

## 18 Schoenberg reception in America, 1933–51

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Like countless refugees from Nazi Europe, Arnold Schoenberg spent an important part of his creative life in America (1933–51). Here he not only produced significant works, but also contributed greatly to America's musical culture. Yet, little research has been done on Schoenberg's American years and the reception of his work. Moreover, scholarly impressions of his American career tend to convey a variety of predominantly negative interpretations. Numerous Schoenberg commentators claim that he was an isolated figure, that his music was rarely performed and "could not fall on fertile ground," and that his work was either misunderstood or ignored.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will challenge some of these perceptions and examine the question of American Schoenberg performances, along with aspects of the theoretical and compositional reception of his work in America.

### Schoenberg performances and press reactions

The common view that Schoenberg's music was "practically not performed" in America is a myth inviting scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> It partly grew out of Schoenberg's own worries about the dissemination of his music. He was troubled by the lean years of the Great Depression and World War II, when the arts saw major cutbacks, and was concerned about the conservatism predominating musical life in America. Yet his anxiety might have been prompted also by the feeling of what his fellow émigré Ernst Krenek called the "echolessness" of the vast American expanses – a notion implying that artists, for lack of feedback, were unaware of the full scope of their work's reception.<sup>3</sup>

When Schoenberg arrived in America in 1933, he was no stranger to Americans and his music was not entirely unknown. In fact almost all of his works composed before his emigration had received hearings and many of the more than two hundred documented performances had obtained press coverage.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to his and his supporters' intense networking, Schoenberg's music continued to receive hundreds of performances across the country throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Although

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Schoenberg often stressed his indifference toward the music market, he strove for a wide dissemination of his music, along with audience appreciation and monetary benefit from his art.

In the 1930s conductors such as Otto Klemperer, Sergei Koussevitzky, Eugene Ormandy and Frederick Stock performed his orchestral music. Their programming, however, complied with the populist leanings at that time. In these depression years, orchestras lost private funding, struggled against declining concert attendance, and could not risk disaffecting audiences with peculiar-seeming music.<sup>5</sup> Thus almost all of the *circa* one hundred documented orchestral performances of the 1930s featured Schoenberg's tonal music, *Verklärte Nacht*, *Pelleas und Melisande*, the First Chamber Symphony, excerpts from *Gurrelieder*, and his Bach, Handel, Monn, and Brahms arrangements. Even Schoenberg himself preferred to conduct his old and new tonal compositions.

The focus on tonal works conformed to his own "pedagogical" strategy to first familiarize Americans with his most accessible music in order to prepare them for his atonal works. While audiences seemed generally pleasantly surprised by what they heard, East Coast critics were puzzled by the incompatibility of these works with Schoenberg's iconoclastic reputation. Upon hearing Schoenberg conduct his *Pelleas und Melisande* in Boston in 1934, a critic wondered, "Why a work this unrepresentative should have been selected by Schönberg (he himself and no other made the selection) remains a riddle as unsolvable as that of the sphinx itself."<sup>6</sup> Schoenberg's new tonal Suite in G (1934) even provoked mockery in the press. "Has the much advertised Californian sunshine thawed out the gloomy apostle of the twelve-tone Grundgestalt and left him singing roundelays among the poppies?" wrote a New York reviewer.<sup>7</sup> The West Coast critics, in contrast, reported mostly favorably, but seldom thoroughly and meaningfully, on his music.<sup>8</sup>

Schoenberg's chamber music could also be heard regularly in major American cities throughout the 1930s. Among the more than ninety performances, however, renditions of his atonal works prevailed. Infrastructures for the dissemination of modern chamber music had been developed since the 1920s thanks to the endeavors of Edgard Varèse, Henry Cowell, and others. The Abas, Manhattan, Pro Arte, and Kolisch String Quartets played his last three Quartets. The Kolisch Quartet not only premiered the Fourth Quartet in 1937 in Los Angeles, but also recorded and performed all four Quartets as a cycle in several American cities.<sup>9</sup> Richard Buhlig, Jesús Sanromá, and Eduard Steuermann among other pianists repeatedly played works from Opp. 11 through 33b.<sup>10</sup> Schoenberg's *Book of the Hanging Gardens*, *Pierrot lunaire*, and Woodwind Quintet, however, received altogether only about a dozen

