American Music in the 20th Century

by

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Background: The United States in 1900

<table>
<thead>
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<th>In the US in 1900...</th>
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<td>- Average annual income = $430</td>
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<td>- Average purchase price of a house = $3,500</td>
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<td>- A year’s tuition at Harvard University = $150</td>
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<td>- A loaf of bread = 5 cents</td>
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In 1900, the United States of America was very different than it is today. It was barely 100 years old as an official country,¹ was still recovering from its Civil War (1861-65), and had not yet made any significant impact as an international political power. American² society was more closed-minded: Women did not yet have the right to vote³, and the Plessy v. Ferguson decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 confirmed the legality of the "separate but equal" ("Jim Crow") racial segregation policies that persisted for the next 60 years. In 1901, President William McKinley was assassinated, and his vice president, Theodore ("Teddy") Roosevelt, assumed the nation’s highest office. Many conveniences that we take for granted today—such as the vacuum cleaner, air conditioning, washing machines, refrigerators, automobiles, a paved road system, airplanes, skyscrapers, radio, TV, and sound-recording/playback devices—were not yet a part of American life.

The US had grown significantly over the previous century:

- In 1800, it had only 16 states (population = 5.3 million)
- The transcontinental railroad that started under President Lincoln during the Civil War (built 1862-1869) was a powerful force in America’s growth and expansion, shortening the travel time for people, goods, and mail from the US east coast to the west coast from 4-5 months to 5 days!
- The new "birdcage" steel frame technology developed by William Jenner in Chicago in the 1880s (after the "Great Chicago Fire" of 1871), led to the proliferation of ever-taller skyscrapers in major cities across the US.

¹ From 1779-1788, the 13 colonial states each had their own authority with no national government. The US became one unified nation in 1789, when the US Constitution was ratified and George Washington became its first President.

² Throughout this book, the term "American" is used in its common English-speaking context, which refers to a "US citizen"—but, in actuality, any person of North-American, Central-American, or South-American descent can be rightfully called "American."

³ By 1900, only 15 of the current 27 amendments to the US Constitution had been ratified. The 14th and 15th amendments gave US citizens "equal protection" and voting rights without discrimination to race/color/previous servitude, but American women were still not allowed to vote until the 19th amendment was ratified in 1920.
• By 1900, the US had 45 states (population = 76 million) and had become the biggest, most thriving economy in the world, with the ability to export/import products to/from both Europe and Asia by ship, and then across the US by train.

During the 20th century, five more states were added to complete the current fifty "united" states: Oklahoma (1907), New Mexico and Arizona (1912), and finally Alaska and Hawaii (1959)—see Figure 1.4

As seen in Figure 2, the United States is indeed a melting-pot of ethnic and cultural diversity. Each region of the US was settled by immigrants of various nationalities—first from England, France, Spain and Mexico, then by a second wave from Italy, Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia—who brought their own musical traditions with them. In the southeastern US, these merged with the African-Cuban musical influences of slaves who were taken primarily from West Africa then routed to Brazil and the Caribbean before a much smaller number were brought to the United States. The indigenous Native-American peoples who had lived here for thousands of years were forced onto isolated reservations by the US government, so their music has not yet had much of an impact on the "American" music that followed.

4 Presently, the United States of America is comprised of the 50 states, the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.—where its federal government resides), plus five official US Territories: Guam, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. It also claims jurisdiction over Baker Island, Howland Island, Jarvis Island, Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef, the Midway Islands, Navassa Island, Palmyra Atoll, Serranillo Bank, Bajo Nuevo Bank, and Wake Atoll. The total population of all these is 312.9 million (last census, 2010)—up from 285.6 million in 2000.
US Musical Styles in the 20th Century

From this cultural melting pot of immigrants, a multitude of musical styles emerged in the US within three broad categories—each distinguished by its overall purpose:

I. American Roots Music
II. American Popular Music ("Commercial" music)
III. American "Classical" Music ("Art" music)

These styles are considered "American" because they are either native to the United States, or because they developed out of foreign traditions to such an extent that something distinctly new emerged here.

