

Miscellaneous American Composers

Part I

There are many, many American composers...it seems like a bottomless pit, at times. We will spend the next three months looking at a variety of these people...starting with those born in the second half of the 19th century. We will start with ten this month, and you will have one listening example for each composer.



Stephen Foster (1826-1864) is known as “The Father of American Music.” He wrote more than 200 songs, many of which are known today. He did get some of his work published, but sadly most of his hand-written manuscripts were lost. His music was primarily used in parlors and in minstrel shows, particularly in black-face minstrel shows. Even though he was born in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania (a northern state), he and his family were pro-slavery.

His music had a simplicity and beauty that made his music popular, and many of his songs today seem more like folk music than actual composed music. (Folk music isn’t written down, but is passed from generation to generation through singing, and often the origin of much folk music goes so far back in time that it cannot be traced.) Foster wrote such songs as *Oh, Susanna*, *Hard Times Come Again No More*, *Camptown Races*, *Old Black Joe*, *Beautiful Dreamer*, *Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair* (written for his wife, Jane), *Old Folks at Home*, and *My Old Kentucky Home*.

He was mostly self-taught and could play piano, guitar, flute and clarinet. He did have some private composition lessons with a music dealer in Pittsburgh named Henry Kleber. They studied scores of Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Schubert together. He briefly attended Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, but he dropped out.

He lived the last four years of his life in New York City, and his death can’t be verified as either self-inflicted or an accident. He had 37 cents and a scrap of paper saying “Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts” in his pocket.

His musical legacy includes *My Old Kentucky Home* becoming the official state song of Kentucky in 1928. *Old Folks at Home* (also known as *Swanee River*) became the official state song of Florida in 1935. *Florida (Where the Sawgrass Meets the Sky)* became Florida’s state anthem. Most of his songs seem rooted in the South, but oddly enough he only visited the South once on his honeymoon, and he never lived there.

Please click on this link to hear the particularly poignant song which speaks to Foster’s own poverty:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jqu_8j6kt0A 5:21

Thomas Hampson sings *Hard Times Come Again No More* with The Jay Ungar Trio. This version is probably very close to the original composition...a simple vocal line with accompaniment. The background chorus was probably added later. (See lyrics on the next page.)

Now listen to the same song in a very modern arrangement, sung by The Swingle Squad. They sing without accompaniment, in other words they sing “a cappella,” and this version is very modern in its harmonic treatment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9C-uWYy7M0> 5:22

Lyrics to *Hard Times Come Again No More*

Let us pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears
While we all sup sorrow with the poor
There's a song that will linger forever in our ears
Oh Hard times come again no more

Tis the song, the sigh of the weary
Hard times, hard times, come again no more
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door
Oh hard times come again no more

While we seek mirth and beauty and music bright and gay
There are frail forms fainting at the door
Though their voices are silent, their pleading looks will say
Oh hard times come again no more

Tis the song, the sigh of the weary
Hard times, hard times, come again no more
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door
Oh hard times come again no more

Tis a sigh that is wafted across the troubled wave
Tis a wail that is heard upon the shore
Tis a dirge that is murmured around the lowly grave
Oh hard times come again no more

Tis the song, the sigh of the weary
Hard times, hard times, come again no more
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door
Oh hard times come again no more
Oh hard times come again no more

Edward MacDowell (1860-1908) was born in New York City. His father was a Manhattan milk dealer. His mother encouraged his talent and took him to Paris in 1877, where he was admitted into the Paris Conservatory. Within two years he was at the top of his class, so he then moved to Frankfurt, Germany, for further study in piano and composition. In 1884 he married Marian Griswold Nevins, who had been a piano student of his for three years. In the Autumn of 1888 they returned to the states where they made Boston their home. In 1896 they purchased a summer home in Peterborough, New Hampshire, called Hillcrest Farm. MacDowell found that his creativity flourished in this beautiful rural setting.

