

Music: The Quintessential American Sound

By Tim Smith



Singer Norah Jones and her album "Come Away With Me" captured eight Grammy Awards in 2003.
(Robert Mora, © 2002 Getty Images)

The early years of the 21st century have yet to provide a clear-cut sense of where music in America is heading, but through the mixed signals, it's possible to draw some promising conclusions.

Despite premature reports of its demise, the classical genre is still very much alive and kicking. American composers continue to create rewarding experiences for performers and listeners alike; most orchestras sound better than ever; most opera companies are enjoying increasingly sizable audiences, with particularly strong growth in the desirable 18- to-24-year-old category. The pop music field -- from the cutting-edge to the mainstream to the retro -- is still spreading its stylistic influences around a world that has never lost its appetite for the latest American sounds and stars.

The Advent of Cyber Technology

Technological advances continue to influence the whole spectrum of America's music in mostly positive ways. Composer Tod Machover has pioneered computer-generated "hyperinstruments" that electronically augment the properties of conventional instruments and expand a performer's options of controlling pitch, tempo, and all the other elements of music-making. Listeners are downloading not just the latest hit recordings, but also live classical concerts and opera performances via the Internet. Music organizations have been quick to add Web sites, giving regular and prospective patrons new opportunities to learn about works being performed and even to take music courses, not just buy tickets.

That component of music education keeps getting broader in scope. The San Francisco Symphony's interactive Web site for children, for example, offers highly imaginative, user-friendly access to the basics of music education. And a new Boston Symphony Orchestra Web site allows for previously unheard of opportunities to dig inside the creative process; Internet users can manipulate the orchestration and even the notes of familiar classical pieces.

The New World Symphony, the Florida-based training orchestra for music school

graduates, is at the forefront of developing still more applications of the cyber technology. Thanks to Internet2, the latest generation of the Internet, a conducting class at Baltimore's Peabody Institute can now observe a live rehearsal of the New World Symphony in Miami Beach and can interact with its music director, Michael Tilson Thomas. More uses for this technology are being planned. The Cleveland Institute of Music will soon be connected to the orchestra by Internet2, providing on-line private music lessons and coaching between the two locales, and several more music schools may soon join in this instant, virtual-reality learning across any number of miles. To stay on top of every fresh wave of technological advances, the New World Symphony is building its own state-of-the-art facility, designed by Frank Gehry. A brave New World indeed.

It is easy, however, to find bad news attributed to technology. Thanks to all the downloading of music from the Internet, record sales are declining sharply. The recording industry, so pivotal in the dissemination of music, is hurting as never before, certainly a worrying trend for the new century. It's even worse on the classical side, with fewer and fewer record labels willing or able to devote resources to classical artists and repertoire. Many organizations are struggling with, and sometimes sinking under, debts, especially since the September 11 terrorist attacks and the jittery U.S. economy; crucial endowment funds, which produce interest income for orchestras and opera companies, have been hit particularly hard by a decline in the market value of investments. Many public school systems continue to ignore music education, a failure that spells trouble for future audience development. The decline in the number and quality of classical music radio stations across the country causes further damage.

Still, there certainly are encouraging aspects of American musical life, which shows considerable resiliency in the face of so many obstacles. The San Francisco Symphony, for example, has responded to the loss of its former recording opportunities with a major label by producing its own recordings with the highest technical and artistic values; one of them won a 2003 Grammy Award for best orchestral performance. To counter the dearth of music education in the schools, a grassroots advocacy initiative called "Support Music" was launched in March 2003 by a coalition involving the nearly century-old, 90,000-member National Association for Music Education and the International Music Products Association (representing 8,000 companies). With significant congressional supporters, Internet resources, and loads of impressive statistics proving how students with music training or appreciation demonstrate higher scores in verbal and, especially, math tests, the initiative provides parents and teachers with the tools and resources to make a case for strengthening music education in every community. And stepping into the picture just as music groups and philanthropic foundations are finding it harder to afford the commissioning of new works, the distinguished Meet the Composer organization has announced the Magnum Opus project, a catalyst for individual patrons; a San Francisco venture capitalist and amateur violinist had stepped up to the plate to start this initiative with \$375,000 worth of commissions that will soon have three orchestras playing fresh scores by three composers.

