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Valerie Blair-Mercer

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

A Program of American Piano Music

A Report submitted to the
University Honors Program
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree
With University Honors

Department of Music

by

Valerie Blair-Mercer

DeKalb, Illinois

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Approved: William Koehler

Department: Music

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ABSTRACT

This Honors Capstone Project was a lecture-recital consisting of piano music by eight American composers, spanning the years 1797 to 1929. The purpose of the lecture was to present an overview of the evolution of American compositional techniques, starting from those which imitated prevalent European styles to those which reflect more uniquely-American traditions and innovations. Prior to the performance of each piece, a brief biography of the composer was presented followed by an overview of the important compositional elements found in the work.

Good afternoon. This is a program of American piano music from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. I've chosen these works in an attempt to show something of the evolution of American music since the days of the Revolution. The first four composers demonstrate the presence of European characteristics and ideas in American works prior to the turn of the century. The remaining composers exemplify some of the developments in American music after the turn of the century and World War I that led to the creation of music more indigenous to America.

James Hewitt was born in England and immigrated to the States in 1792. He was an exact contemporary of Beethoven's, living from 1770-1827. Just as Beethoven was influenced by the French Revolution, Hewitt was influenced by the American Revolution. This inspired him to write a lengthy piece entitled The Battle of Trenton, from which I will perform "Crossing the Delaware." In one respect the piece is uniquely American in that it deals with an American subject, but the form and harmony are strictly European.

Edward MacDowell was born in the middle of the nineteenth century at the height of the Romantic period. He studied in Paris and several cities in Germany. He taught at Darmstadt and planned to settle in Germany because he considered the musical climate there to be more conducive to the kind of composing he wished to do. However, he returned to the States in 1887, where

he made a living as teacher, composer and concert manager in New York. During his career he was well-known both in the States and Europe as a pianist.

MacDowell believed that music attempts to make a suggestion about moods, emotions, light, motion, or things in nature. Much of his music is programmatic. "A Deserted Farm," from Woodland Sketches, is one of his programmatic works, which tries to suggest a mood or an image. Again, one can hear the traditional European harmonies present in this piece.

Charles T. Griffes also spent time abroad, studying piano, theory and composition in Berlin. His music was not well received in the U.S. He made no attempt to be nationalistic in his composing, and opposed trying to create an American sound by simply composing music based on American folk tunes. The European influence is readily apparent in his music.

During the course of his studies, Griffes became interested in the Russian and French schools as well as Oriental music. He composed in the impressionist style. If one is at all familiar with the music of Debussy and Ravel, one will hear a similar sound in "The White Peacock," from Roman Sketches. The piece is based on a poem of the same name written by William Sharp.

I have included Scott Joplin in this program because he was a very important composer of the style of music called "ragtime." The reason ragtime is important in studying American music is that it contributed to the development of jazz. While jazz may not be solely an American invention, it is nevertheless closely associated with America and an American sound. As we will

see later, some composers utilized certain elements of jazz in their concert hall music as a means of creating an American sound.

Unlike the former composers, Joplin was not educated in Europe. However, his music used European harmony and form, even though it presented unique rhythm and a novel sound at the time he composed it. The important contribution that ragtime made to jazz was rhythm. Ragtime rhythm originated in black American music and created a whole new approach to music. Though ragtime was a popular form of music for only a short time, the syncopated rhythms became one of the important elements of jazz. Since jazz is primarily thought of as American in origin, it can be said that ragtime made a considerable contribution to American music. The piece I am performing is not a rag, but rather a waltz, but you will still hear traditional ragtime rhythms and harmonies. You will hear a theme, followed by a contrasting section, followed by a return of the theme, and so on. After every contrasting section, the theme will return.

The remaining composers represent the emergence of a distinctively American music. This development began for the most part just prior to, during, and after World War I. These composers also studied in Europe, but this time, instead of studying established European traditions in composition and then transposing them to American music, they took part in the development of completely new compositional techniques. This meant that there was no longer a precedent for American composers to follow; thus, equipped with these new ideas and sounds, American composers could turn to their own heritage as a source of inspiration and begin to create music indigenous to this country.

