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Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West. By Beth E. Levy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

When composer and native New Yorker Jerome Moross traveled through New Mexico on his way to California in 1936, he was enthralled: "The dimensions of everything starting with the Great Plains just overawed me. I remember I just had to get out of the bus at Albuquerque and stay. I just couldn't go on, I had to get out and wander around the town. . . . The whole thing was just too much for me . . . it was marvelous, and I just fell in love with it. I wandered all around the West, I was ecstatic about it."[1] Moross was not the only composer to fall in the love with the West, as Beth Levy tells us in her seminal book *Frontier Figures: American Composers and the Mythology of the American West*, and the results of this attraction significantly influenced American art music. With some compositional models becoming too "modern" for contemporary audiences, the infusion of Western lore-inspired music and culture into art music breathed new life into American music.

Levy's book presents a series of loosely chronological case studies, centered on nine American composers: Arthur Farwell, Charles Wakefield Cadman, Leo Sowerby, Ernest Bacon, Lukas Foss, Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, and (briefly) Ferde Grofé, and their musical engagement with the West. I wondered how much direct knowledge these composers had about the region, and was surprised to read that many of their first impressions were negative. In contrast to artists such as Georgia O'Keefe and photographer Ansel Adams, who were entranced by the West, especially New Mexico, composers such as Farwell did not initially understand its beauty. Farwell wrote about his first visit to New Mexico thus: "A dweller of the East . . . suddenly dropped down into this extraordinary region would certainly think himself nowhere except in Egypt, or possibly on Mars" (35). Copland described the same topography as "sickly looking parched earth inhabited by he-men cow-punchers" and also wrote that "I can't get used to these barren hills—they remind me of the war-scarred battlefields I saw in France" (322). Maybe it was just New Mexico that these composers did not appreciate. Eventually, their feelings toward the West improved. Cadman, born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania (slightly east of Pittsburgh), headed west for his health when he was twenty-seven. Seven years after moving there, however, Cadman foreshadowed Moross in the following commentary:

[1] Jerome Moross, interview with Paul Snook, WRVR Radio, "Composer in Our Time," 1970, cassette recording.

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> One cannot live in the Great West without sensing it and thinking how it would 'sound' in terms of rhythm and melody. The composer feels the very pulse of it in his contact with the awesome cañons, the majestic snow-capped ranges and the voiceless yet beautiful solitudes of the desert. And if the composer from his dream-height seems to feel these things calling to him, calling in plaintive cadences, in dynamic syncopation that strongly and strangely symbolizes the restless energy of his great land, he may be forgiven.[2]

Levy concludes her work with a brief discussion of Grofé and uses the imagery of "On the Trail" from his *Grand Canyon Suite* to draw together the frontier figures and conclude her journey. Grofé once commented, "[The Grand Canyon] became an obsession. The richness of the land and the rugged optimism of its people had fired my imagination. I was determined to put it all to music some day."[3] I looked in vain throughout Levy's *Frontier Figures* for these awestruck moments that had inspired Grofé, Cadman, and Moross. Where were those feelings of spaciousness and rapture? And how were they translated into music? The fact that I had to dig elsewhere to find these reflections from Cadman and Grofé reflects both my frustration with and appreciation of Levy's book. On the one hand, I appreciated Levy's approach to this heretofore-neglected area of scholarship; but at the same time, I felt that I was missing part of the story.

Since many of Levy's frontier figures only visited the West sporadically, their experiences may have been filtered or otherwise influenced by contemporary literary or visual sources. Understanding how much (or how little) they were acquainted with the West shapes (or should shape?) our understanding of their response to it. Indeed, not only did several of these frontier figures not like the West (at least initially), only a handful spent any significant time there. Their level of personal interaction with the West was the first of several questions that dogged me as I read Levy's book.

