

MUSIC

ORDINGS

Wooded Sonatas led by a Violinist



Violinist.
CD.

Eugène Ysaÿe's sonatas of violin is a hulking beast of six feet, snarling mane and inextinguishable fire. Once greeted by the forest of Beethoven's extraneous musical

of Ysaÿe as a talismanic technique. The sonatas were 'violins. Pub- and of his fan- ner, they are id with peer- if the instru- id knuckle- ngside quiet ly glowing is an almost a pure strain e. The instru- onjured up , particularly nt is celebrat- x contempo-

been neglect-

ed on disc, but it is still a pleasure to find them surveyed again in an excellent new recording by the Austrian violinist Thomas Zehetmair. Always a thoughtful interpreter, Mr. Zehetmair rightly treats these works as more than just rapid showpieces. He brings out the music's modern edges, using subtle left-hand articulations and a kind of X-ray hearing to pick out unusual harmonies and jolting cross-rhythms that can otherwise remain buried beneath the torrents of notes. That said, you needn't fear a cerebral dampening of Ysaÿe's full-blooded spirit. Mr. Zehetmair does not overthink this music. He pours on enough speed, dexterity and pure adrenaline to keep these sonatas the mildly guilty pleasure they are.

JEREMY EICHLER



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it Diane 'cording with of Barber's ompact 20- with major so-Bartok as well ig preludes by nk Martin,

Ms. Walsh invites listeners to hear it as a formidable modern masterwork. Moreover, while she brings plenty of Romantic sweep and arching lyricism to her performance, her incisive, spiky and, where called for, percussive playing reclaims the work from its neo-Romantic trappings.

The first movement surges forward in this performance, alternating statements of its grimly nervous, dotted-rhythm theme with melancholic lyrical flights. Ms. Walsh makes the short, playful scherzo sound ingeniously intricate by pristinely executing the scampering figurations and maximizing the effect of the constant shifts between *duple* and *triple meter*. The slow movement, a lament, is performed with sensitive restraint. And Ms. Walsh brings unflagging stamina and bravura to the finale, an onrushing, stunningly complex fugue with a hellbent coda.

Her performance of Prokofiev's Sonata No. 2 exults in the music's turbulent energy and sarcastic wit. The Martin preludes — pensive, elusive works with loose tonal moorings — are a real discovery. Ms. Walsh gives a fearless account of Bartok's sonata, music that sounds as modern today as it must have at its 1926 premiere. With its pummeling octave passages and thick, finger-twisting chords, this score should carry a stamp from the surgeon general's office warning pianists that playing it could cause injury to the hands. But Ms. Walsh dispatches it with vigor and authority.

ANTHONY TOMMASINI

CONCERTO,

rd, pianist; inist; Clem- ld Schönberg tra of Europe, armoncourt. 602-2; CD.

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Orchestra, of 1808, another lasting favorite from my period of discovery, seems to have come into its own as more than just a sketch for the finale of the Ninth Symphony. Even more colorful and structurally odd than the concerto, it begins with an extended piano "improvisation" and passes through a set of orchestral variations on its way to a grand choral finale.

Again the performance is mighty, especially, of course, in the emphatic choral repetitions of the word "kraft" ("strength"), given mildly explosive treatment here.

Mr. Aimard and Mr. Harnoncourt round out the disc with Beethoven's Rondo in B flat (1793), a merely pleasant work in such exalted company.

JAMES R. OESTREICH

ANTHONY TOMMASINI

A new book shows how influential gay composers were in the creation of a national culture. But can you really hear their sexuality in their songs?



Emmerich Gara, via iPhotoart Inc.



The New York Times



Terrence Spencer/Zengeist Films



The New York Times



Sam Felt/The New York Times



John Aronson



What's So Gay About American Music?

MUSICOLOGISTS now seem to agree that Handel was gay. So, it is thought, was Schubert. About Tchaikovsky there is no doubt: definitely gay, along with Britten, Copland and many other major composers and musicians.

They may not have been gay in the modern sense of the word, as the defining component of their sexual identity. Certainly not Handel, who hid what must have been terrible loneliness under a cloak of irascible heartiness. Nor Schubert, whose relationships with the young men in his circle still elude our understanding. Schubert's devoted friends considered the pudgy, bespectacled and sickly composer a genius in their midst. But who was sleeping with whom? We're not sure.

That we can now flesh out these giants' stories with this crucial missing component of their character is due to the efforts of some pioneering cultural historians and musicologists. Yet, along with the outing of past master composers and musicians there has been a more dubious effort by some to find evidence of a collective gay sensibility in their music.

