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Copland and Bernstein: How the American Left Responds to McCarthyism through Music An Annotated Bibliography

Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein were not only two of the most influential American composers but were also important cultural figures in left-wing American politics throughout their lifetimes. As public figures with sometimes communist sympathies, they fell victim to McCarthyism's Red Scare tactics like so many others did, facing scrutiny from the US government. The Cold War era, marked by a contradictory combination of a cultural push for family values and consumerism with the overarching fear of foreign infiltration and nuclear annihilation, led to a feeling of anxiety and mistrust. In this paper, I examine the ways in which Copland's and Bernstein's politics informed their compositions in response to McCarthyism and the Cold War era. Primarily through the examples of both a stage work (Copland's *The Tender Land* and Bernstein's *Candide*) and a symphonic work (Copland's *Symphony No. 3* and Bernstein's *Symphony No. 2*), this response can be analyzed through both explicit messaging and subtle musical characteristics.

- 1) Ansari, Emily Abrams. "Aaron Copland and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 5, no. 3 (August 2011): 335-364.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196311000162>.

Canadian musicologist Emily Ansari received her Ph.D. in musicology from Harvard University and is currently on the faculty at Western University, where she specializes in 20th century music history. In this article, Ansari discusses Aaron Copland as a political diplomat for American music throughout his career. She specifically references other scholars in the field like Crist, playing devil's advocate to Crist's views on Copland's politics and providing an alternate theory. Where Crist sees Copland as a figure with clear communist sympathies, who later (post-McCarthy hearing) scaled back and largely removed his politics from his music, Ansari claims that Copland was always, first and foremost, concerned with internationalism and unity. In Ansari's view, this aspect of Copland's musical career never waivered, even after his traumatic experience with McCarthyism. Ansari combines a historical account of Copland's diplomatic work, Copland's own words, and a myriad of differing scholars' theories on Copland's politics to come to her conclusion. This article provides a nuanced look into Copland's political life and how it affected his compositions both pre- and post-McCarthyism, showing a Copland continuously engaged with internationalism and pragmatism rather than a journey from leftism to apoliticism.

- 2) ———. "Musical Americanism, Cold War Consensus Culture, and the U.S.-USSR Composers' Exchange, 1958-60." *The Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 360-389.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdu006>.

In this article, Ansari uses Wendy Wall's idea of "consensus culture" to examine the ways in which composers in the 1950s talked about musical Americanism and American values as a false projection of unity. Ansari takes accounts from composers involved in the U.S.-Soviet Composers' Exchange, both serialist and tonal, and both American and Soviet, to uncover how these composers felt about their art and obligation to national solidarity. She argues that while there was a "consensus" among Americans that the value of "freedom" was an American one,

wholly against supposed Soviet “unfreedom,” the interpretation of what freedom looked like varied from person to person. Determined to set themselves apart from the Soviets in any way possible, Ansari presents the complex array of differing compositional values and styles as part of a cultural battle between binaries, such as freedom vs. totalitarianism or individualism vs. conformity. This article discusses the difficulties that composers, like Copland, faced throughout the Cold War due to the pressure to make art representative of so-called “American values.”

- 3) Crist, Elizabeth B. “Aaron Copland and the Popular Front.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 409-465.
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/aaron-copland-popular-front/docview/938503/se-2>.

Elizabeth Bergman Crist, former professor of musicology at UT-Austin, is a research expert on Aaron Copland, having published many books and articles on Copland and other American musicians. This article by Crist takes a detailed look into the political life of Copland. She investigates the Popular Front, a coalition of liberals, leftists, and other like-minded individuals against fascism, as both a political movement and aesthetic, and Copland’s connection to the Front. Crist engages with historian Michael Denning’s research to aid her argument that Copland’s compositions were deeply affected, in both the political and aesthetic sense, by Popular Front ideology, concerned with “pan-ethnic Americanism” and the “proletarian grotesque.” She argues that the Popular Front became a new progressive ideology, not quite as idealistic as the Communist Party, but not as elitist and pragmatic as liberals, and that this American progressive movement permeates through Copland’s work through the Depression and war. Along with Copland’s own statements on his compositions and inspirations, Crist uses analyses of *Billy the Kid*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and his Third Symphony as examples of Popular Front ideology. This article provides an in-depth discussion on the connection between Popular Front aesthetic and political ideology present within Copland’s compositions as a reflection of his personal credo.

- 4) ———. “The Best of All Possible Worlds: The Eldorado Episode in Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*.” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19, no. 3 (Nov 2007): 223-248.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27607162>.