Obsessed by the physicality of the West, I expected primarily environmental or landscape works to emerge—what Levy calls "nature paintings." Instead, she tackles more complex narrative works, such as songs, operettas, cantatas, ballets, and films. She examines some instrumental works, but for the most part these also offer a narrative. Sowerby's interpretation of Carl Sandburg's *The Prairie* is an orchestral adaptation, but still features the poem's narrative structure, particularly as the music depicts the "military moments" and Sandburg's "energetic laborers" (166). Copland's *Music for Radio: Saga of the Prairie* presents an interesting exception in that it was originally composed with one narrative in mind (the *Ballade of Ozzie Powell*) and was eventually assigned a completely different one by the listening public. Copland began the work as a setting of Langston Hughes's poem memorializing the tragic death of one of the Scottsboro Boys falsely convicted of rape in 1931. When commissioned by CBS's radio program *Everybody's Music* to write a new piece, Copland revised it as "Radio Serenade," and later re-titled it (at the request of the radio program) "Music for Radio." Following its broadcast

[2] Charles Wakefield Cadman, "The 'Idealization' of Indian Music," *Musical Quarterly* 1/3 (July 1915): 388.

[3] Quoted in an article on Grofé on the Songwriters Hall of Fame website; see http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/bio/C252.

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premiere, in a public relations ploy, CBS asked audiences to suggest new titles: the winning selection, *Saga of the Prairie*, re-cast the work to reflect the pioneer spirit of westward expansion.

Levy's focus on narrative music draws our attention to the people of the West rather than just its impressive landscape, implying that the frontier figures from the title are not just the composers, but also those who populate their works. As Levy observes, Thomson's soundtrack for *The Plow* emphasizes "the human element more frequently" than the image track and implies that this is because he "based his music ... on native American cowboy airs and familiar American folk music" (191). This applies to most of the compositions Levy examines that employ preexisting tunes, because it is through these melodies—and the people who created, performed, and consumed them—that we encounter the West. Whether directly or indirectly, Levy tells us, it is the people who define the West and direct its mythology through their emotions, experiences, and aspirations. With this perspective, Levy admirably demonstrates how these composers' adaptation and interpretation of these primarily folk tunes amplify those expressions and share them with larger audiences, bringing them to a new level.

Like Kathryn Kalinak, I approached *Frontier Figures* with the idea that it would enhance my understanding of what Levy calls the "cinematic West," specifically the West of the classic Hollywood shoot-'em-up film, and how these frontier figures may have intersected with or otherwise influenced the film composers who provided their musical backdrops.[4] What is the classic Hollywood Western but the ultimate portrayal of the mythologized American West? Levy's book unearths a treasure trove of musical works that can be linked to filmic depictions of the West by their compositional characteristics. Perhaps the most salient common denominator is the use of folksongs, which provided inspiration to the earliest Western film composers, while their successors assimilated other American idioms shared with their concert hall colleagues. Levy points out many of these examples along the way, thereby affirming and adding to her readers' analytical understanding of the western musical landscape.

Understanding and appreciating Levy's observations of the interaction between American composers and the West, however, does not come effortlessly. While it is geographically inspired by a region familiar to many readers, *Frontier Figures* requires careful attention and additional research to provide context and perspective. My naïve expectations aside, we are not invited along on a journey to enjoy inspirational impressions of the West: reading this book is thought-provoking, research-encouraging, iTunes-searching work. It involved unearthing the few Cadman pieces I own from my piano bench and spending considerable time on YouTube seeking out historic recordings of Farwell's songs. I viewed *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The Red Pony* yet again to reacquaint myself with their scores, and I read Sandburg's "The Prairie" from *Cornhuskers* to better understand the impetus behind so many settings of this text. A parallel reading of Barbara Tischler's *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity* offered historic background and

[4] A review of Levy's book by Kathryn Kalinak appears in *Pacific Historical Review* 82/3 (August 2013): 440–41.

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context that helped me understand the radical leanings of the compositional milieu that inspired Copland's *Ballade for Ozzie Powell.*[5] I searched unsuccessfully for recordings of Cadman's operettas and Bacon's *A Tree on the Plains* (one recording of the latter work exists, but access is difficult). In general, it was disappointing to find that many of the works that Levy discusses have not been recorded, and I hope her book will inspire interest in that area.