What exactly is a gay sensibility? With today's gay icons ranging from the brainy, unkempt liberal firebrand Congressman Barney Frank to the stylish, flamboyant and cuttlingly funny fashion guru Carson Kressley of "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," who can say? And if it does exist, just how is a gay sensibility expressed in music? Especially purely instrumental, or "absolute," music?

The latest to enter the discussion is Nadine Hubbs, a professor of music and women's studies at the University of Michigan, whose new book, "The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music and National Identity," has just been released by University of California Press. This is an ambitious, provocative and impressively documented work, with more than 70 pages of detailed footnotes for a 178-page text. It tries to prove that what has come to be considered the distinctive American sound in mid-20th-century American music — that Coplandesque tableau of widely spaced harmonies and melancholic tunes run through with elements of elegiac folk music and spiked with jerky American dance rhythms — was essentially invented by a group of Manhattan-based gay composers: Copland, of course, and Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles, David Diamond, Marc Blitzstein, Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber and Ned Rorem.

Ms. Hubbs's treatise, which focuses mostly on Copland and Thomson, is enriched by her keen sensitivity to traces of coded gay sexuality, veiled homophobia and cultural anxieties in American music and life during the early decades of the 20th century. The book will rightly provoke heated discussion in musicological and queer-history circles. My gay brothers and sisters should welcome Ms. Hubbs's account of the pivotal role played by gay composers in the development of a musical idiom that as the book argues, still signifies "America," not just in the concert hall but also in movies, television and commercial culture.

Yet, I suspect that many musicians, however fascinated by Ms. Hubbs's treatise, will share my discomfort over the notion of trying to identify anything as elusive as a gay sensibility in music. It's significant, I think, that most of the advance praise for the book ("a landmark study," "breathtakingly original history") comes from cultural historians, not musicians. My aim here is not to review the book but to raise the stakes for the debate Ms. Hubbs's work is sure to provoke.

One admiring blurb on the dust jacket comes from a well-known musicologist, Susan McClary, winner of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, whose contentious 1991 article "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music" became a manifesto for a number of queer theorists. Ms. McClary tried to identify homosexual qualities in the slow movement of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony. Her notion that Schubert was inviting listeners to "forgo the security of a centered, stable tonality" and "experience — even enjoy — a flexible sense of self," has always struck me as a convoluted way to account for perfectly explicable disruptions of key.

But Ms. McClary's lead was followed by smart critics like K. Robert Schwarz, long a contributor to The New York Times, who died in 1999. Schwarz wrote impassioned liner notes for a shamelessly commercial though perfectly harmless 1995 recording, "Out Classics: Seductive Classics by the World's Greatest Gay Composers."

Before long, Schwarz speculated, "we may possess the analytic tools to decode a gay aesthetic in music." As I suggested at the time, I cannot imagine how this would work. Will theorists check chord components against a table of telltale interval combinations? Will we someday speak not only of tonic and dominant chords but also of butch and femme chords?

Is Ms. Hubbs heading down that path? She is least convincing when discussing the particulars of the music in question. What she does brilliantly is amass evidence of the pervasive influence Copland and his gay composer colleagues had on the formation of the American national identity.

In her introduction Ms. Hubbs points out that no less an au-

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From top, Leonard Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, Virgil Thomson, Ned Rorem, Aaron Copland and David Diamond. An author argues that the mid-20th-century "American" sound was invented by this group of gay composers.

What's Gay in American Music?

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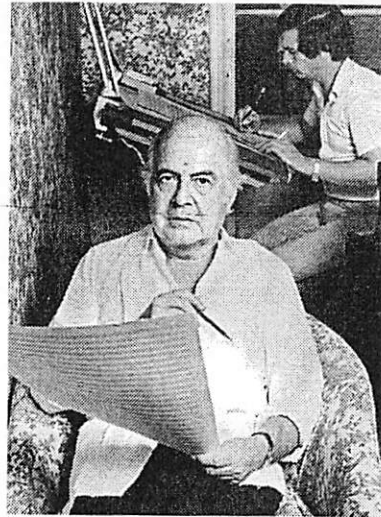
thority than the United States Army confirms Copland's status as "America's most prominent composer." This claim comes from an essay accompanying a pair of recordings of Copland's music by the Army Field Band and Soldiers' Chorus, released in 2000 to celebrate the centennial of his birth. Moreover, the essay points to Copland's life and career as a quintessentially American story and talks glowingly of his Jewish heritage, his Russian immigrant parents, his sensitivity to racial prejudice and admirable collaborations with black artists. But never hinted at is Copland's homosexuality, which of course would have branded him as unfit for service in the military.