performances. These events, often presented at small venues and attended by people from the literary, art, and dance scenes, were generally announced in the press, but seldom reviewed. The premiere of the Fourth Quartet, however, was an exception. It even received a sympathetic review in the *New York Times*, which pointed out the work's Romantic qualities, the sizeable concert attendance, and positive audience response.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Schoenberg's perception in 1949 "that the number of performances sank to an extremely low point," concerts featuring his orchestral works in the 1940s had doubled, not least thanks to his seventieth and seventy-fifth birthdays in 1944 and 1949, and Antony Tudor's popular ballet *The Pillar of Fire* based on *Verklärte Nacht*.<sup>12</sup> American orchestras gave more than 200 performances including premieres of the dodecaphonic Violin and Piano Concertos, *Ode to Napoleon*, Prelude to the *Genesis* Suite, and *A Survivor from Warsaw* conducted by Leopold Stokowski, Artur Rodzinski, Werner Janssen, and Kurt Frederick. Moreover, Dimitri Mitropoulos performed and recorded the Violin Concerto and Serenade, reviving the Five Orchestral Pieces in 1948 and Variations for Orchestra, Op. 16 in 1950. Yet again, performances of tonal works prevailed, with only about ten percent featuring his Modernist output. Schoenberg's initial push for his tonal music had turned into a situation comparable to that of Goethe's *Sorcerer's Apprentice*: "Spirits that I've cited my commands ignore." Schoenberg's hopes that his atonal and dodecaphonic music would become a staple of American orchestra concerts were shattered by the late 1940s.

But conversely, in the realm of chamber music, hearings of his atonal works outweighed performances of his tonal compositions. The over one hundred renditions (out of *circa* 190 performances) of such pieces as *Pierrot lunaire*, *Book of the Hanging Gardens*, and his progressive string and piano works document an increasing interest in modernism against a still conservative musical background marked by a focus on Neoclassicism and Americana. Schoenberg benefited from the emergence of contemporary music groups and the presence of open-minded émigré musicians such as the Galimir, Kolisch, and Pro Arte Quartets, and the pianist-composers Erich Kahn and Eduard Steuermann. But an increasing number of American-born artists including the Fine Arts, Juilliard, and Walden Quartets, the singer Rose Bampton, the pianists Buhlig, William Masselos, Frances Mullen, Leonard Stein, and David Tudor also performed his music. Institutions such as the New School for Social Research and the New Friends of Music in New York, Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and Evenings on the Roof in Los Angeles played a vital role in promoting European (and American) modernism. From 1939 to 1953

numerous performances and lectures on this subject were given at Black Mountain College. Here Heinrich Jalowetz, Schoenberg's student, and a college professor from 1939 to 1946, mounted an influential festival on the occasion of Schoenberg's seventieth birthday in 1944. The creative exchange of such Schoenbergians as Rudolf Kolisch, Steuermann, Marcel Dick, Ernst Krenek, and Mark Brunswick gave Schoenberg reception in America a boost. Significantly Roger Sessions, who also attended the festival, consequently became an active Schoenberg supporter after having been skeptical of Schoenberg's ideas. Initiated in 1939 by writer Peter Yates and his wife, pianist Frances Mullen, the Evenings on the Roof were an important chamber concert series, specializing in modernist repertoire and featuring between 1939 and 1954 nine all-Schoenberg programs and West Coast premieres of *Herzgewächse*, Op. 20, the Serenade, Op. 24, Four Pieces for Mixed Chorus, Op. 27, the String Trio, Op. 45, and *Dreimal tausend Jahre*, Op. 50a.

