

## FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

As any American schoolchild knows, Abraham Lincoln rose from his humble birth in a log cabin to lead the country through its violent Civil War and proclaim the emancipation of slaves. Most of us are less familiar, though, with America's musical heritage. By exploring the overlapping terrain of these two seemingly unrelated fields, Lucas Lavoie's final essay for WR 100 "Lincoln and His Legacy" comments simultaneously on Lincoln, America's twentieth-century musical heritage, and what it means to be an American. In an exemplary synthesis of different disciplines—history, music, biography, political rhetoric—Lucas shows us how different genres can speak to one another and, if we listen carefully, to us, too.

Moving beyond the facts of Lincoln's remarkable life and times—subjects of the earlier writing in the course—this assignment asks students to trace the ways that later generations have used Lincoln's legacy. Lucas's discoveries in Mugar Library of several musical scores from the twentieth century initiated a deeper examination of the historical issues that prompted these compositions and their relevance to Lincoln's speeches and writings. By analyzing and comparing works of Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, and Vincent Persichetti, Lucas's essay argues that these composers at critical moments in history used Lincoln in musical forms to demonstrate a shared ideal of American democracy.

One important virtue to recognize in this essay is its deft command of the language for analyzing music. Even for those who may not be music scholars, Lucas's clear explanations of musical examples allow readers to follow his points of comparison. Finally, this writing demonstrates that a student's passion in one field can certainly be applied to another—as long as the student is willing to take a risk and to use their imagination.

David Shawn

WR 100: Lincoln & His Legacy

## FROM THE WRITER

Ever since I made the decision to pursue a career in music, I have done everything I can to immerse myself in every aspect of it, from performance to research. So, when I hit a dead-end with my initial plans to write an essay on the similarities between Presidents Obama and Lincoln, I turned to what I knew best. I went to Mugar at 10 p.m. on a Sunday night and pulled every music score I could find that had something to do with Abraham Lincoln. The variety of viewpoints, interpretations, and formats that these pieces held was an inspiring look into how Abraham Lincoln's legacy was interpreted musically throughout the twentieth century.

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## A HARMONIC HISTORY

The popular image of a composer is that of a person who, above all else, reaches for a pure musical aesthetic. However, that is at odds with what composers throughout history have experienced. As times have grown tumultuous, composers have often felt the need to express the unrest around them through their music, and American composers are no different. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as America defined itself to the world, its composers increasingly looked to their pasts in order to express what they wished for the future. Three leading composers—Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, and Vincent Persichetti—all saw Abraham Lincoln as the perfect vehicle through which they could express their goals. Using his rhetoric and legacy of freedom, democracy, and perseverance, these composers combined his ideas with their own musical techniques in order to construct a powerful political message, while also defining what it means to be an American.

Charles Ives is considered one of the first truly American composers. Growing up in New England, he retained close ties with abolitionist values of freedom and equality, passed down by his parents and grandparents, as well as transcendentalist values of faith in the inherent goodness of all people. As he grew, both as a person and a composer, Ives increasingly found himself drawn to the progressivism that blossomed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He even became engaged in direct political action, drafting proposals for national referendums and advocating for a direct democracy. In 1912, at the height of these political ambitions, he wrote three pieces to attempt to illustrate what he saw as key tenets of a progressive democratic future, one of them titled *Lincoln, the Great Commoner*.

*Lincoln, the Great Commoner* is a setting of a poem by Edwin Markham titled “Lincoln, Man of the People.” The poem is a dramatization of Lincoln’s life, setting him up as a humble figure with a prophetic destiny. Ives, however, focuses on the last two stanzas of the poem, which detail Lincoln’s dedication, conscience, and relationship to the people, all of which Ives greatly admired and felt were essential to a functional democracy. In an attempt to tie these aspects of Lincoln’s life to the broader idea of what it means to be an American, Ives uses liberal quotations of numerous patriotic folk songs. *Battle Hymn of the Republic* plays a central thematic role, showing up only twice: as the piece begins and as the vocalist sings of Lincoln’s death. Both *My Country, ‘Tis of Thee* and *Hail, Columbia!* also appear numerous times, as do snippets of other pieces such as *The Star Spangled Banner* and *Columbia, Gem of the Ocean*, which are often altered to the point where they are almost difficult to hear. None of these quotations are meant to convey their specific meanings to the piece; rather, they are meant to give the entire setting a general patriotic air. Doing so ties this story of Lincoln to a broader American ideal, which is essential in order to accomplish Ives’ message.