So how did Copland's music, with its "sonic representation of American vastness and rugged, simple beauty," as Ms. Hubbs puts it, come to be the most potent cultural emblem of Americanness? How did Copland and the gay composers in his circle come to write music the way they did?

Though often too sweeping and sometimes laden with jargon (one subchapter is titled "Music as Sex as Identity — and as Identity Solvent"), the book sheds more light on these questions than any study to date. Take Ms. Hubbs's comments on the aggressively homophobic Charles Ives in the subchapter "Ives, American Music and Mutating Manliness." Ives came of age at a time when American music was obsequiously beholden, Ives believed, to European late Romanticism. Ives considered American composers sissified. He wanted them to shape up, get some spine and invent a radically new American sound that embraced vernacular American music. He wanted the audience to stop whining and take its dissonance like a man.

Ms. Hubbs places Ives's diatribes in the context of the genuine crisis of confidence in American music at the time. The composer appears "less as an eccentric crank with personal issues concerning women, queers and music," she writes, "than as a stentorian mouthpiece for interlinked cultural anxieties around gender, sexuality, musicality and national identity that significantly shaped 20th-century American music."

Paradoxically, it was Copland and his gay composer colleagues who answered Ives's call, steered American music through those anxieties and found the new American voice. They were bound together by



Jack Mitchell

A new book detects a gay sensibility in the work of Samuel Barber and others.

codes of secrecy, and with good reason. To understand the social climate they faced, consider that in 1942, while he was the powerful chief music critic of *The New York Herald Tribune*, Thomson was arrested in a raid on a private house in Brooklyn where gay professionals socialized with young men, including sailors from the nearby Brooklyn Navy Yard. After he spent a night in jail, the charges against Thomson were dropped, and the incident was hushed up, though a veiled reference to his disgrace turned up in a *Walter Winchell* gossip column.

Perhaps a sense of separateness emboldened this circle of gay composers, who shared an affinity for French culture and aesthetics, to distance themselves from the domineering, aggressive (meaning rigorously German) brand of 1920's modernism. Copland first turned to jazz as a vehicle to break free. Jazz was by far the most original American music. But eventually he found it hard to incorporate this improvised art into formal concert works. Thomson impishly called Copland's short-lived venture writing jazz-infused concert works his "one wild oat."

In later life Thomson claimed — fairly, most historians agree — that he provided the impetus for Copland's invention of the quintessential American sound through the example of his own simplified musical style. The late 1920's was a time of growing musical complexity and "100 percent dissonance saturation," as Thomson put it. Thinking this direction a dead end, he chose to simplify his language radically. The Thomson work in this vein that most

impressed Copland was the "Symphony on a Hymn Tune," which used hymns familiar to Thomson from his Kansas City, Mo., youth as thematic materials for a genre-busting, unconventional cut-and-paste symphony.

By the late 1930's, Copland, with his language now simplified as well, was writing the works that would make him famous, especially the ballet scores "Billy the Kid" and "Rodeo." Still, what is so gay about a symphony that uses hymns as thematic fodder, or a ballet score run through with cowboy tunes and Old West dance rhythms? What is the gay sensibility of Copland's 1939 "Quiet City" or the vibrant 1943 Violin Sonata?

Words have meanings, of course, as does all music with words. Even if you did not know that Britten was gay, you might guess as much from the content of his operas. Some deal with thwarted or idealized homoerotic yearning ("Billy Budd," "Death in Venice"); others are moral parables about sensitive, volatile and ostracized souls ("Peter Grimes," even the comedy "Albert Herring"). But is there anything gay about Britten's instrumental work, like the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, an ingenious, exciting and deeply moving work?

Ms. Hubbs offers a provocative subchapter, "Complexity Music and the American Way," on the challenge posed by the American composers who championed 12-tone techniques starting in the 1950's, and an apt analysis of "Frenchness as Queer Americanness." But the gender identity questions she raises cannot be answered.

How do you explain the crucial presence of thoroughly heterosexual composers like Roy Harris and Walter Piston in the "commando squad," as Thomson called the circle of composers who set out to establish American music in the mid-20th century? How do you explain that after branding 12-tone music as elitist, arid and Germanic (meaning bad) in the 1940's, Copland took up the technique in the 50's and 60's? To me, his inexplicably neglected 12-tone works still have that clarion, widely spaced harmonic vigor that characterized his influential music in the much-beloved "American" style. Ms. Hubbs takes on this question but leaves it as one of many loose ends.

Ultimately, what we may most value about music is that it moves us in powerful but indistinct ways. It's the one thing that cannot be analyzed or deconstructed for its expressive content, and thank goodness for that.