I am not sure if Copland's discovery of the American West and his subsequent (misapplied) reputation as the quintessential Western film composer was intentional or accidental. Copland readily admitted, for example, that the title for *Appalachian Spring* was not his, but Martha Graham's idea. Agnes de Mille presented Copland with the folksongs he was to use in *Rodeo* and generally guided his (reluctant) hand. As Levy explains, "Perhaps with so much of de Mille in the ballet, there was little room left for him ... he hardly strayed from the detailed scenario she provided and used folk songs and fiddle tunes where she had suggested them" (344). Indeed, Levy recounts Copland's reluctance to compose another cowboy ballet and wanting instead to do something about Ellis Island. She ends her discussion of Copland by stating "By choice or chance, *The Red Pony* contains Copland's last musical thoughts on the West" and that "Copland had become the logical man for the job" (368) when he composed the score for *The Red Pony* particularly after *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*, but it was by choice that this was his last Western score. When offered the score for *The Big Country* in 1957, Copland turned it down, commenting:

> Its Western locale and characters present me with a purely personal problem: that of repeating myself. In the past I composed two ballets (*Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid*) and two film scores (*Of Mice and Men* and *The Red Pony*) with similar backgrounds. Since I have composed nothing for films since *The Heiress* I am particularly anxious to make a return to Hollywood after so long a time in some new capacity, and not again as a composer of western locale. I'm very much afraid that I have exhausted that vein as far as I am concerned.[6]

As Levy admits in the Introduction, her work is not all inclusive: "a string of reluctantly omitted chapters stretches to the horizon in my mind's eye" (14). It was perhaps not so much the omitted chapters that interested me in further research on the topic as much as the possibility of a deeper understanding of the material she does include. I also found Levy's writing style to be remarkably dense at times and complicated by the amount of information presented to the reader. *Frontier Figures* may not be for an uninitiated general audience, but rather for those committed to significantly enhancing their understanding of the progress of American music.

Like other reviewers, and award committees, I was positively impressed with *Frontier Figures*, which is exceptionally detailed, nicely organized, and full of insightful musical analyses.[7] Levy has compiled an exhaustive bibliography, combining recent

[5] Barbara Tischler, *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[6] Letter from Aaron Copland to William Wyler, 27 July 1957; Gregory Peck Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

[7] Levy's book was given the 2014 Lowens Book Award of the Society for American Music and the 2013 Music in American Cultures Award of the American Musicological Society. It has been reviewed

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biographies with contemporary articles and reviews, as well as archival work. The compilation and interlacing of her previous studies in this area provides a detailed and fascinating perspective on how the interaction between composers and the culture of the West contributed to the advancement of American music in the first half of the twentieth century.[8] Although the pursuit of a uniquely American music is not a new topic, Levy's book challenges us by considering how the West has inspired or affected this development, and how these composers' interpretation of this culture is manifest in its expression.

Circling back to Moross, who took up the reins on *The Big Country* after Copland turned it down, I felt his presence throughout *Frontier Figures*. Although Levy refers only to his negative assessment of Cadman's music that appeared in *Modern Music* (391n39), Moross traveled the same trails as these composers. CBS commissioned him to compose music for the radio shows *Everybody's Music* and *American School of the Air*; he was supported by two Guggenheim fellowships; and, making his way West to discover uncharted inspiration, Moross also orchestrated Copland's *Our Town* and *The North Star*. Levy's book suggests there are likely other uncredited American composers who were inspired by the West to re-consider their compositional approach, and her text motivates us to seek them out. *Frontier Figures* tempts us with a great deal of fascinating information and interpretation, and triggers even more questions about the development of American music.

Mariana Whitmer

in numerous journals. The most extensive review is likely that by Charles Hiroshi Garrett in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66/2 (Summer 2013): 584–90.

[8] See Beth Levy, "The Great Crossing: Nostalgia and Manifest Destiny in Aaron Copland's *The Red Pony*," *Journal of Film Music* 2/2–4 (Winter 2009): 201–23; Levy, "'The White Hope of American Music': or, How Roy Harris Became Western," *American Music* 19/2 (Summer 2001): 131–67; and Levy, "From Orient to Occident: Aaron Copland and the Sagas of the Prairie," in *Aaron Copland and His World*, ed. Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick, 307–49 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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