Showcasing Classical Artists

For even more tangible proof of how Americans are bolstering the musical arts, consider the coming unveiling of new performance venues in steady succession. The \$274 million Walt Disney Concert Hall, with its unmistakable curves and swirls designed by Frank Gehry, will give the Los Angeles Philharmonic a long-desired new home in the fall of 2003. The \$89 million Strathmore Hall Music Center, with a graceful design by William Rawn Associates, is set to give a substantial boost to cultural activity in the northern suburbs of Washington, D.C., and become a home-away-from-home for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in 2004. The \$370 million Performing Arts Center of Greater Miami, a multiple-theater complex with a vibrant design by Cesar Pelli, will provide a concert hall for the resident Florida Philharmonic and New World Symphony, as well as many visiting artists, and a badly need new opera house for Florida Grand Opera, in 2005. The following year, the Nashville Symphony will take up residence in the \$120 million Schermerhorn Symphony Hall, designed by David M. Schwartz in neoclassical style and boasting the unusual feature of natural light.

Each time the money and enthusiasm can be raised to build a new performing arts center, the foundation of music in America is greatly strengthened. And there certainly is much for these centers -- and all the existing theaters, of course -- to showcase. American classical artists have long been known for remarkable virtuosity and expressive potency; the level is only getting higher. Just look around at podiums. Never before have so many unusually gifted American conductors held so many of the country's most prominent orchestral posts: Michael Tilson Thomas, who has made the San Francisco Symphony a beacon for adventuresome programming; Leonard Slatkin, who has done the same in his tenure with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C.; Robert Spano, who is energizing the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Lorin Maazel, who is putting his distinctive stamp on the New York Philharmonic; and James Levine, whose inquisitive mind will guide the Boston Symphony Orchestra, starting in 2004. Other exceptionally gifted American conductors -- like Marin Alsop, David Robertson, James Conlon, and Kent Nagano -- reinforce the country's musical assets.

The young generation of performers does that, too. Consider such talents as violinist Hilary Hahn and pianist Lang Lang, who light up stages not just with exceptional techniques but deeply considered interpretations. From the Emerson Quartet to the Ying Quartet to the ever-provocative Kronos Quartet, American chamber music ensembles remain on a high plane as well. And American vocalists are contributing to what will almost certainly be viewed many years hence as another golden age of singing -- just for a start, sample the radiant sopranos of Renée Fleming, Deborah Voigt, and Dawn Upshaw; the velvety mezzo of Denyce Graves; the sumptuous baritone of Mark Delavan; and the gleaming, downright revolutionary countertenor of David Daniels.

Profile: Composer Elliot Goldenthal



Elliot Goldenthal
(Julian Broad)

Most American composers of serious music have for decades adhered to a tradition of not crossing borders -- not creating both classical compositions and the accompanying music for film, ballet, and theater performances. George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Bernard Herrmann, John Corigliano, and Philip Glass are among the few exceptions -- composers whose work has spanned the performing arts.

Add to that list Elliot Goldenthal, who at 48 has been a major force not only in composing symphonic pieces for the concert hall, but also as a creator of movie scores. Working on music for both independent films and star-fueled, big-budget studio productions, Goldenthal brings the same individualistic style to these compositions as he did to his 1997 ballet based on Shakespeare's *Othello* and his formidable *Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio*, a 1996 work for chorus, orchestra, and solo cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Goldenthal, who studied under Copland and Corigliano, is as eclectic a composer as can be found on the scene today. His music has saluted the 70th birthday of Leonard Bernstein (*Shadow Play Scherzo*) and the 75th anniversary of a legendary New York City baseball field (*Pastime Variations*).

Goldenthal's work in films covers an equally wide range. For his score for *Michael Collins*, a study of the Irish revolutionary, Goldenthal used Irish pipes and penny whistles, as well as lush orchestral sounds, to create a romantic aura. In *A Time To Kill*, based on a novel by John Grisham, the composer brought a traditional African-American spiritual into confrontation with ominous string harmonies to depict, musically, a decades-old racist incident in the U.S. South.

The score for *Titus*, one of Goldenthal's many collaborations with stage and film director Julie Taymor, opens melodramatically, then shifts to saxophone solos, jazz themes, and other nontraditional combinations before culminating in an elegiac finale. As one critic noted, the score exploited "the differences between symphonic, swing, Tibetan, electronic, and surf music" in the manner that the movie itself offered diverse images of Rome.

