



1-2017

Play American

Allen C. Guelzo
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Music Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Guelzo, Allen C. "Play American." *First Things*, Institute on Religion and Public Life (January 2017).

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwfac/99>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Play American

Abstract

Just seventy years ago, a *Fortune* poll reported that 62 percent of Americans listened to classical music, 40 percent could identify Arturo Toscanini as an orchestral conductor, and nine million listeners (11 percent of American households) tuned in to weekly Metropolitan Opera broadcasts from New York City. Astonishing. The “grand orchestra,” wrote Charles Edward Russell in 1927, “has become our sign of honor among the nations.” (*excerpt*)

Keywords

classical music, American composers, orchestra, American music

Disciplines

Cultural History | Music | United States History

Play American

by [Allen C. Guelzo](#)

January 2017



Just seventy years ago, a *Fortune* poll reported that 62 percent of Americans listened to classical music, 40 percent could identify Arturo Toscanini as an orchestral conductor, and nine million listeners (11 percent of American households) tuned in to weekly Metropolitan Opera broadcasts from New York City. Astonishing. The “grand orchestra,” wrote Charles Edward Russell in 1927, “has become our sign of honor among the nations.”

And that may have been one of the principal reasons for classical music’s downfall in America, rather than the usual suspects: the downgrading of music education in schools, the ubiquity of pop-schlock music, shrinking audience attention spans, and the retreat of composition into rarefied and unlistenable writing. There’s no denying that classical music in America has become a vagrant of sorts. Leopold Stokowski’s once-great Philadelphia Orchestra filed for bankruptcy in 2011. Lockouts and strikes have crippled orchestras in Detroit, Indianapolis, Atlanta, and San Francisco. Orchestras in Honolulu, Syracuse, and Albuquerque have closed down. Classical radio, which was once the great sustainer of concert audiences, has been shrinking almost as fast as orchestra seasons. I grew up in Philadelphia, hanging onto every note that poured from WFLN. But in 1998, the station’s management laid off the classical staff and converted to heavy metal. The local public radio station, WHYY, junked its all-classical format, too, leaving classical music in Stokowski’s Philadelphia to dangle from a mixed-format Temple University station where classical has to share time with middle-brow fare.

This downfall stems from the undue concentration on performance as an end in itself, and to the cult of performance stars. American classical music has scarcely been about American music at all; it has been about marquee soloists and conductors, buffing and polishing the same imported repertoire until perfection of execution replaced a focus on what was being performed. Classical music in America did not decline *in spite* of Toscanini or Stokowski, but *because* of them.

It was not as though we lacked a classical tradition of our own. “Between 1800 and 1900, more than fifty composers born or living in the United States wrote roughly one hundred symphonies in all,” writes Douglas Shadle in *Orchestrating the Nation: The Nineteenth-Century American Symphonic Enterprise*, a revelation which Shadle finds “truly astonishing given how little we tend to know about the music.” And how would we? In decades of concert attendance and performance, I have never witnessed a performance of William Henry Fry’s Christmas-time Santa Claus Symphony (1853), with its tremolo declamation of *Adeste fideles* to remind listeners that “Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ,” not St. Nick. Ditto for John Knowles Paine’s two symphonies (1876 and 1880), the four symphonies of George Frederick Bristow (“New York’s musical man of iron”) and the *Symphonic Sketches* of George Whitefield Chadwick (1904). In fact, the only slivers of nineteenth-century American symphonic literature I’ve ever met live belong to Charles Ives, largely because he is thought to be a rough precursor to twentieth-century serialism.

The usual explanation of this neglect is that Bristow, Paine, and others were merely aping, and not very competently, the Germanic repertoire of the nineteenth century. “At that time,” said Leonard Bernstein, a great musician but an unstoppable narcissist, “the few American composers we had just imitated the European composers, like Brahms, Liszt, and Wagner. We might call this the kindergarten period of American music.” Aaron Copland was better acquainted with those “few American composers,” but he dismissed them, too, as “not like creative personalities but like the schoolmasters that many of them became.”

But Brahms, Liszt, and Wagner weren’t just the same old thing. They represented violently clashing philosophies of composition. Brahms, the anointed heir of Schumann and Mendelssohn, saw himself as the apostle of clarity and order. His four symphonies are textbooks of disciplined elaboration, varied phrase arcs, a tonal plan built around thirds, and finishing minor-key movements in the parallel major. Wagner, Berlioz, Spohr, and Liszt were ur-Romantics, tossing aside form, destabilizing tonality, crushing the listener between piles of chromaticism. Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms wrote symphonies, and while they occasionally wore their hearts on their sleeves, the music remained firmly within the chaste boundaries of sonata form. Wagner wrote opera (or, in his term, “music drama”), promoted *unendliche Melodie*, and practiced a Dionysian abandonment celebrated by his contemporary and admirer (at least until 1876) Friedrich Nietzsche. There is as much distance between the two styles as there is between Jane Austen and James Joyce.