Most press and audience responses to Schoenberg performances in the 1940s were sympathetic. This was due to the fact that performances of Schoenberg's tonal orchestral works dominated the programming and that performances of his chamber music by and large did not receive detailed press coverage, if it received any at all. Among the non-tonal orchestral works, the Five Orchestral Pieces and *Ode to Napoleon* generally prompted a favorable feedback, the Piano Concerto and *A Survivor from Warsaw* elicited mixed reactions, while the Violin Concerto and Variations for Orchestra initiated antagonism from critics and audiences.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the verdicts of *New York Times* critic Olin Downes, commonly perceived as a Schoenberg detractor, varied greatly. He reviewed positively *Verklärte Nacht*, the First Chamber Symphony, Second String Quartet, Five Orchestral Pieces, and *Pierrot lunaire*.<sup>14</sup> Yet, he dismissed *Pelleas und Melisande*, the Orchestral Variations, Second Chamber Symphony, Piano Concerto, and *A Survivor from Warsaw*.<sup>15</sup>

The performances and emergence of recordings of Schoenberg's modernist music and his provocative contributions to newspapers inspired lively debates on atonality and dodecaphony in widely circulated journals (*New Yorker*, *Newsweek*, *Partisan Review*, *Time*, and so on), especially from the mid 1940s on.<sup>16</sup> Schoenberg critics including Downes, Daniel Gregory Mason, and Tibor Serly questioned the validity and success of his techniques.<sup>17</sup> Schoenberg supporters such as Dika Newlin, René Leibowitz, and Roger Sessions defended his progressive stance insisting on its integrity, relevance, and inevitability.<sup>18</sup> These debates were paralleled by discussions about avant-garde versus mass culture in intellectual circles, which intensified after the massive cultural changes in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Additionally, in the late 1940s

several of Schoenberg's public protests – his infamous complaint about American conductors neglecting his works, his denigration of Aaron Copland, and disapproval of Thomas Mann's best-selling novel *Doctor Faustus* (1948) – strongly reverberated in the press and drew attention to him and his music. But they left the impression that he was a neglected and bitter artist.<sup>19</sup>

## Commentaries on Schoenberg's compositional techniques

Much ink has been spilled to explain, criticize, and defend Schoenberg's innovations ever since the notorious early performances of *Verklärte Nacht*. In America his work has generated commentary since *circa* 1907. By the time he settled there, Americans had been confronted with numerous discourses on his *Harmonielehre* and atonal music. His students, including Egon Wellesz, Erwin Stein, and Adolph Weiss, had informed Americans about the rudiments of dodecaphony starting in the mid 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

In America, as he had done in Europe, Schoenberg left speculation about the twelve-tone technique to his adherents. He limited public discussion of it to the basic talk "Composing with Twelve-Tones," which he presented to non-specialist audiences between 1934 and 1946 and included in his book *Style and Idea* (Philosophical Library, 1950). Thus Schoenberg's relative silence on dodecaphony left much room for idiosyncratic interpretations of this subject. In 1936 American musicologist Richard Hill published an influential in-depth study on Schoenberg's dodecaphony. Herein he identified the ways in which Schoenberg treated the set horizontally and vertically and combined different row forms. He also recognized for the first time in print the phenomenon that Babbitt later termed "inversional combinatoriality." Despite this insight, however, Hill criticized Schoenberg for using the row in complex and non-linear ways, claiming that the row's "motival significance has been completely destroyed."<sup>21</sup> Hill called for a more thematic treatment of the row and adherence to its temporal pitch order. Soon thereafter Krenek, seemingly building on Hill, published two introductions to dodecaphony, *Here and Now* (Norton, 1939) and *Studies in Counterpoint Based on the Twelve-Tone Technique* (Schirmer, 1940), promoting a thematic and polyphonic use of tone rows.<sup>22</sup>

Among other publications of the 1930s, Marion Bauer's textbook *Twentieth-Century Music* (Putnam's Sons, 1933) deserves mention for its inclusion of a chapter on Schoenberg's atonal works, which despite

its sketchy analyses had a special meaning for many musicians, including Milton Babbitt. Merle Armitage published the anthology *Schoenberg* (Schirmer, 1937) with contributions by Schoenberg and many of his champions. And Schoenberg himself emerged with a variety of essays in such venues as *Modern Music*, *American Mercury* and Armitage's *George Gershwin* (Schirmer, 1938).<sup>23</sup>

The 1940s saw many more printed tributes to Schoenberg due to his seventieth and seventy-fifth birthdays, issued by such friends as Brunswick, Jalowetz, and Sessions, but also by some of his American students, including Lou Harrison and Dika Newlin.<sup>24</sup> Jalowetz wrote in 1944 a comprehensive essay on Schoenberg's music featuring a detailed analysis of his Piano Concerto.<sup>25</sup> Author of numerous Schoenberg articles, Newlin published the musico-cultural study, *Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg* (New York, King's Crown Press, 1947). While many surveys of modern music included sizeable Schoenberg chapters, Schoenberg himself published articles, the treatises *Models for Beginners in Composition* (1942) and *Theory of Harmony* (1949), and the essay collection *Style and Idea* (1950).

