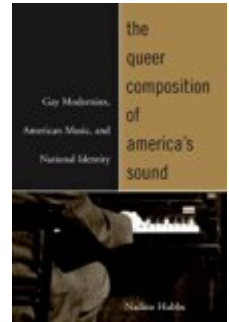


Nadine Hubbs. *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xi + 282 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-24184-8.



Reviewed by Kevin Bartig

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In the opening pages of her book, Nadine Hubbs posits a fascinating irony: Aaron Copland, considered by many to be the "father" of American music, forging the nation's musical identity through his individual genius, was in reality a left-leaning, communist, Jewish homosexual who worked during a time of rampant homophobia and insular anti-communism. Copland's status as America's "national cultural spokesperson" has rarely been considered in connection with his sexuality (and in fact the latter is often glossed over, as pointed out by Hubbs). Yet Copland's homosexuality--however hidden or denied by his public--was something he had in common with a striking number of America's most prominent twentieth-century composers. A central thesis of Hubbs's work is that the shared minority status of queer American composers placed them in a close-knit social network that shaped both their personal and professional lives. The face of American musical modernism and the development of an American identity in music were profoundly influenced by this complex, both in terms of musical influence and the career opportunities available to those inside the network. This queer net-

work was, in turn, shaped by its profoundly homophobic environment in pre-Stonewall America. Thus Hubbs seeks to "illuminate some of the dense and productive interpenetrations between, on the one hand, queer lives and subculture, and on the other, modern U.S. national culture and self-representations, in all their profound and effortful heterosexualization" (p. 16).

Hubbs, who is professor of musicology and women's studies at the University of Michigan, draws on a formidable knowledge of queer theory, musicology, and cultural history to inform her arguments. Although her point of departure is Aaron Copland (the composer most often cited for being the first to fashion a viable American identity in music), Hubbs's work encompasses the careers and music of Virgil Thomson, Leonard Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein, Paul Bowles, David Diamond, and Ned Rorem. The American public (and even prominent biographers) have avoided or altogether ignored the sexuality of these composers, and constructed a facade where these men "were singular individuals--men of genius--and this fact above all accounted for their achievements and

status" (p. 10). By considering these composers as a group, Hubbs posits a revisionist view that shows how collective effort and "mutual influence" among American composers, rather than "radical individualism," created a national music for the United States.

Chapter 1, "Modernist Abstraction and the Abstract Art: *Four Saints* and the Queer Composition of America's Sound," considers as a case study the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), a joint effort of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson. Through a close examination of this work, Hubbs argues that music's non-representational nature and potential to subvert fixed meanings allowed for enormous expressive potential in the milieu of early twentieth-century America. In other words, relying on music's potential for abstraction, Stein and Thomson were able to craft a work that mirrored "queerness and other kinds of social marginality and resistance" (p. 49) and "stage their artistic statement of collective and individual, national, sexual, and artistic identity" (p. 50) without alienating their work from audiences that would perceive such notions as unacceptable.

The premiere of *Four Saints* came at a time when American composers and the American public were desperate to find something that could be declared America's own musical style. This desire for identity represented a point of honor—a prerequisite for placing American musical culture on equal footing with that of Europe. Hubbs argues that aspects of Thomson's musical style and language directly prefigure similar exceptional traits in Copland's "Americana" style (exemplified by such works as *Billy the Kid* [1938] and *Rodeo* [1942]), which was widely considered to be the first truly American music. The link between Thomson's and Copland's musical languages reveals what is perhaps one of the most fundamental links in the web of mutual influence that defined the landscape of American modernist composition.