One of the most essential parts to conveying a message through music is constructing a convincing story, and Ives accomplishes this by employing many compositional techniques. From the beginning, he avoids establishing any specific key center, leaving the listener to concentrate on the words or the musical quotations he uses instead of the chordal development. The tonality of the piece does not appear until the vocalist sings “The conscience testing every stroke, to make his deed

the measure of the man...” This musical feeling of finally reaching stability makes this idea of Lincoln’s conscience a notable moment in the music. As Ives continues and begins to approach the musical climax, the rhythmic patterns he employs in the beginning slow down as the chords he uses become heavier and heavier, pulling the listener into the piece. Finally, as he approaches the line “...wrenching rafters from their ancient hold,” the accompaniment moves into tonal clusters, which Ives marks “Play with fists.”

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the upper staff, with lyrics: "earthquake shook the house, wrench-ing raf-ters from their an-cient hold, he". The piano accompaniment is in the lower staves, featuring complex harmonic structures and dynamic markings such as *fff* and *sf*. A note below the piano part reads "\* Play with fists." The score includes various musical notations like notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 1: Charles Ives, *Lincoln, the Great Commoner*, Peer International Corporation, 1952, p. 23.

These themes would continue to find expressive outlets as the American symphonic soundscape found one of its leading voices in Aaron Copland. Copland had been composing since fifteen, and his location within Brooklyn allowed him close connections with all the major musical stars of the time. At first, his style was defined by many earlier American composers, including Ives. However, he later studied under Nadia Boulanger in Paris, perhaps the most influential music teacher of all time. She encouraged his explorations into new harmonic techniques being explored in Europe, while also pushing him to embrace his American upbringing instead of focusing on the European classical tradition. After returning to America, both of these influences can be seen. Just as Ives did, he trafficked heavily in American folk songs, complex rhythms, and at times unusual dissonance. However, he also developed his own signature techniques in accordance with Boulanger’s teachings, such as his sparse orchestration and rhythmic syncopations. This avant-garde (and at the time quite outrageous) technique works to establish the “earthquake” of the Civil War as both the most chaotic part of the poem but also the climax of Lincoln’s life. From here, Ives returns to slow chordal development, eventually arriving at a final chord that spans four octaves. A final technique employed, a fortississimo downbeat paired with a pianissimo second beat which fades into nothingness, is a fitting ending, given Lincoln’s violent yet fateful demise. All of these techniques work towards heightening the drama of Lincoln’s life as well as drawing the listener into the text. In doing so, Ives hopes to convey that Lincoln is a politician to be looked up to, and his traits of perseverance, good conscience, and public relationship should be that which all Americans work to make commonplace.

A week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent entrance of America into World War II, New York Philharmonic conductor André Kostelanetz sent a commission to Copland for a “musical portrait gallery of great Americans,” in Copland’s case specifically a great

American statesman. In his memoir, Copland states that “Lincoln seemed inevitable” (143). However, his colleague and fellow commissioner Virgil Thomson warned “no composer could hope to match in musical terms the stature of so eminent a figure as Abraham Lincoln” (143). Copland also had his own doubts about the commission, admitting that, “I had no great love for musical portraiture, and I was skeptical about expressing patriotism in music—it is difficult to achieve without becoming maudlin or bombastic, or both” (144). In order to avoid all of these pitfalls, Copland opted not to write in a purely musical language, instead choosing to utilize a narrator to read Lincoln’s own words during the piece. He settled on passages from the seventh Lincoln-Douglas debate, Lincoln’s second annual message to Congress, the closing passage of the Gettysburg Address, and a short writing commonly referred to as *Definition of Democracy*, which was in the possession of Mrs. Lincoln. In selecting these passages, Copland remarked that, “I avoided the temptation to quote only well-known passages, permitting myself the luxury of only one from a world-famous speech.” (144). These strategies ensure that Lincoln’s words remain the focal point of the piece, holding their meaning up as more important than the music. Copland, freed from these constraints, is free to write in a more conventional style, dropping overt patriotic techniques in favor of those that will serve to emphasize Lincoln’s words.

