

Beth E. Levy. *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West*

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Reviewed by Jessica Black

Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West is a welcome addition to the literature on the relatively young history of American music. While previous studies have tended to focus on the biography of a single composer, Levy brings together a number of key figures in American music from the early twentieth century and examines the similarities and differences in their responses to cultural ideas of the American West, Manifest Destiny and the frontier.¹ Levy's work demonstrates the power of ideology about the American West

¹ Manifest Destiny is a nineteenth century belief that Americans were destined to expand westward across the continent; see David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Manifest Destiny* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003).

on composers, and how they in turn contributed to its mythology. *Frontier Figures* effectively shows how ideas of the American West pervaded composers' consciousness and, subsequently, how their varying notions of rural America found their way into concert halls, radio, film and popular culture.

The core of *Frontier Figures* is drawn from Levy's 2002 PhD dissertation of the same name,² but, luckily for the reader, *Frontier Figures* does not feel like a PhD thesis awkwardly adapted into a book. Instead, Levy, now Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, Davis, has expanded the scope of her original research and produced not only an engaging book for musicologists, but also one that appeals to scholars of American culture, film, dance and literature.

In the introduction, Levy purports to lead the reader on a voyage of discovery, and chooses as her framework American art music as practised by a select group of composers working between 1900 and 1950. This prescribed journey primarily examines the works and ideologies of Arthur Farwell, Charles Wakefield Cadman, Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris and Aaron Copland. Levy argues that these composers contributed 'to the way the West was imagined, responding to its landscapes and inhabitants as Americans always have, by idolizing, exaggerating, and stereotyping. In short, they made myths' (p. 14). *Frontier Figures* does not provide broad biographical background on each composer; instead, Levy focuses on how each composer responded to the American West and examines the specific works that embody these ideas.

Levy plots a loosely chronological journey, with chapters dedicated to each composer and their attempts to capture in their music not only American Indians, cowboys and pioneers in their music, but also the American landscape of prairies and plains. The opening chapters are dedicated to Farwell and Cadman, both composers who engaged with Native American music in their works in the early twentieth century. Levy demonstrates the marked difference in each composer's use of Indian tunes, contrasting Farwell's idealism with Cadman's populism and commercial impulse. For Levy, 'If Farwell offered up a visionary West—philosophical and introverted to the point of idiosyncrasy—Cadman represents an extroverted West, pragmatic in its aims and material in its rewards' (p. 89). The comparisons and contrasts drawn across the selection of composers examined is one of the strengths of *Frontier Figures*. For instance, Levy sees a relationship between Farwell's respect for the use of Indian music and Harris's later attitudes to cowboy songs. In contrast, Copland and Cadman used folk material much more freely and with less distinction between such music and their own compositions. While the book is divided into five parts, each dedicated to different composers and themes, these links between ideas mean that the chapters of *Frontier Figures* do not feel disconnected or disjointed.

As well as encounters with Indians, Levy examines the ideas of the American West encapsulated in the landscape and the experience of the pioneer. The connection between man and nature is a central theme, as composers confront the vast spaces of the American West and challenge notions of the idyllic prairie in their music. Leo Sowerby and Lukas Foss both created works inspired by Carl Sandburg's poem, 'The Prairie,' and Levy explores the differences in each composer's approach to the pastoral. In addition, Virgil Thomson's score

² Beth Ellen Levy, 'Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West, 1895–1945,' PhD thesis, University of California, 2002.

for the 1935 government documentary *The Plow that Broke the Plains* is examined in detail. The absence of professional actors and dialogue sees the land emerge as the protagonist of the film, and Thomson's music is enlisted to convey the impact of the drought on those living on the plains.

One of the strengths of *Frontier Figures* is not simply the examination of the music that communicated ideals of the American West, but the elucidation of how the composers positioned themselves personally in response to the frontier. Thomson, for example, evoked impressions of rural America primarily through his use of Protestant hymn tunes and, in contrast to a 'Coplandesque' aesthetic, he painted his link to hymn tunes as a natural one: 'When Aaron [Copland] reaches down, he doesn't get cowboy tunes, he gets Jewish chants. When I reach down, I get southern hymns or all those darn-fool ditties we used to sing' (p. 179). Similarly, Levy's chapter on Harris depicts a composer who from very early in his career was conceived as uniquely American and on whom the hopes of the musical establishment rested. The myth of Harris as the 'White Hope' of America is fully detailed, from his embodiment of the masculinity of the cowboy tunes he used, to what was considered the pinnacle of his career, the Third Symphony (1938). But Levy does not shy away from also examining Harris's fall from grace, and looking especially at how the 'reinterpretation' of cowboy characteristics and national attitudes after World War II contributed to the decline in his popularity.

The final and largest part of the book is dedicated to Copland, the composer most notably associated with American music. While Thomson was sceptical about Copland's personal links to the West, Copland nevertheless managed to shed his cosmopolitan, East-coast image to become one of the most celebrated composers associated with America and the West. Levy examines Copland's interest in popular music and folk song, particularly in the music of both his cowboy ballets, *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942).³ While Copland used cowboy tunes in both works, he considered *Rodeo* a more 'frothy' ballet built on stereotypes, in contrast to *Billy*, which was a dramatic reinterpretation of the nostalgic Western hero. In addition, Levy examines the scores for Copland's Western films, *Of Mice and Men* (1939) and *The Red Pony* (1949), which she argues represent Copland's 'more direct engagement with western character types, gender roles, and the idea of Western expansion' (p. 351).

Frontier Figures provides a significant number of musical examples and analyses that, despite the scholarly nature of the book, would not be impossible for readers with only a basic understanding of music notation to understand. Levy has drawn on archival sources for each of the composers she has examined, and the list of secondary sources is impressive. Her work is aimed at the knowledgeable reader, with the scope limited to only the works of each composer that deal with the American West, rather than their broader musical output and career. While this at times seems restrictive, the depth and detail provided on each composer and their works is rewarding. Even at over 400 pages, *Frontier Figures* is not laden with descriptive language. Instead it proves to be an absorbing and insightful excursion into America's historical and musical frontier. Just as the composers discussed in the book covered new ground as they looked West, so too does *Frontier Figures* venture into new territory as it blends seamlessly the mythology, music and culture of the American West.

³ While the pioneers and hymn tunes of *Appalachian Spring* (1944) are discussed briefly, that ballet receives significantly less attention than the earlier cowboy ballets.