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Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2018

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- 1 *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* by Emily Abrams Ansari is a provocative, accessible re-evaluation of six well-known and influential American symphonic composers whose careers intersected with Cold War politics. In the decades after World War II, as part of a campaign to demonstrate that its brand of democracy was superior to Soviet communism, the U.S. Government sought to convince European intellectuals and other world leaders that American democratic and capitalistic society could produce better art than a communist society. The government enlisted the help of the six – Howard Hansen, William Schuman, Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein – and other composers, using their music as propaganda to further an American exceptionalist image abroad. Exceptionalists, Ansari writes, drawing on Hodgson,¹ ‘perceive the United States as an unusually admirable and virtuous nation – the unprecedented product of a carefully conceived political system and a unique national history’ (p. 34).
- 2 After providing a brief history of the relationship between concert music and U.S. politics from the Great Depression through World War II, the author lays out the general challenges shared by the six composers as the Cold War began. Under the shadow of polarized superpowers, dichotomous thinking pervaded nearly every facet of Cold War culture: class, race relations, politics, intellectual life, sexuality, aesthetic

philosophy, and musical language. Among the most damaging of these dichotomies was McCarthyism, the domestic anti-communist movement that sought to expose and remove from American politics and culture all traces of communism and socialism. Cold War rhetoric portrayed nearly anyone with a history of support for progressive causes as a subversive threat to national security; such ‘sympathizers’ were blacklisted and ostracized, suffering ruinous social and professional consequences.

- 3 A second set of challenges involved deciding which American music traditions were most suitable for propagandistic use abroad. All six composers valued what the author calls ‘Americanist music’: a conservative musical style that was tonal, symphonic, and located solidly in the European concert music tradition. Each composer, to varying degrees, believed that neither popular, jazz-based, or middlebrow music on the one hand, nor radical, highly dissonant, atonal, or experimental music on the other could represent the U.S. abroad to best advantage. Here, they faced a dilemma, for by the end of World War II, Ansari explains, Americanist music was in danger of being relegated to the cultural margins, for several reasons. American-written symphonic music was still considered by many inferior to European masterworks. Politically, some Americanist composers were suspect because they had supported progressive, even radical, causes during the 1930s. In addition, because Nazis and Soviets had strongly emphasized nationalist, tonal writing, that compositional approach was potentially tainted as anti-democratic (p. 5). Drawing on the work of Nadine Hubbs’s *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound*, Ansari adds that many so-called ‘tonalist’ composers were homosexual at a time when many Americans considered gay people ‘deviant’ and even potential security risks, susceptible to blackmail by the Cold War enemy.²
- 4 A third, related challenge had to do with the aesthetic binary that developed between a conservative, tonality-based compositional technique and serial approaches to composition, a binary with politicized and gendered associations. Her position correctly acknowledges that although tonal and serial compositional methods were not mutually exclusive, the 1950s and 1960s saw the creation and politicization of a binary opposition between the two. The latter was imbued with considerably more prestige in academic circles and among young composers. The Americanists found their musical tradition endangered in several respects. By cooperating with, and steering, the U.S. Government’s Cold War propaganda campaigns, these composers as a group managed to keep Americanist music front and center, promoting and rehabilitating the nationalist symphonic tradition.
- 5 Ansari’s conclusions are drawn from numerous primary sources that reflect the composers’ expressed points of view, verbal and musical. Her sources include archival collections relating to each composer, as well as for the organizations that helped fund cultural diplomacy: the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, the U.S. National Archives, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, and collections in Los Angeles, Rochester NY, Arkansas, Kansas, Boston, New Orleans, and New Haven CT. Of special interest are documents from the Music Advisory Panel of the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), which advised the U.S. State Department about the music and musicians to be sent abroad with government sponsorship; Hansen, Schuman, and Thomson served many years on that committee, and through their recommendations shaped the definition of American music seen by the rest of the world. Musical works comprise another important primary source; in each chapter Ansari considers how the composers’ words and actions affect and are informed by

their musical products. The author engages critically with the primary source materials, keeping in mind that a composer's views may change with time and setting. Secondary literature regarding issues of race, middlebrow, transnationalism, the 'Lavender scare,' the CIA's covert sponsorship of propaganda, and the literature of diplomacy, as well as biographical studies of each of the six composers, provide suitable context in these areas, and Ansari's own primary sources shed new light on many of these issues.