The second chapter, "Being Musical: Gender, Sexuality, and Musical Identity in Twentieth-Century America," more broadly addresses the relationship of composition with notions of musicality, homosexuality, and queerness. Such inquiry strikes at the heart of not only the question of "what music is, but of what it means to engage and even to dedicate oneself to music—that is, to be in a serious way *musical*" (p. 65). Through a masterful display of historical research, Hubbs traces the relationship of queerness and music from the nineteenth into the early twentieth century, and shows how "musicality" often functioned as a euphemism for homosexuality. Such rhetorical sleight-of-hand in tandem with the non-representational nature of music allowed the mainstream public to turn a blind eye to the sexuality of many of America's prominent composers. Hubbs shows that in essence, "music in the twentieth century afforded homosexuals, among other things, a means ... for blurring—to outside eyes—potentially incriminating differences that the mechanisms of homo/hetero definition had brought into sharp focus. As such it served as a magnet for queer life and culture, and a hotbed of individual and collective queer identity, expression, creativity, and survival" (p. 94).

Chapter 3, "A French Connection: Modernist Codes in the Musical Closet" considers "categories of meaning and affiliation [attached] to certain gay modernist composers" (p. 119). Through a discussion of what Hubbs terms "musicosexual closet codes," she explores in more detail the membership of musical circles that arose during the twentieth century. Hubbs develops some very striking binaries, notably "dissonance and atonality, stylistic complexity, and Germanness with heterosexuality and masculinity; and of consonance and tonality, clarity and cultivated simplicity, and Frenchness with (male, and hence feminized) homosexuality" (p. 150). Although such an approach appears quite reductive, it is an effective (if generalized) tool for explaining and classifying such codes and identities that strongly shaped the net-

works and alliances that formed among composers in the twentieth century

The fourth and final chapter, "Queerness, Eruption, Bursting: U.S. Musical Modernism at Midcentury," presents a brief look at the significant changes in the American musical scene that accompanied the postwar shift to government sponsored anti-communism and homophobia. Hubbs argues that "the Cold War co-construction of homosexuals and communists as infiltrators and subversives" paved the way for "composition's elitist and masculinist turn toward serialist and quasi-scientific methods" (p. 169). In the highly charged political atmosphere of the American 1950s, Copland came under direct attack as a communist sympathizer, and the music composed by him and members of his circle rapidly lost popularity. Yet the elitist voice of the music that replaced it (Arnold Schoenberg, Pierre Boulez, and others) never gained a lasting following with American audiences, leading Hubbs to argue that "Coplandian Americana" is the only twentieth-century American musical style that has managed "to sustain a vital cultural profile in the present day" (p. 173).

Hubbs's book presents some conspicuous omissions. Almost all twentieth-century American composers of note—including Copland—had something other than their sexuality in common: study in Paris early in their careers with the celebrated pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. The argument for a collective effort in the creation of American musical modernism could be appreciably nuanced by devoting more attention to the influence that Boulanger exerted, not only in terms of musical craft, but also in terms of creating emotional and professional bonds between composers. Attention to the shared minority status suggested by the Jewish heritage of a majority of the composers is similarly absent. Although Hubbs acknowledges the importance of both Boulanger and Jewish heritage in passing, their omission tends to make some of her arguments about the role of sexuality

and queerness seem overly essentialist. Readers will furthermore note the striking absence of one homosexual male American composer in Hubbs's study: Samuel Barber. Although Hubbs points out that Barber's style placed him well outside the innovations of the Copland-Thompson circle, his prominence at the forefront of American music cannot be denied, both in terms of the significant popularity of his works and his official status as spokesperson for American music (among his litany of awards and honors are two Pulitzer prizes and a nomination to the American Academy of Arts and Letters). Consideration of how Barber's arguably anti-modernist style and prominence hindered, enhanced, or informed the activities of the Copland-Thomson circle would be a welcome addition to this text.

Nonetheless, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound* represents a seminal work in gay and queer studies and in music history. Synthesizing the work of such pioneers as Suzanne Cusick and the late Phillip Brett, Hubbs presents a much-needed systematic study of queerness and music in twentieth-century America. In the conclusion of the book, Hubbs suggests the ramifications of her work, "for in highlighting the queer dimensions of central objects and figures in America's cultural life and national identity, this history elucidates the ways in which all of us—queers and nonqueers, musicians and consumers, Americans and global citizens—compose ourselves in concert with modern homosexual identity, the attendant forces of homophobia, and their mid-twentieth century fluorescence in America" (p. 175). Hubbs's readers will find her exploration of these themes rich and highly readable.

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