His compositions include two piano concertos, two orchestral suites, four symphonic poems, four piano sonatas, and many piano suites and songs. (His *Piano Concerto in D* is still very popular today and often appears in young people's concerto competitions.) He served on the faculty of Columbia University in New York City and was the first person hired to teach music there. Although he had written many large works, he is best known today as a Romantic miniaturist (in other words, he is best known for his short works). Many of his piano pieces are taught to young pianists, and his works always appear on the required list of the National Federation of Music Clubs (our own "Junior Festival"). *Woodland Sketches* is a favorite. Please listen to the lovely piece from that suite, *To A Waterlily*. Mr. Russell and I both learned this in our teen years...it was our first exposure to playing in the key of F# Major. (Watch out for those E#'s!!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9adv4FAdvbo> 3:14



MACDOWELL'S LEGACY: After his death, his wife turned their beloved Hillcrest Farm into the MacDowell Colony, (known today as The MacDowell), which is a multidisciplinary artists' retreat, continuing to honor the composer's memory after his death by supporting the work of other artists. Many composers received fellowships to the Mac Dowell, including composers from our last semester's "magazine:" Aaron Copland (who went there eight times), Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, and many others. Our next composer, Amy Beach, also enjoyed The MacDowell in her later years of composing.

Amy Beach (1867-1944) was an American composer and pianist. She was the first successful American female composer of large-scale art music. Her "Gaelic" Symphony, premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1896, was the first symphony composed and published by an American woman. She was one of the first American composers to succeed without the benefit of European training, and she was one of the most respected and acclaimed American



composers of her era. As a pianist, she was acclaimed for concerts she gave featuring her own music in the United States and in Germany.

She was an amazing child...one would say she was a child prodigy. By the age of one she could accurately sing 40 songs, by the age of two she could sing countermelodies to songs, by the age of three she taught herself to read, and when she was four she spent a vacation on her grandfather's farm where she composed three piano waltzes, even though her grandfather didn't own a piano! She composed them mentally, and when she returned home, she played them for her family. Her mother was a pianist and singer, and she wouldn't let Amy play the piano, because she felt that it would damage her authority as a parent to indulge the child. The parents kept a tight rein on her throughout her youth. Finally at age 6 her mother began giving her piano lessons. When she was 8, the family moved to Chelsea, a suburb of Boston, and she continued her piano studies there. She didn't receive a university education, but she bought and read every composition text book she could find and translated foreign texts herself. She was basically a self-taught composer.

In 1885 Amy married Dr. Henry Beach, who was 24 years older than she. He didn't want her to be a concertizing artist nor a piano teacher. In her day, women were expected to be society matrons and patrons of the arts, which she agreed to. After his death, some 25 years later, she began to concertize, to compose, to teach, and to write articles about composing. Her concerts and her compositions met with great success, but her works were largely forgotten after her death in 1944. There has been a revival of interest in women composers, and she is now receiving her due.

Her *Theme and Variations for Flute and String Quartet* was commissioned by the San Francisco Chamber Music Society and is a glowing example of her gifts and her appeal. Here is a video of a live performance. A string quartet consists of two violins, one viola and one cello, and composers often add a fifth instrument for color. In this work the flute serves as a beautiful contrast to the string sound.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I12UDD57P1Q> 21:00 (You are welcome to stop at the end of the first section at 5:30, or you can listen to all of it.)

Charles Ives (1874-1954) was considered a Modernist, using dissonant clashes, cluster chords, and many other devices that broke with Romantic tradition. Although his early works were generally disregarded, later in life people began to appreciate his creativity, and he became known as an "American original." He was actually a very successful insurance agent and owned his own company. He created enough wealth to secretly support artists through private donations. The conductor Nikolas Slonimsky remarked that Ives had practically funded his entire career.

He was born in Danbury, Connecticut. His dad was a US Army band leader in the Civil War. The Ives family was one of Danbury's leading families, and they were prominent in business and civic improvement. They were similarly active in progressive social movements of the last century, including the abolition of slavery. Later in life, as he was involved in politics, he had a heated argument with the young Franklin D. Roosevelt (who was chairman of a war bonds committee on which Ives served) over selling war bonds. Ives had proposed selling \$50 war bonds, but Roosevelt "scorned the idea of anything so useless as a \$50 war bond." Many years later

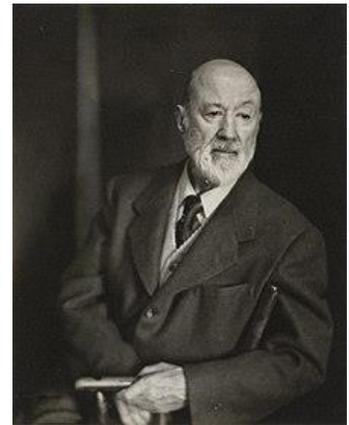
Roosevelt, as US president, changed his mind about small contributions when he endorsed the *March of Dimes* campaign to combat polio.