- 6 Scholarly integrity notwithstanding, the author's tone and her conclusions are decidedly informed by twenty-first century call-out culture. Her chapter titles reduce each figure to a single label. In Ansari's telling, these six white men wielded whatever privilege they had to promote themselves and their musical tradition. In one particularly striking section of Chapter One, Schuman and Hansen are 'The American Exceptionalists', portrayed as 'myopic' nationalists who, as members of influential national boards and committees eagerly promoted an Americanist agenda that excluded 'nonwhite, non-classical, non-middleclass musicians' from State Department programs (p. 55, p. 39-55). In chapter two, Thomson 'The "Apolitical" Opportunist,' comes across, at best, as 'pragmatic' both economically and politically, a 'realist' and a 'strategist,' and at worst, as a racist gay man grasping for social power and prestige in a heteronormative world (p. 88-89, p. 91). Harris and Bernstein fare better, and Copland best of all, but ultimately, by serving the U.S. exceptionalist propaganda campaign during the Cold War, she concludes, the reputations of all six were compromised (p. 208).
- 7 Hanson and Schuman, composers who headed two of the nation's top music conservatories – the Eastman School of Music and Juilliard respectively – 'spent most of the fifties and sixties trying to resist serial, atonal, electronic, and experimental currents [...] Both believed fervently that the kind of music they wrote – Americanist and tonal – could help advance their government's Cold War agenda, which they strongly supported' (p. 31). Their nationalist views limited American export of jazz, folk, Latin, and other non-symphonic music, and even waged a campaign to disqualify foreign-born U.S. citizens; successfully barring performers including Jascha Heifetz, Vladimir Horowitz and Artur Rubinstein from touring for the State Department (p. 42). The composition supporting these points is Schuman's *Credendum*, a seventeen-minute fanfare for orchestra commissioned by the U.S. Government for UNESCO (p. 56). Contrary to the commission agreement, which sought a work to describe the world's citizens' desire for world peace, Ansari finds in the first and third movements' loud dynamics and musical bombast evidence of 'assertive triumphalism.' She writes, 'I hear the work not as a piece about hope and unity on a global scale but as a celebration of American exceptionalism [...] a hypermasculine response to the feminine associations [...] that much musical Americanism was seen to carry, especially compositions by the circle of gay New York composers centered around Copland and Thomson' (p. 56). She rightly asserts that though he may not have intended it, Schuman's willingness to participate in propaganda (p. 59) 'saved progressive and Communist-inspired [classical concert-] music from anti-communism' (p. 63), which he was in a strong position to do, given the privilege he held as a composer who was neither gay, nor Jewish, and unencumbered (as were Harris and Copland) by progressive affiliations of previous decades.

- 8 Thomson's participation in U.S. propaganda efforts were plentiful, despite his professed distaste for partisan politics. He wrote propaganda film scores for the Office of War Information and the United Nations, traveled overseas with State Department funding three times, (p. 79) served on the ANTA panel with Schuman and Hanson, and worked with an organization called the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), which was secretly funded by the CIA, and whose target audience was Communist-sympathetic European intellectuals. Combined with Thomson's long career as a music critic at *The New York Herald Tribune*, the records of these activities provide many first-person statements of Thomson's values. Her sources also include two compositions: Thomson's 1945 score to the propaganda film *Tuesday in November* (1945) about election day in the U.S., and the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927-1928), which was produced at a major CCF arts festival in Europe in 1952. Drawing upon Lisa Barg's work to analyze *Four Saints*, Ansari concludes that Thomson's motivations for requiring an all-black cast in the opera were racist, and that he deliberately hid those motives when the CCF organizers chose it to demonstrate the U.S.'s respect and approval of African-Americans.³
- 9 In Chapter Three, we read that Roy Harris, 'The Disillusioned Nationalist,' was a member of the progressive Old Left (p. 93) who employed a conscious 'branding strategy' (p. 97) to portray himself as a rugged 'individualist pioneer from the American West,' capitalizing on exceptionalist myths. In this she builds upon Levy (p. 97), examining writings from the 1930s, at the time his Third Symphony first brought him to national attention, and considers the work's reception.⁴ She provides a welcome full account of Harris's encounter with anti-communist harassment in Pittsburgh between 1950 and 1952, and chronicles his most significant participation in state-sponsored musical propaganda – a 1958 tour of the Soviet Union. Ironically, the latter experience reinforced his own conviction that a communist society was preferable to the American exceptionalist democracy he had been sent to promote. The Harris composition she examines is his 11th Symphony (1962) with its extensive program note, hearing this 'problematic and rarely performed work' as 'a unique musical confrontation between Harris's patriotic, exceptionalist image and his progressive, anti-establishment attitudes' (p. 119).
- 10 Chapter Four treats Copland, 'The Principled Brand Strategist.' Ansari begins by describing his well-known blacklisting after his participation in the communist-influenced 1949 Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York, which led to an interruption in Copland's diplomatic career. Using primary sources to chronicle his diplomatic activities she shows that despite the waning of Copland's compositional output, his career as a diplomat and conductor revived from the mid-1950s onward as he became one of the State Department's favorite cultural ambassadors. She explains the reason behind his rehabilitation thus: 'Great benefits could be gained for both [Copland and the State Department] if they could not only erase the influence of unfashionable progressive politics upon Copland's most popular works, but even present these works as expressions of American nationalism as it was most commonly understood during the first decades of the Cold War – that is as articulations of American exceptionalism' (p. 153). She correctly points out that Copland's interest in internationalism and bridge-building between cultures was more deeply rooted than even his New Deal-era progressivism, dating back to his years as an international student training in Europe with Nadia Boulanger in the early 1920s. Of

the six composers, Copland comes across as the most genuine. ‘Copland can be easily re-aligned to the other side of each of these supposedly opposing positions in our minds [...] because he *did* in fact embrace both positions on all of these dyads, often simultaneously...’ which she attributes not to opportunism or dishonesty but to ‘Copland’s messy humanity’ (p. 161).