Goldenthal's latest composition is the warm, intimate score he created for *Frida*, Taymor's 2002 project on the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. In keeping with the passion and romanticism of the movie's subject, the music, created for a small ensemble (guitar, accordion, marimba, and piano), incorporates traditional Mexican folk music and is capped by a stirring waltz, played once on guitar and again on piano.

Goldenthal has been honored with numerous cultural tributes for his contributions to the concert hall, the ballet stage, the theater, and film. Most recently, his work on *Frida* was recognized with an Academy Award for the best movie score of 2002.

Rock

The best-known American singers, of course, are the ones singing to a different beat -- the rock beat that revolutionized music in the early 1950s and shows no sign of slowing down, let alone fading out. There isn't a corner of the globe that hasn't felt the drive of this quintessentially American contribution to the musical art form. Ethnic sounds from various cultures -- generalized by the term "world music" -- have become increasingly assertive in the international marketplace over the years, but the most influential kinds of popular music still emanate, as they have since the age of ragtime more than a century ago, from the United States.

Two genres, in particular, have exerted an extraordinary hold for the past two decades or so -- rap and its close cousin, hip-hop. Born of inner-city poverty and mixed with braggadocio and a host of anti-establishment sentiments, rap replaces sung melodies with rhythmically punchy, mostly rhymed recitation set to an insistent beat. Hip-hop uses many of the same features, but it is a more dance-driven, rather than message-driven, phenomenon. Both styles have African-American roots, but have been quickly embraced by white performers and can be encountered today just about everywhere and in just about any circumstance. Rappers pop up in TV commercials and movies; rappers even articulate the feelings of contemporary Christian bands.

Lately, hip-hop seems to be taking new twists and turns; one result is lyrics with less posing and more down-to-earth attitudes. Even Eminem, the bad boy of this field who insulted just about everyone in his early days, has softened his anger somewhat and introduced a wicked sense of humor. The unmistakable sound of his music, with its funky rhythm tracks molded by Dr. Dre, exemplifies the fresh drive behind the hip-hop movement now. Such acts as The Roots and Outkast are among those also contributing to the new vibrancy of this crowd-pleasing sound.

The hard-charging, super-amplified style known as heavy metal is also very much a lasting force, several decades after first exploding on the scene. Some subtle changes can be found here, too, today. A telling case in point is Audioslave, a groundbreaking band formed from the members of two of the last century's biggest acts -- Rage Against the Machine, the most overtly political rant-rock band of the late 1990s, and Soundgarden, a leading Seattle-based proponent of "grunge" (the name given to an aggressive musical style that expresses the anger of disaffected youth). With Audioslave, the raging has largely given away to pure rock, full of inventive instrumental flourishes that will likely energize a new generation of fans. Political statements can still be found in rock, of course, as they have almost from the beginning, and some of the messages now within earshot are being made with fresh creativity, as evidenced by a "prog" (progressive rock) band called System of a Down. The musicians combine left-leaning lyrics, strong melodic hooks, screams, rapid-fire guitar work, and even a touch of rhythms from Eastern music.

Pop

A look around the pop scene will turn up the lingering presence of "techno" music in nightclubs (punchy, dance-to sounds generated by disc jockeys spinning turntables) and new manifestations of "garage bands" (The Vines and The Strokes are among today's examples of this traditionally raw, unfocused music-making). Mainstream pop is providing its typical lion's share of entertainment, with particular help these days from airwaves-dominating female vocalists, such as Sheryl Crow (shades of the "California rock" style of the old band The Eagles) and Lucinda Williams (a potent fusion of blues, country, and rock). One thing pop fans are encountering less of is the phenomenon of "boy bands," ensembles of young males crooning innocuous tunes with carefully synchronized harmonies and fancy footwork. These acts seemed unstoppable in the 1990s, but appear to be fading fast.

As evidenced by an abundance of radio stations playing "the greatest hits of the '80s, '90s, and today," older styles of pop continue to be a strong part of the American musical fabric. Sounds from even earlier in rock history are never far away; the group Sugar Ray incorporates so many elements from vintage rock styles that the result is at once nostalgic and refreshing. Newcomer Norah Jones, who swept the 2003 Grammy Awards, is an intimate songstress who provides a direct link to the likes of Phoebe Snow and others from decades ago, proving the longevity of the softer rock beat and evocative, communicative lyrics. And John Mayer has demonstrated the durability of one of American pop's greatest assets of the 1960s and 1970s -- the sensitive singer-songwriter. Still another demonstration of the endurance and versatility of American pop music can be found in the seemingly unlikely, but thoroughly winning, collaboration of veteran song stylist Tony Bennett and pop/country star k.d. lang.