The piece opens in signature Copland style, with a rolling theme based on *Springfield Mountain* moving throughout the orchestra, slowly developing over ambient chords. After reaching its height, the section winds down into solo trumpet before abruptly entering the second section, a flying allegro. Here, Copland bases his next theme on *Camptown Races*. In Copland’s mind, it was, “an attempt to sketch in the background of the colorful times in which Lincoln lived.” Copland is working firmly within Ives’ tradition, utilizing folk songs to build a story through his music and thus draw the listener in. As this second theme is fully realized and the orchestra comes to a plodding stop, the narrator enters and the third section begins. In order for the narration to be heard, Copland scores sparsely throughout; often times only a single instrument or section is playing while the narrator speaks.

The image shows a musical score for the narrator's part in Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*. The text is written in a serif font and is placed above the musical staff. The text is: "He said: 'As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no de-moc-racy.'" The text is divided into five phrases, each with a downward arrow pointing to a specific musical note. The musical notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 4/4 time signature. The score is divided into three sections: "Violins and Flutes" (mf), "High Strings and Horns", and "Full Orchestra" (ff). The "Full Orchestra" section is marked with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Fig. 2: Aaron Copland, *Lincoln Portrait*, Boosey and Hawkes, 1942, p. 38–39.

Using Lincoln’s words, Copland is able to effect a two-way exchange between his music and the American political canon. Every excerpt that Copland chooses has one ideal in common: democracy. In his annual message to Congress, Lincoln is asking that those gathered there “think anew and act anew” (Lincoln 364) and that they work together in ending the Civil War. In his argument from the seventh Lincoln-Douglas debate, he is calling slavery the “same tyrannical principle” (193) as the monarchical rule that earlier Americans rejected. In the Gettysburg Address he is explicitly calling for a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (405). These excerpts were essential to Copland’s goal: to inspire his fellow citizens for the upcoming fight against totalitarianism, justified through their shared goal of democracy. When the narrator and

orchestra are performing simultaneously, Copland is always careful to keep dynamics low and always relegates themes to solo instruments. In this way, he is conscious that the narrator be heard over the orchestra, allowing his message to be epitomized through Lincoln's words. This multi-step plan of first drawing the audience in through his music and then giving them Lincoln's message is crucial to keeping Lincoln as the focal point of the piece, while also allowing Copland to compose a work that musically connects to his audience.

Around the same time that Copland was advancing this new idea of an "American sound," teacher and composer Vincent Persichetti was starting to make his mark on the American music scene. He grew up in Philadelphia among the musicians of his era, much in the same way that Copland had. However, unlike Copland, he did not have a European compositional training. As such, he was heavily influenced only by the popular composers of his youth such as Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, and especially Copland. Following their techniques, his music is often characterized by sharp melodic lines, a lack of tonality, and sparse orchestration, much in the same vein as Copland.

Persichetti may have been relegated to remain a cult favorite among band and choral directors were it not for a piece he was commissioned to write in December of 1972, titled *A Lincoln Address*. The Philadelphia Orchestra had been commissioned to play for the second inauguration of Richard Nixon, and their conductor Eugene Ormandy had recommended they program a work by Persichetti. It was requested that he set Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address to music, to be read by the actor Charlton Heston. At the time, there was some incredulity; in his bio-bibliography, it is reported that "despite insinuations to the contrary, Persichetti insisted that the choice of texts was not his" (Patterson 17). Looking back at it, we now understand why some were worried: Nixon's second inauguration would mark the eighth year of American involvement in the broadly unpopular Vietnam War; Lincoln's second inaugural is a general prayer that "this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away" (Lincoln 450). However, despite his doubts, Persichetti finished the work in only two weeks, utilizing themes that he had been in the process of developing.

Musically, the piece is rather unremarkable, tending to stay within established traditions. The piece is similar to many of Persichetti's other works in more than just its themes, playing off of the shifting tonalities and uneasy atmosphere that he loves. It also utilizes many of Copland's techniques, such as selective ensemble orchestration and solos during the narration. However, what is most notable about this piece is how Persichetti chooses the lines for the narration. Working within Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Persichetti carefully edits it down to its most essential parts, removing elaborations on slavery and the war in order to focus on Lincoln's message of peace after a brutal war. Lincoln's original words are not altered in any way, rearranged, or rephrased. However, Persichetti did add one word to the speech, at the very end. As the orchestra dies into silence, the narrator repeats Lincoln's final word: "Peace."

