perturbed by middlebrow pedagogues and their focus on dissonance and fragmented melodies was not that they misrepresented his music—confusing style for idea, as he liked to say—but, on the contrary, that they successfully distilled the characteristics of his work into an all-too-transparent stylistic recipe.¹⁷⁶ This was a point upon which Adorno later elaborated, as he grew ever more pessimistic about the prospect of modernism’s capacity to resist domestication into middlebrow formulae. “Those works that seem most exactly to represent their style,” he explained, “have always fought through the conflict with it”; “there where [modernism] renounced all will to style, something resembling style formed under the pressure of the immanent elaboration of works.”¹⁷⁷

If the anxiety surrounding Copland’s styles attests to the fraught relationship between modernism and middlebrow culture, it also helps to deepen our understanding of the middlebrow. It gestures toward what we might call a middlebrow “style,” confounding straightforward visions of the category as a mode of cultural mediation. More importantly, however, it promises to undermine the conceptual oppositions upon which this modernist paradigm rests—between the putatively parasitic act of cultural mediation and the “creative” act of composition; between pedagogy and style. Not only was the “middlebrow style” a product of the reciprocal relations among composition, mediation, and consumption; so was the very notion of style. Style histories were never the passive surveys that pedagogues and their modernist critics made them out to be—they were creative acts, “styling” modern music in new and surprisingly contentious ways. At the same time, Copland’s compositional eclecticism was itself often associated with passivity, as though a form of “modern music” appreciation itself. We might even go as far as to suggest that the middlebrow aspects of Copland’s music consisted not just in its stylistic breadth or eclecticism but also in its seeming self-consciousness about new processes of mediation, as though his music were composed with contemporary stylistic pedagogies in

¹⁷⁴ See the final lecture of his imaginary course. Adorno, “What a Music Appreciation Hour Should Be,” 230–31.

¹⁷⁵ Webern, “The Teacher,” 257.

¹⁷⁶ Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music.”

¹⁷⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 270.

mind.¹⁷⁸ Examining the reciprocity between Copland's pedagogy and music within this context shows clearly that the problem that middlebrow culture created for high modernism lay not just in its ability to blur the boundaries between high and low but also in the challenges it posed to long-standing modernist fantasies of aesthetic immediacy and autonomy.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between Aaron Copland's activities as composer and as pedagogue in order to illuminate the fraught midcentury relationship between musical modernism and middlebrow culture. I situate his unpublished lecture notes and music appreciation books within the middlebrow context and trace their connections with the works he composed during this period. At the center of my investigation is the contentious midcentury category of "style," which implicated both Copland's music and his pedagogy in ways that illuminate middlebrow cultural appreciation at large. Challenging long-standing modernist depictions of the middlebrow as the straightforward commercialization of high culture, I excavate characteristic middlebrow commitments to compromise, novelty, and breadth that proved even more unsettling to midcentury hierarchies than mass culture's supposedly shameless pandering.

By emphasizing Copland's commitment to a canon of modern "styles," in composition as in music appreciation, I draw out underlying tensions between his "middlebrow" approach to modern music and a "higher," purer form imagined by Arnold Schoenberg and Theodor W. Adorno. At the same time, I show how these distinctions often threatened to collapse. On a broader methodological level, I chart a middle course between "social" conceptions of the middlebrow—as a means of marketing, distributing, and teaching high art to a mass audience—and "aesthetic" discussions of it as a compositional style. By examining the reciprocity between Copland's pedagogy and music, I ultimately suggest that the problem which middlebrow culture posed to high modernism lay not just in its ability to mediate between high and low, modernism and mass culture, but also in the challenges it posed to fantasies of aesthetic immediacy and autonomy.

Keywords: middlebrow, modernism, Aaron Copland, music appreciation, new music, style

¹⁷⁸ For an elaboration of a similar point with regard to music criticism, see Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 22.