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The Virtue of American Power and the Power of American Virtue: Exceptionalist Tropes in Early Cold War American Musical Nationalism

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Summary:
While many American nationalist composers suffered from the early Cold War politicization of musical style, the careers of Howard Hanson and William Schuman thrived. This paper examines the music and writings of these two composers to argue that their success during the 1950s in part owed to the compatibility of their music's nationalism with mainstream political ideologies of the period.
I argue that Schuman and Hanson's music evoked one of the central tenets of 1950s consensus culture: American exceptionalism. Schuman promoted the virtue of American power by combining familiar nationalist tropes with an aggressive, hyper-masculine sound. Hanson's music also employed conventional nationalist markers, while its spiritual idealism showed evidence of the same exceptionalist philosophy in reverse: the power of American virtue.
Keywords: *American music, American exceptionalism, nationalism, national identity, masculinity*

It is now a well-established narrative of American music history that the Cold War brought the end of musical Americanism—the accessible national style created by Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, Howard Hanson and others—and the rise of atonal and experimental approaches in its place. Anti-totalitarian, individualist, objective serialism, we are told, and the Cold War that encouraged its growth in popularity, effectively "killed off the First School" of American composers, as Elie Siegmeister has put it [1].

Scholars have questioned the extent to which serialism really dominated American composition during the 1950s—although it seems clear it did enjoy high status [2]. Certainly, though, we have continued to neglect the composers who remained loyal to tonal Americanism. In fact, musical nationalism could and did continue to thrive in some quarters during the 1950s, even as leading figures like Copland felt compelled to experiment with atonal methods. In this paper I look at two Americanists, Howard Hanson and William Schuman, who were successful writing tonal, nationalist music not only before and during World War II, but also beyond into the Cold War.

Although Hanson and Schuman are not as well known today as some of their other Americanist colleagues, during the 1950s they were two of the most powerful musicians in the United States. As composers they received regular commissions, performances, and prizes. Both ran leading US conservatories—Hanson the Eastman School of Music and Schuman the Juilliard School—where they shaped music programs with a strong emphasis on contemporary, and especially American music. Schuman was so successful at Juilliard that in 1961 he was offered (and accepted) the Directorship of Lincoln Center. The two men also contributed significantly to a host of other domestic music organizations, particularly in the realm of education, and to an array of international programs, serving as American delegates to UNESCO conferences and as highly influential advisors to the US government's cultural propaganda efforts. Through these varied activities, Hanson and Schuman created numerous opportunities for their music to be performed, for tours by their school's ensembles, and particularly for the promotion of the American composers they favored.

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Hanson and Schuman not only felt able to compose as before during the 1950s, even as many of their Americanist colleagues foundered. They also watched their professional careers reach new heights and saw their influence continue to grow. Likely it helped that they had never shown any interest in leftist politics. But more than this, I will argue, Hanson and Schuman benefited from their commitment to American exceptionalism—a nationalist philosophy that was pervasive during World War II and the early Cold War. In this way, Hanson and Schuman also serve to demonstrate that musical Americanism was much more varied in its ideological underpinnings than has to date been acknowledged.

Those who subscribe to the tenets of American exceptionalism believe the United States' unique history and political structures helped create an unusually admirable nation [3]. As US power grew, so too did the notion that the United States' special destiny was to use this power to serve the global good. Balancing power and virtue did not prove easy, however: history reveals many moments when American citizens either questioned the morality of their leaders' exploitation of power or else decried excessive idealism where an aggressive assertion of power was needed. The early Cold War was unusual, therefore, as a period in which power and virtue were widely considered in alignment. World War II had proven conclusively, many felt, that American power was inevitably virtuous [4]. As a result the majority of Americans viewed almost all expressions of American power during the immediate post-war period to be morally justified, whether they involved rooting out communists at home, fighting proxy wars abroad, or promoting American ideals to foreign citizens.

Hanson and Schuman, despite their many differences, can be usefully considered in tandem because they represent two complementary iterations of American exceptionalism in music. Hanson believed that American classical music could help the United States provide an example to others because of its profound connection to the human spirit. Meanwhile Schuman's music, with its machismo style, can be read as a musical testament to American military might at mid-century. While Hanson's exceptionalism invoked the power of American virtue, therefore, Schuman's invoked the virtue of American power. Both men celebrated a globally assertive nation by attempting a globally assertive music.