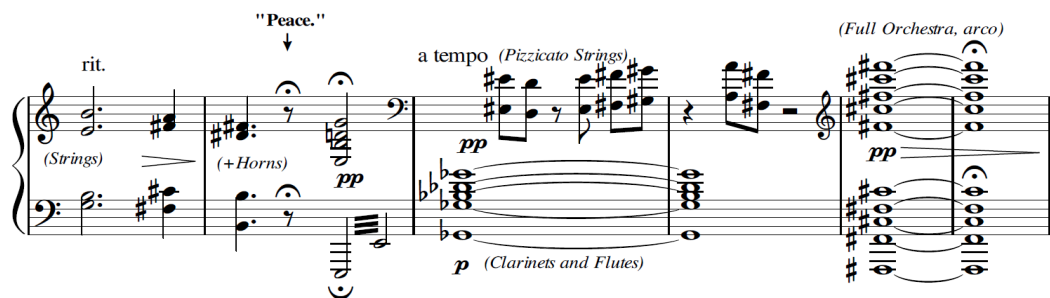


Fig. 3: Vincent Persichetti, *A Lincoln Address*, Elkan-Vogel, Inc., 1973, p. 35.

The scandal resulting from Persichetti's selective editing is perhaps the only reason this piece gained popularity. Initially after submitting the work, Persichetti told the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* the following:

I started getting a lot of phone calls from inaugural committee members, asking me to delete certain lines [sic]. Although I'm completely against what's going on in Vietnam, I agreed to the deletions. ... I agreed to cut out a line that goes something like, 'insurgent agents in the city seeking to destroy it without war.' These aides were very sensitive to lines like these. (17)

However, after receiving more requests for deletions, Persichetti said no. In his bio-bibliography, Persichetti tells author Donald Patterson that his "conscience rebelled," and he refused to cut anything further (17). Then, just ten days before the piece was to be performed, he received word that it had been removed from the program. The concert ended up proceeding with a hastily arranged work called *Heritage of Freedom*, a setting of the Declaration of Independence, replacing Persichetti's work. The committee also ended up concluding the concert with Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, a work notable for its use of a military cannon as a percussion instrument. Needless to say, a great many people were outraged. Persichetti was interviewed and ended up on the front page of newspapers across the country, including the *New York Times*. Conductors of orchestras across the nation were clamoring to perform *A Lincoln Address*.

Upon first inspection, one might think that comparing these composers is ill advised; their musical techniques seem to range widely and their political ambitions are equally varied. However, when looking at the larger context, one sees a different picture. These composers all rest firmly within an American symphonic tradition, running from Ives all the way to the modern day. Ives' use of folk songs as well as his story-telling ability was a major factor in Copland's upbringing within the music scene. Similarly, Copland's orchestration techniques and harmonic language would go on to become the backbone of the "American sound" that Persichetti was keenly tuned into. Though these pieces might sound different on the surface, the musical language used within them is very much part of a long heritage, one which continues to this day. Furthermore, though on the surface they seem disconnected, their political goals all share a common thread. The progressive movement that Ives wrote his pieces for would remake American democracy, forging a strong national sense of pride in our form of government. This pride would in turn serve as the justification for entering WWII, in opposition to the totalitarianism that threatened all that America held dear. Copland here is careful to focus on this ideal, rather than giving in to blind patriotism. These progressive tendencies would finally manifest themselves in the anti-war movement, this time opposing the government as it used the threat of totalitarianism to wage an unjust war upon Vietnam.

Besides their political goals, analyzing these three examples gives one an idea of the importance that Lincoln holds within American culture. Lincoln is consistently idealized as one of America's greatest figures, a man who guided the country through one of its most despairing moments into a brighter future. By using Lincoln as a catalyst for their works, these three composers are furthering those ideas, and building upon their own. By integrating him into their works, they are arguing that Lincoln's words are as important in their present as they were in Lincoln's day, whether they be in service of the fight for progressivism, the fight for democracy, or the struggle to end war. Their compositions add to and progress that image, placing Lincoln within a context of folk tunes, soaring melodies, and despairing chords. This process is a means by which these composers have built a musical legacy for generations, enshrined in both our musical past and our fight for a better future.



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