American composers debated these issues on their own soil. William Henry Fry, an anti-slavery activist who doubled as the *New-York Tribune*’s music critic, and George Frederick Bristow fought the good fight for an independent American music based on the Mozart-Beethoven sonata. Mere imitation of the “unalterably German” was repugnant to Bristow, since Germany was a land of “police and bayonets and aristocratic kicks and cuffs . . . where an artist is serf to a nobleman.”

Bristow’s Second Symphony is a model of the sonata’s logic. The first and fourth movements are cast in D minor, while the inner movements are in the parallel major and in B-flat major (a third down from D minor); the second movement, a scherzo with two trios, has the appropriately

dance-like feel of a schottische, while the last movement's three themes culminate in a full-throated march. No shade of Wagner here.

When John Knowles Paine found one of his students playing Wagner scores on the piano in Harvard's University Hall, the student reported that Paine "was greatly distressed and warned me solemnly that I would corrupt my musical taste." But Paine was also skilled at keeping a finger in the wind. Paine's Second Symphony (1880) adopted a Wagnerian "programme," mimicking the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* in the first movement, and playing uncertainly between F major and F minor in the slow movement, after "the Wagnerian method."

The contrasting methods of Schumann/Brahms and Wagner overlay another musical antagonism about "national music." The boss of American music critics in the nineteenth century, Boston's John Sullivan Dwight, shrank from echoes of nationalism, flag-waving, or fiddle tunes, judging them impure and contrived. After listening to Anthony Philip Heinrich's attempt to work "Indian melodies" into two of his symphonies, Dwight complained, "We are sorry to see such circumstances dragged into music as the 'Indian War Council,' the 'Advance of the Americans,' the 'Skirmish,' and 'Fall of Tecumseh.'" Whenever music "leaves its natural channels . . . to paint pictures in the hearer's imagination," it "forfeits true unity. . . . Music, aiming at no subject,—music composed with no consciousness of anything in the world *but* music, is sure to tell of greater things than these." That didn't keep Bristow from writing a "rowdy fiddle dance" into his Niagara Symphony (1893) or Amy Beach from writing a Gaelic Symphony in 1894 "influenced by old English, Scotch or Irish songs." It didn't stop Ellsworth Phelps from invoking "the profound pathos of . . . negro melodies" in his Emancipation Symphony (1880). Dwight's purism would suffer a permanent setback when the newly founded National Conservatory of Music snagged Antonín Dvořák as its director in 1892, only to have Dvořák frankly recommend "plantation songs" as the true material for American composers—something he promptly incorporated into his Ninth Symphony, *From the New World*. The most successful American composer of the nineteenth century, New Orleans-born Louis Moreau Gottschalk, ladled generous helpings of patriotic rally songs, minstrel show tunes, and Afro-Caribbean dance rhythms into "The Banjo" (1855), "Pasquinade" (1869), "Concert Paraphrase on 'The Union'" (1863) and "Bamboula: Danse des Negres" (1853).

Douglas Shadle's roster of forgotten nineteenth-century American symphonists is proof that the United States had no shortage of composers. What it lacked was the network of musical institutions that could train performers. It was considered a mark of accomplishment in 1828 that Boston's Handel and Haydn Society was able to secure the services of the one oboe player who "exists in North America."

Oberlin College's conservatory was only founded in 1865, and John Knowles Paine only became assistant professor of music at Harvard in 1873 after convincing Harvard president Charles William Eliot of the need for musical studies on the collegiate level. In the absence of music schools, American musical promoters had no choice but to import performers from Europe. Some of these performers were tourists—Louis Antoine Jullien, Jenny Lind, Ole Bull, Hans von Bülow, Arthur Nikisch, Anton Rubinstein, Peter Tchaikovsky—commanding hefty fees for lending a little Continental glamor to American music-making. Other émigré performers became permanent features in the life of American orchestras, which is why rehearsals in American

orchestras were usually held in German through most of the 1800s. In 1865, fifty-three of the New York Philharmonic's sixty-seven members were German-speakers. As late as World War One, sixty-four of the one hundred members of the Boston Symphony were German-speakers. Its music director, Karl Muck, had been the Kaiser's favorite conductor in Berlin.

