

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN PIANO SOUND AS PORTRAYED BY SELECTED COMPOSERS IN THE UNITED STATES

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EARLY AMERICAN COMPOSERS

A few early American composers used historic battles as inspiration for their piano pieces. **Benjamin Carr** (1768-1831) wrote a programmatic work that depicted the bombardment of Tripoli. After the Battle of Bull Run, **Thomas Green Bethune** (1849-1908) composed a piano piece which recreated an eyewitness's account of the skirmish.

It was New Orleans' native **Louis Moreau Gottschalk** (1829-1869), though, who can be considered the first authentically American classical composer as recognized by the international community. He brought American exoticism to Europe with his piano works that portrayed his upbringing amidst French, Spanish, African, Haitian, Cuban, and American cultures that were prevalent in New Orleans in the 19th century.

GERMANIC INFLUENCE

Prior to the 1890s, American composers did not have a sense of national identity. Instead, they copied the musical traditions of the European composers, and more often than not, the German composers. Critics at the time believed that no American composer was even worthy of consideration and wrote as such in their reviews. These composers studied in Europe, then came back to the United States and continued to write in the style of their teachers.

John Knowles Paine (1839-1906) wrote in the style of J.S. Bach then evolved to style of Chopin or Liszt.

George Whitefield Chadwick (1854-1931) wrote music that was informal, on a smaller scale, and evoked the Art Song.

Horatio Parker (1863-1919) wrote works that were deeply rooted in European romanticism.

Daniel C. Mason II (1873-1953) wrote in a conservative style. He rejected the impressionist and post romantic styles.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK'S CHALLENGE OF 1893

In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition, or Chicago World's Fair, celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America. Invited to compose and conduct a work for the grand auditorium was Bohemian composer, **Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904). While in the United States, Dvořák wrote in *The New York Herald* encouraging American composers to create a national sound. He felt that the future of American music must be founded on the Native American, African American and Creole melodies and rhythms. Dvořák's comments represented a turning point in American composition as they provided the catalyst needed for composers to start to look at folk music for inspiration.

INDIANIST MOVEMENT

The Indianist Movement in American classical music flourished from 1880-1920. It was based on attempts by composers to incorporate Native American musical ideas with Western music to create a new, truly American national music. Ethnologists Alice Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche used groundbreaking wax cylinders to record the music of the Omaha Indians in the late 19th century. American composers used those recordings as primary sources for Native American folk melodies.

Arthur Farwell (1872-1952) founded the Wa-Wan press in 1901 to publish the works of the American Indianist composers. He directed American composers to use all manner of folk music: ragtime, African American songs, Native American songs, and cowboy songs.

Amy Beach (1867-1944) used Native American melodies with the use of pedal tones, ostinatos, linear chromaticism and borrowed tunes in imitation of the monophony of the Indian melodies. She used the modal and pentatonic melodic features of the Indian melodies and added simplified harmonies as to not overwhelm them.

Harvey Worthington Loomis (1865-1930) wrote piano works that depict scenes from a Native American village. He included the original melodies at the beginning of each piece as a point of reference.

Edward MacDowell (1860-1908) begrudgingly accepted Dvořák's challenge, but struggled to find an American sound. He felt music composed in America should be judged on its craftsmanship and beauty, not on the origin of the melodies. MacDowell used Native American melodies as he felt they showed a heroic past, unspoiled landscape and independent spirit. MacDowell did not preserve the integrity of these melodies.

Henry F. Gilbert (1868-1928) was a prolific writer for *The Musical Quarterly* about the topic of what defines American music. He wrote piano pieces using Native American melodies but became more interested in ragtime as a source for his works.



NADIA BOULANGER LEGACY

In the 1920s, some American composers chose to travel to Paris to study composition with Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), a French neoclassic aesthetic who supported a special American manner of composing. Boulanger encouraged these American composers to experiment with jazz as they found their unique style. **Virgil Thomson** (1896-1989), **Roy Harris** (1898-1979), **Aaron Copland** (1900-1990), **Louise Talma** (1906-1996) were some of Americans to go overseas to study with Boulanger. They returned to America and wrote piano works using jazz and other folk music as the source of their compositions.

MODERNISM

Charles Edward Ives (1874-1954) was an early modernist who used piano music to paint musical pictures of small-town America. He used polytonality and polyrhythms he heard from the untrained church choir as well as tone clusters as heard in the church bells and train whistles.

After WWII, as higher education grew, many universities began to employ composers to teach and write music. These composers were allowed more freedom to experiment as universities were less bound by tradition as the conservatories. The composers in turn trained students in modern musical composition including serialism, neoclassicism, and polytonality. **Paul Creston** (1906-1985), **Samuel Barber** (1910-1981), **Norman Dello Joio** (1913-2008), **Vincent Persichetti** (1915-1987), and **Frederick Rzewski** (b. 1938) were others who composed in these new styles. Established composers such as **Aaron Copland** and **Virgil Thomson** also experimented with these new sounds.

RAGTIME & JAZZ

African American music influenced American composers the most and would become more popular to mainstream America. Ragtime and jazz, built on African American folk music, also would go on to earn the distinction of being called American music in Europe.

Scott Joplin (1868-1917) and **Robert Nathaniel Dett** (1882-1943) were early composers who used African American folk music as inspiration. **George Gershwin** (1898-1937) dabbled in ragtime early in his career and later helped the advance of American Jazz. Other early composers who experimented with jazz were **Florence B. Price** (1887-1953) and **William Grant Still** (1895-1978).

POST-MODERNISM

Some post modernists took to experimentation for their compositions. **John Cage** (1912-1992) used extended techniques and prepared pianos to represent his belief that all sounds are valid. Other composers looked to the past for inspiration. **William Bolcom** (b. 1938) led the revival of ragtime but added modern techniques. **Lowell Liebermann** (b. 1961) wrote using traditional harmonic structures in sonata and fugal forms.

MINIMALISM

In the early 1960s, some composers began to see serialism and the twelve tone system as too complicated. As a reaction, they began to simplify all manner of music by turning away from the dissonance and goal orientated music of earlier years. Instead, the minimalist composers created music that required the audience to focus on the internal processes. Techniques of the minimalist style include slow changing patterns and repetitions built on drone foundations. Minimalist composers include **Philip Glass** (b. 1937) and **John Adams** (b. 1947).