- 11 Bernstein, ‘The Frustrated Activist,’ is treated last, appropriately, since he is the youngest, and was deeply affected by the attitudes and experiences of those treated in the previous chapters, inheriting political values from his elders that were no longer relevant as Bernstein came of age. Ansari calls him ‘one of the first celebrity diplomats’ (p. 197), acknowledging his remarkable career as a conductor and composer. She notes that Bernstein’s political views might seem to disqualify him from government service: he supported the radical Black Panthers and opposed the Vietnam War. Yet as Danielle Fosler-Lussier has pointed out, the State Department found it to their advantage to send abroad people with dissenting voices, because it demonstrated that freedom of speech and thought was indeed an American value (p. 199).⁵ Ansari acknowledges this, but nonetheless questions the extent to which Bernstein could truly promote his own views while accepting funding from one of the nations driving the Cold War arms race. She asks, ‘Surely, we cannot think of Bernstein’s promotion of an antiwar position in the USSR as truly effective when we consider that, in expressing such views, he was helping those who promoted military buildup, psychological warfare, and ultimately Soviet defeat, not peaceful coexistence?’ (p. 199) Despite his celebrity, Ansari concludes, Bernstein allowed himself to become a pawn of the government.
- 12 There are small but concerning mistakes especially in the Bernstein chapter, beginning with an incorrect year of the composer’s birth (p. 162); the misattribution of a McCarthyism-inspired libretto line to Bernstein’s *Candide* rather than Copland’s *The Tender Land* (p. 172); an incorrect rhythm in the *Appalachian Spring* music example (p. 179, measures 2-3). A similarly incorrect implication in the Thomson chapter is that all of Harlem’s ‘black and tan’ clubs catered to a gay clientele, rather than only a small subset (p. 88). These errors, though surprising, do not directly affect the validity of her larger points.
- 13 This is a book with a point of view. It contains a considerable amount of interpretation and does not hesitate to question the composers’ motives or cast judgment on their actions. It amounts to a revisionist look at received historiography.⁶ Figures customarily portrayed as heroes who nobly labored to put the U. S. on equal artistic footing with the European masters are shown to have feet of clay, especially when evaluated according to twenty-first century standards, as these Americanist composers apparently used whatever power and privilege they could leverage to promote themselves, making political and artistic compromises along the way. While their actions and decisions may indeed have re-inscribed an exclusive, musically conservative and exceptionalist image of American music abroad, one wonders if their choices and motives can be fairly judged from our present-day vantage point. Alternative choices and large-scale consequences were doubtless less obvious at the time. Provocative chapter labels and bold, controversial characterizations notwithstanding, there is much information to learn and digest thanks to Ansari’s broad archival work and her shrewd analyses of her sources. An engaging read with a clear point of view, *The Sound of a Superpower* is important for anyone studying the Cold War, mid-twentieth-century concert music, or American cultural diplomacy.

NOTES

1. HODGSON Godfrey, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 2009.
 2. HUBBS Nadine, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004.
 3. BARG Lisa, "Black Voices/White Sounds: Race and Representation in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*," *American Music*, vol. 18, n° 2, 2000, p. 121-61.
 4. LEVY Beth E., *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012.
 5. FOSLER-LUSSIER Danielle, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2015.
 6. See, for example, STRUBLE John Warthen, *The History of American Classical Music: MacDowell through Minimalism*, New York, Facts on File, 1995; BUTTERWORTH Neil, *The American Symphony*, Brookfield, Vermont, Ashgate, 1998; HAMM Charles, *Music in the New World*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1983, p. 307-338, p. 410-459; CHASE Gilbert, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present* [3rd ed.], Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 470-488, p. 562-580.
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Jennifer DeLapp-Birkett is a consulting musicologist for the Aaron Copland Fund for Music and adjunct faculty at Binghamton University, New York. She completed the Ph.D. in Historical Musicology at the University of Michigan in 1997 with a thesis on Aaron Copland in the McCarthy era, which won the Society for American Music Dissertation Prize. She has served as full-time musicology faculty at Bowling Green State University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Maryland in College Park. She has presented her research on Copland and on Shaker music at numerous national and international academic conferences. Her articles on Copland have appeared in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Censorship* (2017) and the *Journal of Musicological Research* (2008). She is co-editor with Aaron Sherber of a forthcoming edition of Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* ballet for the Music in the United States of America (MUSA) series, published by A-R editions (2019).