

INSPIRED BY AMERICA COMPOSERS, THEIR MUSIC, AND CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

To relate any of the composers to American and world history, reference a world [timeline](#) and explore how the year the piece was created is related to other events in the world at that time. Likewise, have students make relationships between world and American events during the years the composer lived (or is living), and the music he or she created. Have students substantiate their assertions with evidence from the music itself.

Samuel Barber

Adagio for Strings

American composer Samuel [Barber](#) (1910-1981) originally composed his “Adagio for Strings” as the second movement of his First String Quartet, Op. 11 in 1936. Two years later, at the request of the legendary conductor Arturo Toscanini, Barber rewrote the work for string orchestra. The premiere of this version was broadcast from New York on November 5, 1938 to millions of listeners across America. What is this analogous to in today’s media world? There was no television in 1938, and radio was a major form of entertainment. What was the music of other American composers like at that time in comparison? Written when the composer was just 26, it is Barber’s most popular work and is also one of the most popular and recognizable works of the twentieth century. The piece is often considered the “unofficial American anthem of mourning” and was performed at the funerals of two American presidents: Roosevelt and Kennedy. From listening to the Quartet’s piece, what about it compels the nation to observe these two American icons’ deaths through listening to it?

Possible topic links for teachers:

- The Great Depression
- Causation and effects of World War I and World War II (time period during the creation of this piece)
- Presidents of the United States

Charles Ives

String Quartet No. 1

American composer Charles [Ives](#) (1874-1954) is considered one of the first great composers of American classical music. His music was largely ignored during his lifetime, and only began to gain recognition when he stopped composing in 1925. Ives was the son of an Army bandmaster who taught him enthusiasm and curiosity about sound. Ives began composing by the age of 12, and by 14 he was the youngest church organist in Connecticut.

Charles Ives’ First String Quartet was written in 1896 when the composer was a 21-year old student at Yale. The piece has two nicknames: “A Revival Meeting” and “From the Salvation Army” and is based on traditional hymns.

Movement 1 is a fugue, with two hymns being quoted as subject and countersubject (“Missionary Hymn” and “Coronation”). Movement 2 is in ternary form (A-B-A) and quotes two more hymns: “Beulah Land” and “Shining Shore.”

Possible topic links for teachers:

- Types of music: band versus orchestra, stringed instruments versus wind instruments.
- Influence of religion on music in history, in America and other parts of the world.
- Music form and composition

Antonín Dvořák

Quartet in F, Op. 96 (“American”)

Czech composer Antonín [Dvořák](#) (1841-1904) wrote his Op. 96 String Quartet in June of 1893, while he and his family were on vacation in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. Dvorak was in the U.S. as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. The first work he wrote in Spillville was the “New World” Symphony, where he used elements from Native American and African-American melodies from folk songs. In the case of the “American” Quartet, Dvorak said that he was sending a ‘musical postcard’ to his native land, including “impressions and greetings from the New World.” In this way, Dvořák was truly “Inspired by America.”

Possible topic links for teachers:

- Characteristics of music from various cultures, role of music in various cultures, its relationship to culture’s history.
- Translation of ideas into sounds
- Native American History in Iowa

Charles Tomlinson Griffes

Two Sketches Based on Native American Themes

American composer Charles Tomlinson [Griffes](#) (1884-1920) was considered one of the most gifted composers of his generation. His “Two Sketches Based on Native American Themes” was written in 1919, the year before his death. In his first of two sketches, Griffes bases the music on a “Farewell Song of the Chippewa Indians” and instructs the players to create effects that sound “like Indian drums.” The second sketch is his impression of a Native American dance.

Possible topic links for teachers:

- American history, Native Americans
- Native American cultures, music, dance
- Attitudes toward Native Americans in the United States throughout history
- Oppression in the United States—other races, ethnicities, and culture throughout its history
- Current oppression in the United States and efforts to address it

Jennifer Higdon

Impressions

American composer Jennifer [Higdon](#) (1962-) wrote her fourth string quartet, titled “Impressions,” for the Cypress String Quartet in 2003, as part of the Cypress String Quartet’s “Call & Response” series. In this series, composers are asked to create music using two “call” pieces as inspiration. “Impressions” was written as a response to the quartets of Debussy and Ravel. The second movement, “Quiet Art,” is about the solitude in which artists work, and the passion and consistency that help to create a work of art. Jennifer Higdon teaches at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, and is one of the most sought-after composers of our time.

Possible topic links for teachers:

- Music styles in each time period
- Relationships between the time periods in which events in *Inspired by America* take place and music styles during those periods.
- Impressionism
- Trends and political activities between 1960 and current day.

Dan Coleman**quartetto ricercare**

American composer Dan [Coleman](#) (1972-) composed his String Quartet No. 1: “quartetto ricerare” in 1999 for the Cypress String Quartet, as part of the “Call & Response” series. In this series, composers are asked to create music using two “call” pieces as inspiration. The piece was written in response to Mozart’s Quartet K. 464 and Beethoven’s Quartet, Op. 18 No. 5. Mr. Coleman states, “I took my cue from Mozart and Beethoven, and wrote a series of variations. But in my quartet the ‘theme’ upon which these variations are based is never explicitly stated. The ricercare movements of Baroque music are wandering preludes that introduce more stable material. The ricercare of my title refers to the fact that the theme is being discovered over time.” Dan Coleman resides in Tucson, Arizona, where he is in his fifth season as composer-in-residence of the Tucson Symphony.

Possible topic links for teachers:

- Themes—in music and in the world.
- Themes in history over time.

Benjamin Lees**Quartet No. 5**

American composer Benjamin [Lees](#) (1924-) composed his Quartet No. 5 for the Cypress String Quartet in 2002, as part of the “Call & Response” series. In this series, composers are asked to create music using two “call” pieces as inspiration. The Quartet was written as a response to Shostakovich’s Quartet No. 11 and Britten’s Quartet No. 3. The third movement is titled, “Quick, quiet” and is like a gossamer thread. The fourth movement, “Explosive,” is driven and energetic. Benjamin Lees was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2003 and resides in Palm Springs, California.

Possible topic links for teachers:

- Contrast in sounds between types of music
- Characterizing certain types of music and sounds
- How do sounds and how does music reflect or articulate ideas?

Elena Ruehr**Quartet No. 4, and Red, for solo violin**

American composer Elena [Ruehr](#) (1963-) composed her Quartet No. 4 for the Cypress String Quartet in 2004, as part of the “Call & Response” series. In this series, composers are asked to create music using two “call” pieces as inspiration. The Quartet was written as a response to Mozart’s “Dissonant” Quartet, K. 465 and Beethoven’s Quartet, Op. 59, no. 3. The second movement, “Aria” begins with an extended duet between the cello and viola. Elena Ruehr composed “Red, for solo violin” for Cypress violinist, Cecily Ward, in 2006. “Apple” is the second movement of the piece. Elena Ruehr teaches at M.I.T., and has been composer-in-residence with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project since 2000.

Possible topic links for teachers:

- Women as composers, historically and currently
- Study of music: the voices of the string quartet, and each alone. How do they interact?
- Comparison of one versus several voices together: how does the difference affect the sounds?
- Concept of “Dissonance”: its meaning with relationship to music, and in the world. Likewise, the concept of “resolution.”