

# **“AMERICANISM” IN MUSIC**

## **PIANO SONATAS FROM 1939–49**

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### **ESTABLISHING A MUSICAL STYLE**

- “The way to write American music is simple. All you have to do is be American and then write any type of music you wish.” ~ Virgil Thompson
- Dominance of European traditions on 19thC American composers: Alexander Reinagle and James Hewitt were born in Europe, while John Paine, George Chadwick, Dudley Buck, Horatio Parker, Louis Gottschalk, William Mason, and Edward MacDowell all studied in Europe
- Arthur Farwell began to incorporate American folk tunes in the end of the 19thC, but it is not until Charles Ives that saw the emergence of “America’s first great composer” (Leonard Bernstein)

### **METHODOLOGY**

- “Reductive Style Study” is a method of tracing compositional techniques and forms back to their genesis within each composer
- Focuses on primary sources and interviews with the composer, including intent, musical analyses, and biographical sources
- Time period chosen based on the premiere of Charles Ives’s Piano Sonata No. 2 ‘Concord’ in 1939

### **SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS**

#### ***AARON COPLAND***

- Piano Sonata (1941) a deliberate attempt of creating a sonata “that sounds American to Europeans”
- Sonata and ternary forms, and traditional motivic unity/cyclicism from his conservative teachers: Rubin Goldmark and Paul Vidal
- American influences include the jazz syncopations in II, experimentalism in the form of III, and open “Americana” harmonies

#### ***ELLIOTT CARTER***

- Piano Sonata (1945–46) part of his desire to create a “new grand piano style,” without implying that it had to be an American style
- Combination of his traditional counterpoint studies with Nadia Boulanger, and the influences of Charles Ives and American ultra-modernists Henry Cowell and Conlon Nancarrow
- American influences include jazz pianists Fats Waller and Art Tatum, and Copland’s *Piano Variations*
- Traditional elements include sonata form, large-scale fugue, and motivic unity
- Contains original innovations, such as metric modulation and harmonies

### **SAMUEL BARBER**

- Piano Sonata (1949), commissioned by the League of Composers and written for Russian pianist Vladimir Horowitz, also a desire to create a “new grand piano style”
- Barber’s musical education was largely traditional, and he studied with Rosario Scalero at the Curtis Institute of Music and throughout Europe
- Studies focused on the standard European repertory, such as J.S. Bach, Muzio Clementi, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johannes Brahms
- Traditional elements are found in the forms, motivic connections, and counterpoint and fugue
- American influences found largely in the finale: jazz syncopations, and “blues” notes
- Also incorporates modern European techniques, especially the twelve-tone system in I and III

### **CONCLUSION**

- Incorporating American influences is not enough to create an “American” style, as seen in both the sonatas by Barber and Copland
- Copland’s intent, incorporation of American influences, and rejection of European conventions all contribute to his cultivation of an “American” style (similar to Ives’s rejection of European tradition)

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