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In a 1951 lecture, Hanson articulated his vision for US global hegemony in overtly exceptionalist terms:

> The United States of America stands at the present time in a unique position, not only in its own history but in the history of the world. It seems obvious that we are required by the inexorable progress of history to exercise a leadership which has never before been required of us.... We have, I believe, been inclined to assume that [this] leadership… is primarily political and economic. This is an assumption which I believe has no foundation in fact, for responsible leaderships cannot be fragmented, divisive or partial. Our example will influence the world, not merely in material matters, but in spiritual matters as well. Our leadership in political affairs and economies will, whether we wish it or not, extend itself automatically to all of those fields which are tangent to our material development, including the fields of philosophy, the humanities and the fine arts [5].

Hanson believed that the opportunities for leadership that the Cold War offered the United States presented a similar opening for American music. Indeed, he says, the global political environment "required" the United States to exercise political, economic, cultural, and spiritual leadership. In rising to this need, he proposed in this speech, the United States would provide an "example" for others to emulate.

As Hanson's reference to the "spiritual" here suggests, his exceptionalist Americanism was intimately bound up with his religious faith. Born into a family of Lutherans, he was an active member

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of his church, converting in 1946 to Presbyterianism. Hanson only rarely made reference to religion itself in his writings, but in quasi-mystical language he consistently invoked "the spirit" and the ways in which music might meet its needs. Music was itself "a kind of religion," he said, "which works in strange and wonderful ways upon the lives of those who become impregnated with its beauty" [6]. Indeed, he felt, music was poised to become "the great socializing force for which God put it here on earth" [7].

For Hanson, American music was particularly capable of precipitating the "spiritual rebirth" that he believed Americans needed. The American musician was, to Hanson, God's earthly representative: he "will minister to the American people," Hanson wrote [8]. As the years progressed, Hanson began to realize this rebirth through American music need not be restricted to the United States and indeed would be essential, as he wrote in 1949, "if the world is to be reclaimed." This rebirth seems to have meant an embrace of Christian values: "the substitution of humility for arrogance, of social consciousness for the idolatry of selfish individualism, of joy in the service of our fellow men" [9].

American music's spiritual features, Hanson argued, and the rebirth it could help precipitate, might also be used by the United States to build international alliances. As he said in a 1949 speech,

> We use an enormous amount of music, but we are not very sensitive to its values... The nations of Europe, almost without exception, regard the fine arts not only as the most important outlets of creative expression, but as the most powerful propaganda agencies in their possession... The United States, on the other hand, has officially no conception of the vital role played by the arts as agents of propaganda [10].

Americans needed to approach music in the same way that they approached global leadership, Hanson said. Just as American politicians did not "shrink" from their global responsibilities, he said, so composers needed to "fight" to become "a first rate power in things of the spirit and the humanities," not by pursuing internationalism in composition but rather by "mak[ing their] own contribution"—that is, we can infer from his other writings, by writing music that came honestly from a uniquely American experience [11].

In understanding the United States' investment in the spirit as a national value to be promoted, Hanson was closely aligned with American leaders of his time. President Truman cast the Cold War as in part a battle against the scourge of atheism, describing communism as a form of "fanaticism" that "stamps out the worship of God" [12]. This connection of morality with religious belief and immorality with godlessness quickly became one of the most important tropes of the United States' Cold War philosophy, enduring through presidencies of both political stripes [13].

Meanwhile Hanson's music from this period deliberately sought to foster a spiritual connection between people in a way that could be politically useful. He described his output as a kind of *gebrauchsmusik* that was, he said, inevitably more "healthy" and "productive" than the "splendid isolation" that many composers preferred [14]. Works like his 1957 choral work *Song of Democracy* thus combine the tropes of American musical nationalism with the promotion of mainstream American ideals of the period—in that specific case, democracy and access to education. As a result, such works were poised to serve the advancement of US agendas on the global stage.

Schuman wrote much less than Hanson about politics, yet his music is similarly engaged in exceptionalism, albeit of a different sort. Whether he intended it or not, his music has sounded to many like an artistic representation of power. I think I am the first to put it quite as baldly as this, yet both critics and scholars have found themselves drawn to masculine-associated vocabulary to describe his music. In 1964, according to Raymond Ericson of the *New York Times,* the adjective "muscular" was the word most often associated with Schuman's style [15]. Indeed, Schuman's Second Symphony was, to critics in the 1930s, "healthy and stimulating" with "muscular drive:" for Leonard Bernstein, meanwhile, it was "formidable—powerful—marvelous" [16]. Scholarly analyses describe its "robust

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athleticism," asserting that "its virility extends even to the lyricism, which is strong and nonsubjective" [17]. One fan even wrote to Schuman that the work's "brutality" was actually what made it "endearing" [18]. Much more recently, musicologist Nicholas Tawa has linked the masculine features of the wartime Third Symphony, which has no program, to American military nationalism: "It sounds like a giant flexing his muscles, like an American ready to cope no matter what. The symphony is muscular and potent… The score's projection of authority and strength may possibly be Schuman's unconscious response to the enemy forces clamoring at the American gates" [19].