One telltale feature of American concert music composed during the twenties and thirties is the use of jazz idioms, both harmonic and rhythmic. Also, in the words of Roy Harris, one characteristic of an "American" sound is its asymmetrical rhythm. One composer who utilized these devices was Aaron Copland.

Copland studied in Paris during the post-war years. At this time anti-German feeling was abundant, and this carried over into music. Copland stated that he used jazz idioms to create a unique American sound, but that was "...symptomatic of the period." Later in his life he went on to utilize other methods of creating an American sound.

Copland was a leader in getting American music performed in the States by setting up the Copland-Sessions Concerts from 1928-1931. The Cat and The Mouse was one of Copland's early pieces, composed when he was nineteen. It was also one of two pieces that comprised the first performance of his music in the U.S. In it one can hear asymmetrical rhythm. It also demonstrates some of the ideas being explored at the time it was composed, such as dissonance, and the pentatonic scale.

Henry Cowell's music is experimental in nature. He researched acoustics and developed completely new devices of composition and methods of performance on the piano. One of these was the tone cluster, which consists of using the entire forearm to depress keys on the piano. He also explored different means of producing sound with the strings. The Aeolian Harp makes use of the strings in this unusual manner.

George Gershwin started his career as a pianist in New York. He studied briefly with one of Copland's teachers and tried to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, but was rejected on the premise that he was already so well developed as a composer that there was nothing that she could teach him.


Gershwin believed that certain rhythms or chords are what identify music of a particular country. According to him, jazz is that identifying characteristic in American music. He incorporated jazz traits into his music through the use of some common jazz chords such as the dominant seventh, half-diminished seventh, diminished seventh, and ninth chord.

Charles Ives was definitely ahead of his time in his compositional approach. The Concord Sonata was composed earlier than both the Gershwin and the Copland compositions, yet already explored new compositional techniques more than those two works did. For example, there is neither a regular key signature nor time signature in the piece. A few places have these signatures, but they appear in the middle of the piece, and are subsequently different. The fact that his music was first recognized when he had stopped composing for twenty-five years attests to the fact that he was ahead of his time. He was 73 when he received the Pulitzer prize for his Third Symphony.

Ives' American sound can be found in the Concord sonata which is a portrayal of American transcendentalism of the nineteenth century. The four movements are titled "Emerson," "Hawthorne," "The Alcotts," and "Thoreau." According to Ives, what he tried to suggest in "The Alcotts" was a memory of the Alcotts' New England home under the elms, and the hymns that the family sang at the end of each day. In his own words, "... a strength of hope that never gives way to despair--a conviction in the power of the common soul which,

... may be as typical as any theme of Concord and its Transcendentalists."

Thus we have seen something of the progression of American music from imitating European styles, particularly German, to the beginning of twentieth-century music, when American composers began to assert themselves as legitimate composers in their own right.

Northern Illinois University 
College of Visual and Performing Arts
School of Music

Student Recital Series
Saturday, September 10, 1988
Music Building
Boutell Concert Hall; 3:00 p.m.

VALERIE BLAIR-MERCER, Piano

A Program of Selected American Composers

Crossing the Delaware (1797) (from <u>The Battle of Trenton</u>)	James Hewitt (1770-1827)
A Deserted Farm (1896) (from <u>Woodland Sketches</u>)	Edward MacDowell (1861-1908)
The White Peacock (1915-16) (from <u>Roman Sketches</u>)	Charles T. Griffes (1884-1920)
Bethena (1905)	Scott Joplin (1869-1917)
The Cat and the Mouse (1920)	Aaron Copland (1900-)
Aeolian Harp (1923)	Henry Cowell (1897-1965)
Liza (1929)	George Gershwin (1898-1937)
The Alcotts (from the <u>Concord Sonata</u> , 1906-1915)	Charles Ives (1874-1954)

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
University Honors Program.

The use of cameras or personal tape recorders
during performances is expressly prohibited.