Charles' father George directed bands, choirs, and orchestras, and taught music theory and a number of instruments. Charles got his influences by sitting in the Danbury town square and listening to his father's marching band and other bands on other sides of the square simultaneously. This intrigued Charles, and several of his own works combine multiple melodies simultaneously. His father taught him and his brother (Joseph) Moss Ives music, and he guided Charles' first compositions. George took an open-minded approach to theory, encouraging him to experiment in bi-tonal and polytonal harmonizations. (Using two or more key signatures at the same time – which causes quite a clash of sounds!)

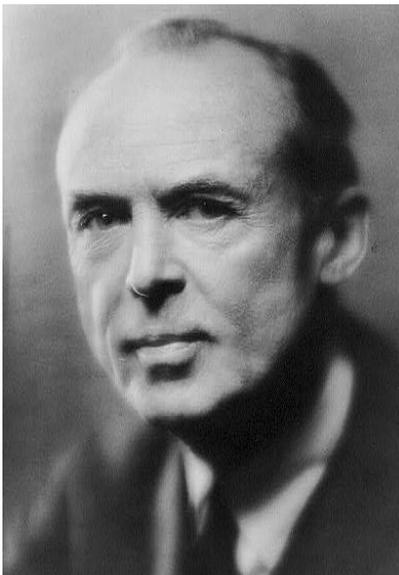
He wrote several large works for orchestra (including four symphonies) and for solo instruments, including three piano sonatas, and a large solo work for organ.

Igor Stravinsky, a modern Russian composer, praised Ives. In 1966 he said: "During the heyday of Strauss and Debussy, (early 1900s) Ives was exploring polytonality, atonality, tone clusters, perspectivistic effects, chance, statistical composition, permutation, add-a-part, practical-joke, and improvisatory music: these were Ives's discoveries a half-century ago as he quietly set about devouring the contemporary cake before the rest of us even found a seat at the same table."

Here is a link to an almost-two-hour movie. Please listen to the first 10 minutes of it to get a sense of who Ives was, and to hear some of his works.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEtsFAiPT5w> 10:00



John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951) was born in Park Ridge, Illinois and was raised in a musical household. He attended Harvard and was the president of the Harvard Glee Club. He traveled to Rome in 1906 and had a few composition lessons with Sir Edward Elgar, a major English composer. He returned home to Chicago and became vice-president of the family business, a shipping supply company. He retired from this work in 1936 and after retiring, he spent much time composing.

His compositional style was mildly modern with touches of Impressionism. He used jazz in several works, and was among the first classical composers to use elements of jazz and ragtime in his pieces.

He composed three ballets, an opera, an orchestral suite, a symphony, and many pieces for solo piano and for voice and piano, including the song cycle *Gitanjali* using poems by Rabindranath Tagore. *Gitanjali* means "song-offering" but in Hindi it also means "a collection of songs."

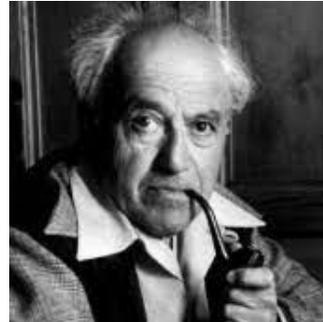
During his lifetime he received several honors, including an honorary masters from Harvard, an honorary doctorate from the University of Wisconsin, and the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1947.

Please listen to two songs from the song cycle *Gitanjali*: the first one, *When I Bring to you Colored Toys*, and then skip over to 6:40 for *The Sleep that Flits on Baby's Eyes*.

NOTICE: for some reason I cannot get this link to start in the beginning....please drag the cursor back to the beginning to hear the first song (*When I Bring To You Colored Toys*). It opens at 6:47 (*The Sleep That Flits on Baby's Eyes*) so please listen to this one first, and then drag the cursor back to the beginning to hear the first song. My husband, the techie, and I worked on this and finally gave up. Maybe it is just a bug in my computer, and you won't have this problem! (Total listening time is around 5 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L2mIla9sgc&t=402s>

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) was a Swiss-born American composer. He is recognized as one of the greatest Swiss composers in history. He was born in Geneva to Jewish parents, and much of his music reflects his Jewish heritage, although he didn't limit himself in that regard. He was also influenced by Chinese culture, as well as the culture of the South Seas. In 1916 he moved to the United States and in 1924 he became a citizen.



