

## THE AMERICAN PIANO

**Anthony de Mare and Steven Mayer, piano**  
**Joseph Horowitz, Artistic Director**

Classical music in the United States has focused disproportionately on European masterworks, to the neglect of native repertoire. The relative failure of American keyboard repertoire to penetrate the mainstream has been especially unjust. Whatever one makes of the quest for the great American symphony or great American opera, or of the relative paucity of important American chamber music, there exists a great American piano sonata: the Concord, by Charles Ives.

Far afield from Ives, Charles Tomlinson Griffes' Sonata, an exercise in New World diablerie paralleling Scriabin abroad, and Aaron Copland's modernist Piano Variations, with its stark sonic pillars and skittering urban rhythms, are emblematic American piano landmarks too little heard.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the first American pianist to establish an international reputation, was a cosmopolitan hedonist raised on Caribbean fare in New Orleans – and the first in a long line of virtuoso composer/pianists inspired by the black vernacular, an amazing list also including the likes of Scott Joplin, James P. Johnson, Zez Confrey, George Gershwin, and Art Tatum.

The "Indianist" movement, little remembered today, was an alternative search for American roots. Its highest keyboard achievements, transcending kitsch, include the astringent Navajo War Dance No. 2 by Arthur Farwell – of the Indianists, the closest by far to an American Bartok -- and Ferruccio Busoni's grandiloquent, elegiac Indian Diary No. 2.

Henry Cowell was internationally celebrated as a renegade, pounding the keys with his fists. His signature piece is The Banshee, in which strings scraped and plucked produce echoing cries and wailings. More recently, composers as varied as Elliott Carter, John Adams, and Frederic Rzewski have produced important keyboard works only an American could have written. Cowell's American pianist uses fists and forearms, Rzewski's must recite political slogans. On the margins of American keyboard music are such unforgettably idiosyncratic figures as Anthony Philip Heinrich, the "Beethoven from Kentucky," whose *A Chromatic Ramble of the Peregrine Harmonist* requires the pianist to sing while rambling "among the flats and sharps."

Taken as a whole, American classical music may betray an absence of lineage and continuity complicated by a late start and a heterogeneous population. But this same fragmentation may be read as a protean variety: of composers who imitated Europe or rejected it; who preferred German music or French; who viewed the popular arts as a threat or as a point of departure. "The American Piano," featuring two of the most versatile stylists ever to specialize in the American keyboard literature, chronicles this singular odyssey.

*-written by Joseph Horowitz*

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