In the 1940s knowledge about atonality and dodecaphony was further advanced. In his 1943 essay "New Developments of the Twelve-tone Technique," Krenek discussed the "trend towards exploring the extramotivational function of the series," analyzing Schoenberg's non-thematic use of the row in the Violin Concerto and works by himself and his student George Perle.<sup>26</sup> Concurrently Perle published his first essays on his twelve-tone modal system and twelve-tone tonality combining dodecaphonic ideas with hierarchic relations among pitch classes and chords comparable to those existing in tonal practice.<sup>27</sup> These systems, which Perle substituted for the (in his opinion) "fortuitous" harmonic relationships in dodecaphonic music, imply a critique of Schoenberg's handling of the harmonic dimension in dodecaphonic composition. In 1946 Babbitt completed his Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton University, "The Function of the Set Structure in the Twelve-Tone System," which was, due to a lack of competent readers, not officially accepted until 1992, but became nevertheless a widely read and authoritative manuscript on dodecaphony in America. Drawing on set theory, Babbitt rationalized and extended the theoretical foundation of Schoenberg's, Webern's, and Berg's twelve-tone ideas. Moreover, he created a soon widely used mathematicized terminology including "pitch class," "set," "aggregate," and "combinatoriality" to describe manifold serial concepts.

Yet René Leibowitz, a Polish-born French composer and passionate Schoenberg promoter, arguably made an even greater impact on the music scene at the time with his enthusiastic landmark study *Schoenberg et son école* (1947), which appeared in 1949 in an English translation by Newlin,

presenting for the first time broad coverage of Schoenberg's, Berg's, and Webern's music. While this book was welcomed and widely read, it was criticized by Aaron Copland for its "dogmatic" and "fanatical tone," and by Babbitt and Perle for its superficial musical discussions and use of "misleading" analogies between tonal and twelve-tone music.<sup>28</sup> With his scathing 1950 review of Leibowitz's book, Babbitt officially published for the first time his sophisticated insights into dodecaphony and set the stage for many detailed studies of twelve-tone music in the years to come.<sup>29</sup>

Both Babbitt and Perle also criticized Schoenberg's essay "Composing with Twelve Tones," published in 1950, questioning his evocation of serialism's historical lineage and his analogies to tonal music to validate its use.<sup>30</sup> And as if Schoenberg had foreseen this essay's critiques, he claimed in 1950 that he wrote "a superficial explanation" of the twelve-tone method against his "'free' will."<sup>31</sup> His apologetic position, however, reflects his apprehension of the looming ideologies of serialism. The generalization of Schoenberg's methods resulted, according to Sessions, in "attention on the *means*, rather than on the music itself," which was something Schoenberg tried to avoid.<sup>32</sup>

The preoccupation with Schoenberg's techniques after World War II was furthered by the growth of college education prompted by such measures as the 1944 GI bill, a tendency toward teaching specialized rather than general knowledge, and a focus on science and technology. Lending itself to theorization and science-inspired thinking, Schoenberg's work was soon institutionalized, researched, and taught at major American universities. Its study propelled the rise of American music theory and denoted a sea change in musical thought and practice in America.

### Schoenberg's impact on composition in America

During the 1930s and 1940s Schoenberg inspired gradually more composers to explore his ideas and above all serialism – perhaps the most easily traceable Schoenberg influence in American music. During Schoenberg's American sojourn, serialism developed into an important compositional trend marking American music for several decades.