American Roots Music

American "Roots Music" is a broad category that includes

- Blues, Spirituals, Gospel music
- Cowboy songs, Bluegrass, Folk songs, Labor Songs, Traditional country music,
- Appalachian music (fiddle with banjo/guitar/dulcimer)
- Cajun, Tex-Mex, and Native American music

These are called "roots music" because they served as the basis for later American styles such as rock and roll, rhythm & blues, jazz, country-rock, folk-rock, etc. Roots
music communicates the hopes, sorrows and convictions of ordinary people in their everyday lives, and its words and melodies were typically passed down from generation-to-generation through oral tradition.

**American Popular Music**

American "Popular Music" is music conceived and performed as a commercial commodity for mainstream audiences through nightclubs, concerts, recordings, radio/TV/film broadcasts and printed sheet music. This includes

- Pop songs
- Ragtime
- Barbershop music
- later "Commercial" blues styles/Rhythm & Blues
- Jazz
- Musical Theater and Film Music
- Rock and Roll
- Rap
- Various types of dance music

**American "Classical" Music**

*An Important Note on the Term "Classical Music"*

"Art-Music" of the Western Hemisphere is often referred to as "Classical Music," but **that is not accurate.** "Classical" music is actually a particular style of European art-music written between c1750-1820 by composers such as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven. It is only one of several different style-eras within Western art-music tradition that includes

- "Medieval" (c450-1450)
- "Renaissance" (c1450-1600)
- "Baroque" (c1600-1750)
- "Classical" (c1750-1820)
- "Romantic" (c1820-1900)
- "Modern" (since 1900)

The term "Classical" will be used in this book as a convenience, since most students know that it refers to concert music that is distinctly different from popular and roots styles.

(Note: the "c" before a date stands for the Latin word "circa," which means "approximately.")

American "Classical" music is intended for a concert hall or theatrical performance. For many years, it was modeled after European "art music" from the Classical (c1750-1820) and Romantic (c1820-1900) eras, but for the past 100 years it has also been a realm for cutting-edge musical experimentation:

- Orchestral music
- Band Music
- Opera/Operetta (Light Opera)
- Chamber music
- Art Song

This book highlights many of these styles in their chronological-historical perspective, while showing how they exemplify American ingenuity and expression while reflecting various changes and challenges during the turbulent 20th century.

* * *

In order to discuss the many styles and traits of American Music that arose throughout the 20th Century, a basic common vocabulary of terms known as the "elements of music" will be used (similar in concept to the way the atomic "elements" of the Periodic Table serve as the fundamental building blocks of larger molecules, compounds, etc.)

There are seven main categories of Musical Elements:

- Rhythm
- Dynamics
- Melody
- Harmony
- Tone Color
- Texture
- Form

*Note: A musical work may or may not use or reflect all seven of these elements*
"The Elements of Music" (and some related sub-terms)

- **Rhythm**: the aspect of "time" in music
  - **Beat** (pulse)
  - **Tempo** (how fast or slow the beat moves)
  - **Meter** (beats organized into recurring patterns such as "4/4")
  - **Syncopation** (accenting the "offbeats")

- **Dynamics**: the relative "loudness" or "quietness" of music

- **Melody**: the *horizontal* presentation of *pitch* (sounded musical notes)

- **Harmony**: the *vertical* presentation of *pitch*
  - **Chord** (a block simultaneously-sounding musical pitches)
  - **Consonance** (harmony that is "smooth-sounding")
  - **Dissonance** (harmony that is "harsh-sounding"/clashes)

- **Tone Color**: the sound created by the type of instruments/voices used

- **Texture**: the inter-relationship of musical ideas being heard at one time
  - **Monophonic** (a melody with no accompaniment)
  - **Homophonic** (a melody with simple chord accompaniment)
  - **Polyphonic** (a complex interweaving of several melodies at once)

- **Form**: the large-scale design of a musical composition—examples of forms are:
  - **Binary** ("A B" form)
  - **Ternary** ("A B A" form)
  - **Strophic** (a song that has several different verses of text)

**Review of Important Terms From Chapter 1**

"American Music": music styles that are native to the United States or that developed here out of foreign traditions to such a degree that something distinctly new emerged.

"Roots Music": Various types of "folk" music (in America, these became the basis for later American styles such as such as rock and roll, rhythm and blues, jazz, country-rock, folk-rock, etc.)

"Popular Music": music conceived and performed as a commercial commodity for mainstream audiences.

"Classical Music": Art-music intended for a concert hall or theatrical performance, or music that is highly experimental.

The Elements of Music: Rhythm, Dynamics, Melody, Harmony, Tone Color, Texture, Form (see above for specific definitions).