Broadway and Hollywood

Also demonstrating the holding power of the old days is the enormous popularity of the Broadway musical *Hairspray*, with its ear-catching songs recreating the sound and flavor of the 1960s' American scene. Musical theater remains one of

America's most distinctive cultural assets. Such hits as *Rent*, *The Producers*, and *Chicago* (which also scored big in a movie version that won an Academy Award as the best motion picture of 2002) continue the venerable tradition of audience-pleasing Broadway shows. And Stephen Sondheim, the groundbreaking composer of masterworks like *Company* and *A Little Night Music*, remains a benchmark of creativity; his latest musical, *Bounce*, about two colorful sibling entrepreneurs from early 20th century America, is scheduled to debut this year (after many revisions).

In addition to Broadway, American composers continue to dominate Hollywood. The artfully crafted, atmospheric, brilliantly orchestrated scores of such veterans as John Williams and Elmer Bernstein, along with the work of gifted young composers, help to enliven and enrich one blockbuster after another. America's oldest contribution to music -- jazz -- enjoys a smaller niche of public interest today than it once did but has hardly lost its compelling energy. You need only hear the sophisticated phrasing of singer Diana Krall, or the hot vocals, piano playing, and arranging of Peter Cincotti, or the cool sax riffs of Wayne Shorter to know that the great legacy of jazz has fresh life.

Tonal vs. Atonal

The American pop scene routinely experiences a sensation every few years, something strikingly novel and inventive. As of this writing, listeners are still waiting for the next one. It's much the same in the classical sphere, which has not been vigorously shaken up since minimalism began to make serious inroads in the early 1970s. Back then, many a pundit announced that the minimalist fad wouldn't last. Philip Glass, the composer who most unsettled conservative ears with his few, basic chords and motor rhythms, was supposed to disappear the fastest, yet he's still going strong, producing music today (as in the acclaimed film *The Hours*) that sounds very much like what he has been doing all along.

There are detectable differences, however, in what Glass and the other major minimalists, John Adams and Steve Reich, are doing. They have all gradually refined their techniques, expanded their horizons. Minimalism has evolved into a style with such a wide melodic and harmonic range and capable of such expressive intensity (Adams's affecting, Pulitzer Prize-winning memorial to the victims of September 11, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, is a recent case in point) that it can be heard now as an adjunct to the most prevalent style in contemporary classical music -- neo-romanticism.



Saxophonist Wayne Shorter performs during the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland in July 2002. (AP/Wide World Photos)

The severe atonality and complex abstraction once deemed sacred in academic circles still has its adherents, but it will not likely enjoy again the firm hold it had on American composers 40 or 50 years ago. The predominant force now is mostly tonal, often very lyrical, directly communicative. The vividly orchestrated, sometimes emotional scores of Aaron Jay Kernis exemplify this flourishing movement, which is unafraid to reveal roots in the past. It isn't so much a case of a stylistic re-tread, however. The best of today's neo-romantics take full advantage of the liberating influences of the atonal revolution and explore a limitless melodic and harmonic range.

The older generation of accessible American composers -- the likes of Ned Rorem, John Corigliano, William Bolcom, John Harbison, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich -- is still producing important work as 20th century music gives way to 21st. These artists seem more like pioneers or prophets now that tonality has reclaimed the forefront. Helping to reiterate how much mileage is left in tonal devices are many younger composers, among them Michael Hersch, whose darkly beautiful music is striking deep chords with audiences, and Kevin Puts, whose atmospheric, sometimes minimalist-inflected scores are doing the same. As always with American music, it's dangerous to generalize. Tonality may be king again, but it does not have absolute rule. There is still a remarkable amount of diversity in expression, still a remarkable number of individualistic voices. These include Jennifer Higdon, whose brilliantly orchestrated works speak eloquently in an often complex language, and Tan Dun, who brings the exotic flavors of music from his native China into a Western environment and fashions an arresting sound world all his own.

The State of American Music

As the new century unfolds, challenges of many types will keep rising, but chances are, the musical community will meet them head-on, backed up by a compelling reservoir of talent, dedication, and imagination. When you tally up all the dynamic orchestras, opera companies, conductors, soloists and chamber groups, all the fresh-voiced composers, and all the myriad pop performers who are making their mark day by day, it's clear that the state -- and most certainly the heart -- of American music is sound.