Adolph Weiss, who studied with Schoenberg from 1925 to 1927, was one of the first Americans who composed twelve-tone works and whose dodecaphonic Piano Preludes (1927) and Sonata da Camera (1929), each accompanied by a brief analysis, were the first twelve-tone works published in America (1929 and 1930). These pieces inspired composers such as Wallingford Riegger, who soon thereafter extensively experimented with this method. In *Dichotomy* for chamber orchestra (1932) Riegger

used an eleven-note and a thirteen-note row in their prime, retrograde, and inversion forms as themes with variations in a freely chromatic context. Weiss's and Riegger's focus on the linear-thematic and contrapuntal possibilities of dodecaphony, however, differed from Schoenberg's mature twelve-tone techniques in which the twelve-tone set is often treated as referential background. Despite a widespread unawareness of these procedures, Schoenberg, on the occasion of the publication of his *Klavierstück, Op. 33b* in Cowell's *New Musical Quarterly* in 1932, abstained from "musical explanations concerning his work, since his musical viewpoint [is] well known."

Interest in the use of dodecaphony in America grew thanks to Schoenberg's popularity as a teacher and the presence of other European refugee composers including Paul Dessau, Hanns Eisler, Kahn, Krenek, Steuermann, and Stefan Wolpe who employed and/or helped disseminate it in various ways. Wolpe and Krenek, who both emigrated to America in 1938, had adopted the twelve-tone technique shortly before Hitler's rise to power and kept using it in idiosyncratic ways. Wolpe, a left-wing activist composer, shifted his focus from Neoclassical approaches to serial techniques in the late 1920s, believing that serial music symbolized not merely resistance to fascism, but rather the new social liberation. In America he generally held on to a personalized serial technique, surely for political reasons gaining in urgency during the Cold War when Soviets suppressed artistic freedom and Senator Joseph McCarthy persecuted leftist artists. Wolpe often alternated between diatonicism, octatonicism, and twelve-tone techniques, employed pitch cells within completely chromatic settings, and combined serial ideas with traditional harmonic devices. Later Wolpe refrained from the constant exhaustion of the chromatic palette, giving fewer notes greater weight and exploring pitch sets with fewer or more than twelve pitches.<sup>33</sup>

For Krenek, his adherence to serialism was partly a political gesture, withstanding its ban by the Nazis and mediating it to another culture. Krenek was perhaps most instrumental in using and promoting thematic, modal, and unorthodox approaches to dodecaphony. In his *Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetae* (1942) he used modal counterpoint and applied the principle of rotation to the row, dividing it into two hexachords and systematically alternating the pitches within these hexachords. Thematic and modal treatments of the row became popular in the 1940s and early 1950s with composers such as Ben Weber, Walter Piston, Ross Lee Finney, Copland, and Sessions.

From the 1930s through the 1950s American Schoenberg students, including John Cage and Harrison, also used serialism in their works. Yet since they heavily engaged in experimentalism, they tend to be overlooked



as heirs of the Schoenberg legacy despite the fact that to them Schoenberg had remained a lifelong inspiration. Cage, a student of Schoenberg from 1935 to 1936, explored various unorthodox forms of serialism between 1933 and 1938. He used a twelve-tone row and its transformations in his *Sonata for Clarinet* (1933), unordered rows of twenty-five pitches based on the principle of non-repetition in *Sonata for Two Voices* (1933), and rows as collections of small motives subjected to various serial transformations in *Metamorphosis* (1938). In comparison, Harrison, who studied with Schoenberg in 1943, alternated between serial composition and multitudinous other techniques for much of his career. Modeled after Schoenberg's *Suite, Op. 25*, his *Piano Suite* (1943) is based on a thematically treated quasi-all-interval set. This lyrical work, which Harrison wrote during his studies with Schoenberg, is one of the rare student twelve-tone compositions that he actually supervised and endorsed. Later Harrison used various serial approaches, involving very lyrical tone rows with tonal implications or with fewer than twelve notes, as well as permutation principles in such compositions as *Schoenbergiana* (1945), *Symphony on G* (1948–65), and *Rapunzel* (1954).