Imported musicians brought with them imported music. It was American composers who were unfamiliar, and it was *their* music that went a-begging for performance. "Clannish cliques are formed in our midst by alien artists, musicians, and actors," complained the *Journal of the Fine Arts* in 1851. "Why are they illiberal? Why do they not appreciate our talent?" Even American-born conductors such as Theodore Thomas yielded to the expectation for European repertoire. At the time of the 1876 Centennial, Thomas commissioned a new piece to celebrate a century of American independence. But he turned not to Fry, Bristow, or Paine, but to Wagner. For a whopping \$5000 fee, Wagner negligently tossed off a "Grand Festival March for the Opening of the Centennial Commemorative of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America," which the composer admitted did not contain "twenty bars worth listening to."

The nineteenth-century American symphonic literature didn't last into the twentieth century, then, not because it was imitative or amateurish, but because it was American. The loss has been ours, Shadle says: "we have fundamentally misunderstood the eclecticism and diversity of nineteenth-century American orchestral music and musical thought." But even worse, "repeating familiar works benefited both performers and organizations," allowing them to "focus on elements such as perfect intonation, articulation, phrasing, and so on." In other words, the pre-eminent American musical art became performance, not composition. From this sprang the twentieth-century cult of the celebrity soloist, adulation of the imperial conductor (Stokowski, Koussevitzky, Szell, Reiner, and Toscanini), and cultivation of the perfect orchestral sound (the Philadelphia Orchestra's strings, the Chicago Symphony's brass). The same cycle of canonical European compositions kept churning through season after season; it was the way they were played, and the way they sounded, which became the great American obsession.

American symphonic composition entered the new century on the shoulders of Frederick Converse, Daniel Gregory Mason, Nathaniel Dett, Edward MacDowell, and Edward Burlingame Hill. They wound up on the same unperformed shelf as their predecessors. Between 1930 and 1960, American composers ushered in a second great symphonic awakening. It was music that followed a uniquely American star. Virgil Thomson's Second Symphony (1926–28) teemed with hymn tunes; Roy Harris's Fourth Symphony (1939) packs "The Streets of Laredo," "Johnny Comes Marching Home," "The Blackbird," and "The Girl I Left Behind Me" into seven movements for orchestra and chorus, while his Third Symphony evokes as no other the cowboy West in which Harris grew up. No matter. Once again, a fresh wave of émigré musicians, fleeing fascism in the 1930s, dismissed American music as bourgeois flummery.

Thomson and Harris were followed by the wartime decade of Douglas Moore, Walter Piston, Paul Creston, and Peter Mennin. The only American music from this golden age enjoying repeated performances is Aaron Copland's three proletarian ballet scores of 1938–44 and Barber's "Adagio for Strings" (which began life as the slow movement to his only string quartet). Copland's "A Lincoln Portrait" gets trotted out for every Fourth of July "pops" concert. George Gershwin gets more playing time than all of these combined, even though Gershwin,

while a great Tin Pan Alley melodist, was a mediocre symphonist. I have heard but one live performance of Barber's "Overture to *The School for Scandal*" (his Curtis Institute graduation piece at age twenty-one), and none at all of Thomson, Creston, Mennin, or Cowell. The solitary airing of Copland's Third Symphony I heard in Philadelphia in 2001 nearly came apart during the slow movement.

The League of American Orchestras' 2011–12 survey of major orchestral programming across the country found that only two Americans were among the twenty most-performed composers (Barber and Leonard Bernstein), while the twenty most-performed works did not include a single American composition. This season, the New York Philharmonic's lineup will include Rimsky-Korsakov, Max Bruch, Dvořák, Schubert, Wagner, and Berlioz, along with a showcase of star soloists: Lang Lang, Leonidas Kavakos, Anoushka Shankar, Wynton Marsalis. Oh, yes, Aaron Copland is on the playbill—but only for his ten-minute miniature *Quiet City*. The Cleveland Orchestra will do a tad better: Gershwin, Copland (the Third Symphony and the Organ Symphony), and Ives. Philadelphia will play Gershwin, a Leonard Bernstein symphony, and a serialist "Andante" by Ruth Crawford Seeger, but these will have to compete with an entire Brahms symphony cycle, a complete *Daphnis et Chloé*, three weeks of a "Paris Festival" (Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier), Mozart, Liszt, Grieg, Mahler, the 1812 Overture, and a Rachmaninoff mini-festival. No wonder, when there's no home team to cheer for, that most of the excitement has been leached out of American orchestras. No one within the Lincoln Center zip code has reason to experience much in the way of fellow feeling, much less civic identity, in programs which show no interest in American composition.

Allen C. Guelzo is Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era, and director of Civil War era studies at Gettysburg College.