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A Conversation With David Gockley



David Gockley
(Courtesy Houston Grand Opera)

For more than a generation, David Gockley has garnered considerable attention and respect as general director of the Houston (Texas) Grand Opera. In that capacity, he has spearheaded the commissioning of new works and brought to the fore new performing and creative talent.

Q: Looking back over the past decade or two, what do you believe to be the most significant developments in serious music in the United States?

A: New music is more listener-friendly, audience-friendly, today, as opposed to being academic-friendly. There's more of a chance that the operatic music of our time will be accepted by audiences, and just not thought of as a dose of castor oil. There's more of a connection with the 18th, 19th century idea of opera being middle-class entertainment that is not confined, intellectually, solely to academics and aficionados, as it was for much of the 20th century.

From the 1920s on, classical, or art, music took a turn away from the great traditions, down what I would call a blind alley, in evolutionary terms. I'm talking about music that turned out to be more an intellectual process than an attempt to seize audiences with an immediate experience.

Today, composers are not afraid of being popular, and opera companies -- more than orchestras -- are welcoming them into their houses.

The relationship between the Lyric Opera of Chicago and composer William Bolcom is indicative of this trend. Lyric has commissioned Bolcom three times and put the full extent of their abundant resources into realizing his works. We also see these works being picked up by other opera companies -- Bolcom's *A View From the Bridge* at the Metropolitan Opera and Mark Adamo's *Little Women* at New York City Opera. So it's more wide open now, everywhere.

When I first got into the business 30 years ago, we all knew that the purpose of producing world premieres was to get attention and a review in the *New York Times*. So an opera would have a world premiere and then sit on the shelf. That is not the way it is today.

Q: What's the greatest challenge in your field, from your perspective?

A: I would say it's the reality that there are so many, varied, less expensive entertainment options -- including staying at home to listen to recordings or to watch a DVD or 120 channels on television. These new media threaten to move opera and symphony off the radar screen of public consciousness. There are a lot of really, really good new singers. But somehow, they don't get the chance to become household-name celebrities like Luciano Pavarotti or Beverly Sills did in the past. The attention of the media is on things that have a greater common denominator among the public.

There's another challenge -- the demographic change in American cities that tends to marginalize great Western civilizations. Opera and serious music are not reaching the new immigrant groups in urban America. That will take generations to accomplish. Music has to survive somehow in the meantime.

Q: Is there a new musical tradition coming here from abroad? And if so, who are the creative influences?

A: In opera, the significant creative influences are the stage directors who are reinterpreting the existing repertoire of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries in new and sometimes radical ways -- often much to the chagrin of the traditional audience. In some ways, the directors have attracted a new public, a younger public, a public interested more in visual art. The big test case of "directors' opera" will be the new administration at the San Francisco Opera -- notably its general director Pamela Rosenberg. Though originally from California, Pamela has spent most of her career to this point in such cities as Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and Stuttgart, where she absorbed a modernist sensibility. Her repertory and productions will challenge the basically traditional San Francisco audiences.

As far as composers go, people seem to be staying where they are -- with some exceptions, such as Tan Dun. But conductors do keep coming from abroad, just as some American conductors continue to be popular overseas.

Q: When you think of the creative giants of the past -- Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, and others -- is there a new generation of luminaries in music?

A: I think one would have to call composer John Adams a "creative giant." His music has spanned both orchestral and opera genres. None other springs to mind in the tradition of Copland or Bernstein.

Q: How, at this time of economic downturn, do you continue to function?

A: We're more conservative in our programming. We are unbelievably scrupulous about our costs. We take every opportunity to do things more efficiently, hang on and ride it out.

Q: Speculate, for a moment, as to how your field will be different in 10 years.

A: I'd love to prophesy a new golden age. The challenges mentioned earlier -- competition from other media and demographic change -- are exacerbated by the high cost of opera and symphony. Opera at least has the visual component, which we must exploit to the extent possible. I don't see going beyond an evolutionary state. I do believe there will continue to be high-quality opera available in major U.S. urban centers and at festivals like the Santa Fe Opera. There will be continued attempts to reach out and cultivate new audiences. The level of training of American artists, the theatricality of opera, and new works with American themes or influences will keep opera viable.

The interview with David Gockley was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.

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