Babbitt and Perle, Schoenberg scholars since the 1930s, emerged in the 1940s as perhaps the most dedicated and influential “serial” composers, taking dodecaphony to new levels of sophistication. Babbitt developed dodecaphony into an intricate system of structurally interrelated sonic textures articulated by pitch, rhythm, timbre, dynamics, and register. In his *Three Compositions for Piano* of 1947 he pioneered new types of combinatoriality and invariance and developed, earlier than his European colleagues, integral serialism by serializing duration and dynamics. Further, Babbitt expanded Schoenberg's approach to what he called “partitioning” by constructing trichordal rows whose four forms could be superimposed to unfold horizontally and vertically at the same time. These so-called arrays would then lead to more complex types of textures such as all-partition arrays and superarrays. While Schoenberg and Babbitt both believe in musical progress, in contrast to Schoenberg's emphasis on emotion and intuition, Babbitt stresses quasi-scientific and technical qualities in his music. As Babbitt greatly illuminated Schoenberg's work, his penchant for logical positivism and academicism, however, reinforced the cliché of Schoenberg's music being “cerebral.”

As mentioned above, Perle developed his own twelve-tone modal system in the late 1930s. In such works as his *Two Rilke Songs* of 1941, he conceived twelve-tone sets with ascending and descending circles of fifths, which determined the vertical dimension of the work. Next Perle refined this tone-centered approach, now termed “twelve-tone tonality,” through the use of cyclic sets – twelve-tone sets consisting of symmetrical

cells that can be combined in pairs to form symmetrically interrelated arrays of chords. Only marginally related to Schoenberg, twelve-tone tonality became the focus of many of Perle's compositions since the 1940s. As Perle found fault with certain aspects in Schoenberg's twelve-tone works, including the Violin Concerto, he also rejected Babbitt's approach to serialism due to its musical and perceptual complexity.

In 1949 Kurt List, former student of Berg and Webern, wrote to Schoenberg that as the editor of the music publishing firm Boelke-Bomart he had seen many dodecaphonic works, reporting that "twelve-tone music is now very 'fashionable'" and that most young American composers now write music based on rows.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, young composers, including Newlin, George Rochberg, and Gunther Schuller, but also established figures such as Piston, Copland, Sessions, and Finney, began to explore serialism. Having been controversial and greeted with a mixed reception, Schoenberg's ideas gained momentum thanks to a myriad of favorable circumstances. Highly esteemed performers and spokesmen suggested the relevance and prestige of his music. Moreover at the beginning of the Cold War era, serialism became a symbol of creative freedom in Europe and America in that it epitomized resistance against the stifling cultural politics of both the Nazi and Communist regimes. In America McCarthyism arguably motivated left-wing composers (among them Copland) to balance their formerly politically oriented and audience-friendly music with abstract serial works.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, music conveying socialist or patriotic messages was less in demand after the war. Neoclassicism, the most popular style in the 1930s and 1940s, seemed outmoded too, as many composers, among them its most prominent representative Stravinsky, abandoned it in favor of serialism shortly after Schoenberg's death. With the renewed faith in progress, science, and technology, there was an increased interest in intellectually based, abstract, and avant-garde music. In 1948 and 1949 such works as Riegger's dodecaphonic Third Symphony and Babbitt's serial Composition for Four Instruments began to receive prestigious awards.

## Conclusion

Schoenberg's presence in America led to manifold responses to his music reflected in performance, scholarship, and composition. He obtained support from three groups: fellow émigrés, his American students, and Americans outside his circle. Despite his worries about being neglected, he received numerous performances nationwide, though the renditions of his tonal music outweighed those of his atonal works. The number of

performances of Schoenberg's modernist music, however, needs to be gauged against the background of a general musical conservatism conditioned by economically strained times, and also compared with the still smaller number of performances of progressive works by such fellow émigrés as Bartók, Krenek, and Wolpe, or indigenous composers including Ives, Riegger, and Sessions. Aside from performances, Schoenberg also received attention in many journalistic and scholarly publications, reflecting a growing interest in musical Modernism and music theory. The diverse theoretical and practical interpretations of dodecaphony filled the gap Schoenberg created with his silence on this subject, but also generated consequences he might not have anticipated. During a time when dodecaphonic music was largely banned in Nazi Europe, ever more American composers began developing their own take on serialism and conveying their fascination with Schoenberg to younger generations. Finally, Schoenberg's ideas benefited from political and societal changes in the postwar era, attaining new political and cultural values. Schoenberg's ideas undoubtedly fell on fertile ground, growing into one of the strongest influences on American music for a quarter century.