The perceived virility of Schuman's musical nationalism was highly compatible with mainstream American attitudes during World War II and the first decade of the Cold War, a period in which many scholars have observed a pervasive use of masculinized nationalist rhetoric. Historian Robert Dean, for example, has diagnosed a "sexualized language of competition" in US foreign policy from World War II through the 1960s. "US hegemony over the 'free world,'" he argues, "required the cultivation of imperial masculinity [and a] manly patrician stoicism" [20]. These tropes are also evident in defenses of the period's liberal values. Arthur Schlesinger cast the political extremes on the right and left as "soft," "sentimental," and too willing to succumb to the "thrust" of political leaders. Only the center, he implied, was appropriately masculine and strong [21]. Both Republicans and Democrats adopted a similar rhetoric in order to appeal to the centrist values of the day [22].

Schuman honed his muscular nationalism during World War II, but he employed a similar style in many Cold War works. The 1955 orchestral piece *Credendum*, with its Cold War-appropriate, aggressive style, seems in particular to invite an exceptionalist reading. The US Commission to UNESCO, who requested the work for their national conference, asked that it portray the following: the hopes that accompanied the founding of the UN, the disappointments that followed, and the continued yearning for global solidarity that the organization sought to provide [23]. Schuman's music for his "article of faith" (which is the translation of his Latin title) adheres to the suggested program, but also goes beyond it. The first movement, titled "Declaration," begins with an assertive brass fanfare—surely Schuman "declaring" his hopes for the UN. Here are a few seconds of that. The movement ends on a more pensive note, juxtaposing Db major and Eb major chords, presumably to suggest the requested "disappointment." Schuman then brings in the string section for the first time for a second movement of lush, romantic writing titled "Chorale." This movement is more meditative, encouraging a collective contemplation (hence "Chorale") of the questions raised by the first movement. The closing material of "Declaration" returns at the end of the second movement to remind us more overtly of these questions. All this material is referenced again in the Finale but ultimately resolved, as all sections of the orchestra combine for a bombastic and noisily optimistic "peroration" (as Schuman called it) to depict a defiantly optimistic vision of the UN's future.

Although *Credendum* certainly explores the UN's challenges, it ultimately promotes its successes, ending not with an expression of "continued yearning," as was requested, but rather on a defiantly optimistic note. This sentiment becomes problematic when we consider that this musical celebration of the UN is articulated through a particularly American musical language. *Credendum*'s style mirrors that of Schuman's nationalist wartime works, with its juxtaposition of militaristic, "masculine" brass and percussion, US-associated rhythmic asymmetry, and more melodious, thoughtful passages. Schuman's decision to begin *Credendum* with a fanfare only makes these associations more explicit, very overtly tying the piece to both the battlefield and the United States, where brass music had long been associated with national identity. If we hear both nationalism and militarism in Schuman's musical expression of his faith in the goals of the UN, it is but a small leap to interpret the work as a musical depiction of an Americanized United Nations. With its over-the-top, triumphant, militaristic noisiness and its rhythmic vibrancy, the climax might even be read as a celebration of American power on the international stage: perhaps this is one reason why some listeners found its ending elating while others found it "ear-splitting" [24].

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Hanson and Schuman's period of philosophical and aesthetic alignment with mainstream American values—and their far-reaching influence—did not last forever. While their works were widely performed during the 1950s, their musical exceptionalism, articulated through spirituality-inspired musical moralizing and bombastic nationalist tropes, were not so well received amidst the widespread rejection of both exceptionalism and the wars it had helped justify during the sixties and seventies. Schuman's music continued to invite masculinized adjectives from critics, but increasingly such characteristics were considered neither attractive nor positive. At the same time, Hanson's attempts to build spiritual connections with nationalistic music felt more and more dated.

Yet despite their fall from prominence and the waning of their influence, Hanson and Schuman had both left an indelible mark on American music history. Musically, their output bears witness to mainstream Cold War-era exceptionalist values. And thanks at least in part to their commitment to these values, these two composers were granted opportunities to promote the exceptionalism of American music—a category that for them meant the conservative, tonal, concert music tradition—through a whole host of domestic and international channels.

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