In this article, Crist examines the changes made to the first version of Bernstein and Hellman’s *Candide* book leading to its eventual Broadway premiere, with particular attention to the “Eldorado episode” present in Voltaire’s original text. Through letters and other forms of communication between composer and book writer, Crist provides insight into the disagreements between the two that led to a less political finished product. She also provides musical examples and analysis to demonstrate how anti-McCarthyist sentiments manifest in the score and lyrics/dialogue. This article demonstrates that although *Candide* is critical of McCarthyism and has clear left-leaning subtext, the finished product errs on the side of caution by toning down more explicit references to McCarthyism and shifting thematic focus to the Broadway-esque love story. Furthermore, it demonstrates that dilemma that left-leaning figures like Bernstein and Hellman were facing at the time, caught between telling the story they wanted to tell and endangering themselves to even more Red Scare backlash than they had already faced.

- 5) ———. “Critical Politics: The Reception History of Aaron Copland’s Third Symphony.” *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 232-263. <https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/85.2.232>.

In this article, Crist chronicles a short history of the critical reception of Aaron Copland’s Third Symphony. It is not her own analysis of the Third Symphony, but an objective collection of differing reviews of the symphony, with her own interpretation of the reviewers’ possible biases. She begins with reviews from the initial performances, noting that reviews are generally positive and focus on Copland’s workmanship. As a few years pass and McCarthyism begins to dominate the political and cultural atmosphere, Crist discusses how this has an overall negative effect on reviews, with critics tending to have an unfavorable view of his nationalist and populist aesthetic. Finally, she shifts from a journalistic perspective to a historiographic one, exploring post-Cold War analyses of Copland’s Third Symphony in hindsight. Although the symphony was composed before the height of the McCarthy era, this article demonstrates that Copland’s leftist values were built into the symphony and reflect a populist and hopeful agenda at odds with right-wing McCarthyism and individualism. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the political climate of the time had a direct effect on the reception of the symphony.

- 6) ———. *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

In this book, Crist focuses on Aaron Copland’s life as a composer and politically left-leaning figure from the 1930s through the early McCarthy era. This is not a comprehensive history of Copland’s life during this time, but rather a representative exploration of some of Copland’s compositions and lifestyle within the sociopolitical context. Crist draws upon her earlier research from articles like “Aaron Copland and the Popular Front,” discussing Denning’s research and Copland’s membership of the Popular Front at length. She also writes on Copland’s contributions to the newly-developing American style, along with his personal mantra of “imposed simplicity” within his works. Crist analyzes select pieces by Copland like *El Salon de Mexico*, *Billy the Kid*, *Lincoln Portrait*, and the Third Symphony as representations of his Popular Front aesthetic and pan-ethnic populist approach. The conclusion discusses post-war reception of the Third Symphony as well as issues Copland faced throughout the McCarthy era. Crist presents a selective yet representative analysis of Copland’s compositions in the context of his ideology as it evolved from the Great Depression through World War II and beyond.

- 7) ———. “Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era: Aaron Copland’s *The Tender Land* and Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*.” *The Journal of Musicology* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 485-527. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jm.2006.23.4.485>.

This article by Crist addresses the ways in which Copland’s *The Tender Land* and Bernstein’s *Candide* both criticize conservative McCarthyism by engaging pragmatic liberal ideals, but ultimately taking a communitarian leftist stance. Crist gives extensive background into Copland’s, Bernstein’s, and *Candide*’s librettist Hellman’s political backgrounds and issues dealing with McCarthyism in their real lives. She also provides textual and musical examples from both stage works, primarily from *The Tender Land*’s Act 1 finisher “The Promise of Living” and *Candide*’s finale number “Make Our Garden Grow.” She further argues that the

differences between the endings of the two works represent two composers from different generations' similar but separate attitudes on McCarthyism. Crist's research demonstrates that both composers, at the height of McCarthyism, used these stage works as vehicles to criticize the movement while navigating the dangerous and complex backlash they received as members of the Left.

- 8) Cuellar, Scott Dean. "Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 2: Americanism, Tradition and Modernism in its Relationship to W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*." DMA diss., Rice University, 2019.

Scott Dean Cuellar, a recent graduate from Rice University, is now an assistant professor of piano at Syracuse University. Cuellar's DMA dissertation analyzes Bernstein's Second Symphony in relation to the source material by W.H. Auden and America's cultural and political landscape at the time of composition. Chapter 1 builds a groundwork upon both Bernstein's and Auden's interests and political views. Chapter 2 discusses Auden's philosophical shift and the development of an American musical style, and briefly mentions Copland's influence on this American style. Chapter 3 analyzes both Auden's poem and Bernstein's symphony, placing Bernstein's work as a "compositional statement." Bernstein stated that his Second Symphony was his "most American work" and Cuellar compares it to Bernstein's previous works as evidence supporting this claim. He analyzes the Second Symphony in the context of the developing American style, noting influence from Copland and Gershwin. Cuellar argues that the symphony is a synthesis of old and new styles. This dissertation focuses more on the intermusical relationships present in *The Age of Anxiety* rather than any explicit or implicit political meaning, placing the symphony as more of a personal statement by Bernstein.

- 9) Gentry, Philip Max. "The Age of Anxiety: Music, Politics, and McCarthyism, 1948-1954." PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008.