Bloch had a distinguished academic career that culminated in his recognition as Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley in 1952. This was quite impressive since he was never a full-time faculty member there...only teaching one semester per year for 11 years until his retirement. He taught composition to many young composers who made careers for themselves.

He retired to Oregon's Agate Beach, and in 2009 his home was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Many of his works are for orchestra, but he has also written several pieces for piano, including a piano sonata and a three-movement cycle called *Poems of the Sea*. If Bloch had come to the United States in 1916, he would have had to sail on a ship, so maybe this was his inspiration for composing this music, which holds a copyright of 1923.

The three movements have the titles: *Waves*, *Chanty*, and *At Sea*. On the first page of the score, Bloch quoted Walt Whitman:

In cabin'd ships at sea,
The boundless blue on every side expanding,
With whistling winds and music of the waves, the large imperious waves,
Or some lone bark buoy'd on the dense marine.

Where joyous, full of faith, spreading white sails,
She cleaves the ether 'mid the sparkle and the foam of day, or under many a star at night,
By sailors young and old haply will I, a reminiscence of the land, be read,
In full rapport at last.

Here is a link to the piano solo *Poems of the Sea*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQW_vI6EWTY 10:08



Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920) was a composer for piano, chamber ensembles, and voice. At first he followed the tradition of German Romanticism, but became attracted to the exotic and mysterious sounds of the French Impressionists, such as Debussy and Ravel. His later works brought him the label of American Impressionist. He was also influenced by the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, who also employed strange and mysterious sounds in his own works.

Griffes was born in Elmira, New York, and his earliest piano lessons were from his sister Katherine. He received his musical education in Germany, and when he returned to the US in 1907 he became director of music studies at the Hackley School for boys in Tarrytown, New York, where he worked until his death. The job was described as “grim and unrewarding,” but it provided a steady income, and it allowed him time for composition. In the summers he would travel and promote his work.

His most popular works are *The White Peacock*, his *Piano Sonata* (a tone poem), *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan*, and *Poem for Flute and Orchestra*. He wrote several works for piano, including *Roman Sketches*, which was written in 1915-1916. It contains four movements: *The White Peacock*, *Nightfall*, *The Fountain of Acqua Paola*, and *Clouds*.

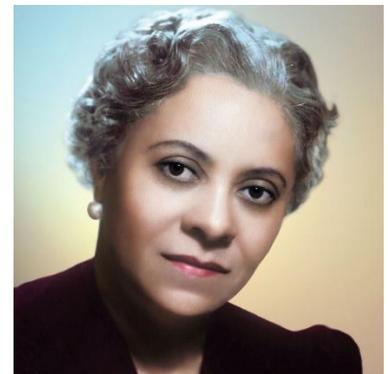
Sadly, Griffes died at age 37 from the Spanish Flu, which was raging after World War I. He is buried in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

Here is a link to *The Fountain of Acqua Paola* from his *Roman Sketches*. There are two other pieces about fountains written by Maurice Ravel and Franz Liszt, which he certainly must have known, since this one has the same virtuoso approach with similar descriptive writing that conveys the bubbling and cascading play of a fountain.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVGNIjLskvk> 3:13

Florence Price (1887-1953) was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and was educated at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She and her husband moved to Chicago in 1927 after a black man was lynched in her town, and there she lived until her death in 1953.

She is the first African-American woman to be recognized as a symphonic composer, and was the first to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra. She composed over 300 works (both instrumental and vocal) for large groups and small. In 2009 a large number of her abandoned works was discovered in an old house she had used as a summer home.



According to her daughter, Florence really wanted to be a doctor but felt the difficulties of becoming a woman doctor at the time were too formidable. Instead, she became that even greater rarity: a woman composer of symphonies. Price was steeped in the European tradition in which she was trained, but she was able to weave her traditional folk music with the music of serious composers of her day. She composed four symphonies, two violin concerti, a second work for piano and orchestra (*Rhapsodie/Fantasia*), and several other works for orchestra, including *The Oak* and *Suite of Negro Dances*. She also wrote many choral and solo vocal works, along with a large group of chamber pieces, and many pieces for solo piano and for solo organ. She also arranged over a dozen spirituals. Here is the first movement (*Nimble Feet*) of a solo piano work called *Dances in the Canebrakes*.



Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) (FERdee GroFAY – “fer” rhymes with “Mary”) was born in New York to German immigrant parents. He came from a musical family...his father was a baritone who sang light opera, and his mother was a professional cellist who taught Ferde to play piano and violin. Her father (Ferde’s maternal grandfather) played professional cello in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra and his uncle Julius (his mom’s brother) played first violin and was concertmaster of the Los Angeles Symphony.

When Ferde was only seven years old his father died, so his mother took him to Germany to study piano, viola, and composition. He learned to play a wide range of instruments including piano, brass instruments, and percussion. This gave him a foundation to become an arranger of other people’s compositions and then to become a composer in his own right.

He left home at age 14 and had many jobs, including milkman, truck driver, usher, newsboy, elevator operator, iron factory worker, and pianist in a piano bar (earning two dollars at night.) By the time he was 15 he was performing with dance bands.

By 1920 he was playing piano with the Paul Whiteman orchestra and doing most of Whiteman’s arranging...hundreds of show tunes and popular songs. One of his biggest claims to fame was arranging George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. (You may remember that Gershwin had to write this piece in a hurry for Paul Whiteman’s concert...a concert that was announced before Gershwin had even started the piece.) Grofé helped out by arranging the work for piano and orchestra as Gershwin would write it...section by section...in order to have it ready in time.

Grofé’s most well-known composition is his five-movement *Grand Canyon Suite*. It is a five-movement work and evokes the feelings, sights, and sounds of the Grand Canyon. The first movement, *Sunrise*, is a slowly evolving piece which pictures the sun rising over the canyon rim...you can hear birds twittering and experience the climb of the sun as the piece grows to a climax. The second movement, *The Painted Desert*, is a quiet, atmospheric piece which paints the stillness of the desert. The third movement, *On the Trail*, tells the story of a ride down into the canyon on the back of a donkey, with his braying and his clip-clops. This is perhaps the best known of the five movements. The next movement, *Sunset*, is again a quiet close of a perfect day, and finally *Cloudburst* is a dramatic ending to this lovely work.

Here is the link to *Grand Canyon Suite*. Please listen to the first movement, and then skip over to **19:52** for the third movement, *On the Trail*. Let your imagination run free as you listen to this descriptive piece. (If you are fan of the movie *A Christmas Story* you may recognize music from this movement.) 😊

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xc6oYN_2h6g *Sunrise* is 6:00 and *On the Trail* is 8:00 starting at 19:52

David Guion (1892-1981) was born in Ballinger, Texas, and although he doesn't have the stature of some of the other composers on this list, he is a fellow Texan, and he has written several virtuoso arrangements of fiddle tunes, which are close to my heart.

He began to play piano at an early age, and as he worked on his father's ranch, he was interested in cowboys. Besides his exposure to cowboy songs and fiddle tunes, he also heard spirituals in the African American church which he occasionally attended with a family servant. Every Saturday he took the train from Ballinger to San Angelo for piano lessons, and later he attended Polytechnic College in Fort Worth, which later became Texas Wesleyan University. He traveled to Vienna, where he studied with the piano virtuoso Leopold Godowsky. In 1914 he returned to Texas and taught in Brownwood at Howard Payne University.



After his father died, his family moved to Dallas. His father had served as President of the Board of Directors of A&M University, and Guion Hall is named in his honor. David Guion taught at SMU, various private schools in Dallas, and also at Chicago Musical College, and in the summers at Estes Park, Colorado. While in Estes Park, he won first prizes in rodeos in Colorado and in Wyoming.

In 1930 he went to New York and starred in the cowboy show *Prairie Echoes* at the Roxy Theater. He performed several cowboy songs, including his version of *Home on the Range*, which transformed the tune into one of the most famous and popular of all western songs. President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed it as his own favorite. Guion did weekly radio shows which were carried across the country coast to coast, and this opened the way for singing cowboys, something that continued in radio and television through the 1940s and 1950s.

Guion wrote a ballet *Shingandi*, which was originally for two pianos, but was later orchestrated by Ferde Grofé and performed by Paul Whiteman's orchestra. After living in New York for two years, Guion returned to Dallas in 1932.

Guion wrote over 200 works, including many arrangements of cowboy tunes and African American spirituals. Here is a link to his *Turkey in the Straw*. In case you are wondering, this is very difficult to play!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qq0LXrmhQhk> 2:43