

***The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity.* By Nadine Hubbs. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004. Pp ix-288, introduction, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0520241851)**

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The *Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*. By Nadine Hubbs. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004. Pp ix-288, introduction, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0520241851)

Can sexual orientation manifest itself in music? Is it possible for gay composers to create a sound that is intrinsically homosexual? Nadine Hubbs seems to think so. Her book *The Queer Composition of America's Sound* attempts to explain the correlation between gay composers and the creation of the "American Sound" in the first half of the twentieth century. As I set out to review this book, I realized that scepticism can be an ugly thing: was Hubbs really going to convince me that Aaron Copland's *Grand Canyon Suite* expresses his homosexuality? Or does his pastoral sound really convey a longing to be a part of the American landscape, something his gayness would never fully allow him to be? Could she really convince me that sexual orientation can inform talent? Much to her credit, after reading her book and most of the seventy pages of notes, she did.

Hubbs' main argument is that a group of gay male composers, primarily from New York City, helped form mid-century music into a distinctive "American Sound." Hubbs calls these men, focusing primarily on Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, the "architects of ...national identity" since the type of music they created was so very in sync with American culture of the time. Who can really imagine the 1930s without the swank sophistication of a Cole Porter song? What epitomizes the 1950s more than the fusion of Latin rhythm with traditional Broadway showtunes in *West Side Story*? (In 2005, we associate these musical motifs so strongly with that time 50-60 years ago that it begs one to wonder: what will be the sound associated with the present?) Copland's majestic melodies evoked the sweeping western vistas, putting to music the landscape of which Americans were so proud. And with *West Side Story* and *On the Town*, Bernstein served as a counterpart for Copland in an urban milieu. Although their homosexuality has been overlooked historically, it was the gay composers of the early twentieth century who was nonetheless shaped the sound of the era.

Admittedly, the music theory aspects of the book were lost on me; Hubbs' explication of tonality or twelve-tone serialism, for instance, will not be of use to the casual reader but to someone with a greater understanding of these theories. While interesting and certainly included

to prove her point, such discussion elicits an aloof response from the more non-academic reader. She fares better when dealing with the influence French music had on these men. An American movement in the 1920s and 1930s away from German culture (undoubtedly a product of WWI) included with it a resistance to the stoic, masculine music associated with Germany. The main source of inspiration for Copland and his contemporaries was French music, which was considered more feminine with its soft tones and light melodies. The melancholy French melodies coupled with rich eighteenth and nineteenth century American folk melodies created a uniquely American sound. It is this sound that Hubbs believes, defined the nation at the time.

I have to question, however, Hubbs' choice to exclude Cole Porter from her discussion. True, he was interested more in popular songs and not focused on orchestral work but his compositions speak of 1930s and 1940s much more, I believe, than any of the other composers mentioned in the book. His homosexuality is often verbally expressed in his songs. Take the witty lyrics to "It's All Right With Me" and there is little doubt that Porter is explaining his situation of being married to a woman: "it's the wrong game with the wrong chips/your lips are tempting but they're the wrong lips/they're not his lips but they're such tempting lips/so it's all right with me." Porter realized he must yield to society for acceptance, even if they were the "wrong lips."

To put it plainly, this book really got me thinking. Although Hubbs does provide answers to some tough questions about national identity and gay identity, I was still left with a feeling of incompleteness. And I do not blame Hubbs for this. These are questions that do not really have definitive answers.

In music, what is "gay sound"? While more difficult to pinpoint in theory, it is not at all difficult to identify in sound. There is something in the chic melodies of Cole Porter, the orchestral splendour of Aaron Copland, and the teeming urban pulse of Leonard Bernstein that inherently seems to appeal to gay men. A well-worn reason might be that gay men are outsiders searching for a place in society and this richly nostalgic, yet innovative and risqué, music appeals to that sense of longing. But, from this gay man's perspective, the gay sound comes from somewhere else. Somewhere ...over the rainbow perhaps? From the first time I heard Judy Garland sing when I was five years old I knew that was the music for *me*. I had no idea what straight or gay was but I

knew that I *liked* how her voice sounded and how the music in *The Wizard of Oz* sounded. I can't explain it any better than that. Perhaps there is a part of gay people that strives to attain some sort of normalcy, to have a childhood and a life like the people we read about or see in a movie or play. Judy Garland certainly did not have this idyllic life. Neither did Copland, Bernstein or Porter, being marginalized by their genius or homosexuality or both. Perhaps their estrangement from ordinary society seeps unconsciously into their music thus creating the "gay sound." Or maybe they were just a bunch of talented guys who happened to be gay? Pick up Hubbs' book and decide for yourself.

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Obsession, Compulsion, Collection: On Objects, Display Culture, and Interpretation. By Anthony Kiendl, ed. (Toronto, The Banff Centre Press, 2004. Pp. 384, ISBN 1-894773-05-5)

Distractions of the unspoken object. This is how editor and curator Anthony Kiendl describes the fascination for material culture and collecting, the subject matter for this compilation of essays by twenty-four contributors. These contributors, either curators, historians, artists, writers, teachers, critics, or film scholars have combined their insight and knowledge with visual images to illustrate the reasons why people collect objects and what we make of these collections in public forums.

The book's format is visually and tangibly enticing; even as a paperback, its jacket is lined with bright neon pink and the glossy pages offer a delectable taste of the eclectic writing and material found in each essay. Though this book is "the fourth in a series ... about curating and contemporary art" as written on the front inside jacket synopsis, it may be used by itself for the subject alone about collecting and why humans collect things. The book attempts to recreate the obsessive compulsion of collecting by displaying the amassed objects, art, and images within each text. The conclusion "Doodles" (371-376) is most befitting for this book's finale. All that is written as far as a conclusion is concerned, is relevant to a selection of notes and sketches made by