Philip Gentry is currently an associate professor of music history at the University of Delaware, specializing in 20th century music and its intersections with politics and identity. Gentry's Ph.D. dissertation addresses the ways in which McCarthyism affected music at the time, analyzing Leonard Bernstein, John Cage, and the Orioles, against the intersections of politics, race, and sexual orientation. Chapter 1 is particularly relevant to the study of Copland and Bernstein, as it focuses on the political background of both composers, their musical influences, and musical analysis of Bernstein's Second Symphony. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the intersection of race and politics within music in post-war America, and Chapter 4 discusses John Cage's *4'33"* as a shining example of The Age of Anxiety displayed through music. Gentry provides an extensive introduction to the McCarthy era in general, citing historical examples of cultural shifts like *Brown v. Board of Education* and Eisenhower's executive order on sexual perversion. He also cites musical context, engaging with research by Crist and DeLapp on Copland's and Bernstein's experiences with anticommunism. Gentry goes into further detail discussing Bernstein's relationships with Koussevitzky and Copland, how these influences manifest in the symphony, playing with the "symphonic tradition." His musical analysis, along with identifying these competing influences, also identifies two themes he calls "loneliness" and "purity" which he finds are particularly reflective of Cold War anxiety. This dissertation explores

in great detail how McCarthyism shaped musical culture throughout the 1950s and how the Age of Anxiety manifested in works like John Cage's 4'33" and Bernstein's Second Symphony.

- 10) ———. "Leonard Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety*: A Great American Symphony during McCarthyism." *American Music* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 308-331.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.29.3.0308>.

In this article, Gentry argues that Bernstein's Second Symphony is representative of the cultural "Age of Anxiety" America was facing through McCarthyism and the Cold War. Gentry discusses political and psychological trends during McCarthyism, as well as Bernstein and Copland's experiences with anticommunism and their popular compositions at the time. He described Bernstein's influences going into his Second Symphony, primarily as a dichotomy between Copland and Russians like Koussevitzky, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky. Drawing on previous research done for his dissertation, Gentry then analyzes the Second Symphony, connecting the work to Auden's poem as source material, and identifies the loneliness and purity themes. He argues these themes, among other moments in the symphony, like the "Masque" section, represent exhaustion, cynicism, anti-heroism, and anxiety. He also discusses the edits Bernstein later made to the composition, reflecting a different cultural climate. Gentry's research demonstrates that even in Bernstein's symphonic works and even if it was somewhat unintentional, his feelings about McCarthyism and the current state of American culture permeated through his works.

- 11) Rothbarth, Adam L. "Copland in Pursuit of Neoclassicism: A Speculative Discourse on his 'Leftist' Politics, His Interpretation of Mahler, and Their Confrontation at the Third Symphony." MA thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2016.

Adam Rothbarth's MA thesis explores Copland's compositional influences, particularly influence from Mahler, and their effect on his Third Symphony. He engages with Copland scholars' works, like Crist's *Music for the Common Man* and her dissertation, taking into account how his political leanings had greatly affected his compositions. Where this thesis differs from the variety of other works about Copland's influences is its focus on Mahler and neoclassicism. Rothbarth takes writings from Copland to find his personal statements on Mahler, composition, and politics. He compares Copland's Third Symphony with other symphonic works leading up to its composition, positing that the Third is an attempt to conjoin Socialist realism with European modernism. Copland was also hesitant to name Mahler as a direct influence to the Third, but Rothbarth argues the similarities undeniably present. He further argues that the Third was an unconscious effort by Copland to emulate Mahlerian style, and that he didn't necessarily succeed, using musical analysis comparing Copland's Third to Mahler's First. This thesis provides an alternative lens to analyze Copland's Third Symphony, in which political analysis takes a passenger seat to a more important analysis of Copland's engagement with the neoclassical style.

- 12) Seldes, Barry. *Leonard Bernstein: The Political Life of an American Musician*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Barry Seldes received his Ph.D. in Political Science and Government from Rutgers University and has since retired from his professorship at Rider University. In this book, Seldes pushes against the claim made by previous Bernstein scholars that the man was liberal but primarily apolitical in his life and music. Seldes does not engage in musical analysis, but instead historical analysis, chronicling Leonard Bernstein's political journey from the 1930s to the 1980s. Starting with his time at Harvard, Seldes argues that his influences from his teacher and Copland, his senior thesis on "race elements" in American music, and his friendship/collaboration with Marc Blitzstein point to an early political beginning. Seldes follows Bernstein's successes and hardships, going into great detail about his dealings with anticommunism and subsequent blacklisting from events and organizations. Outside of events directly relating to Bernstein, Seldes also provides plenty of background information on the American political culture at large, listing government policies, presidential statements, historical analysis from other scholars, etc. The end of the book also examines how, post-McCarthyism, the American Left began to fracture, and poses questions as to where this could lead into the future. Seldes' research provides incredible context to Bernstein's politics behind his compositions, leaving room for deeper musical analysis of his pieces.