Histories of American classical music in the 20th century typically begin with the bold experimentation of Charles Ives, who created sound collages using familiar American tunes. They then move on to the arrival of jazz and its great influence on American composers such as George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, who were seeking a distinctly American “sound.” Inevitably the subject of an alleged “crisis of tonality” is raised, a phenomenon that led many composers to explore a variety of radical new paths: serialism, indeterminacy, aleatory, microtonality, and others. These new directions were part of an avant-garde movement that became known as “Modernism”: an aesthetic perspective that influenced all the arts during and after World War I.

The Modernist position in music held that Romanticism—especially its focus on the emotional life of the composer—was no longer relevant to the concerns of the new century. Around 1920 Arnold Schoenberg devised his “twelve-tone” system—an alternative to the organizing principle of tonality, later developed into a more comprehensive approach known as “Serialism.” Schoenberg actually saw in twelve-tone composition a means of perpetuating the supremacy of Austro-Germanic music into the future, but many of his followers promoted this system as “international,” scorning the provinciality of more nationalistic approaches. Most public audiences, however, were unmoved by—even hostile to—the twelve-tone music they heard. From the outset atonality was aimed at, and appealed to, an elite, specialized group.

During the 1930s, the period of the Great Depression, composers who were unwilling to limit their work to a small group of specialists turned to recognizably American themes and musical styles. They were successful in reaching a broader audience and their music enjoyed a brief period in the limelight. Although the quest to create an American symphonic repertoire dated back to the mid-1800s, it was not until the 1930s and 40s that a distinctive American symphonic school of composition began to emerge. Most of the composers who participated in this movement—Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and others—were eager to find an appreciative audience for their work and attempted to evoke a sense of the “American character” or the “American experience” in a way that would be discernible to the untrained listener. Many incorporated jazz, folk, and popular elements in their work; others sought ways of reconciling modernism with more traditional approaches. These composers, too, enjoyed a brief period of attention, as well as popular and critical favor. A handful of composers—Copland and Samuel Barber, for example—developed prominent reputations that outlasted the brief period when these trends were in vogue, and their music is still heard today; however most enjoyed either a brief period of exposure or were overlooked completely.

During the middle decades of the 20th century, Modernists persuaded many influential critics and academicians that
theirs was the logical next step. But the American music-loving public never accepted the music composed in the wake of the tonal system. In fact, many European composers at the time who did not embrace Modernism—Ravel, Puccini, Richard Strauss, and Rachmaninoff, for example—were achieving tremendous popular success in the United States, as well as in Europe. By the mid-1950s the Modernists—especially the twelve-toners—established influential power-bases in the music departments of Princeton, Columbia, and other major American universities, where composers were freed from the responsibility of having to win acceptance for their creative fruits in the marketplace of music lovers. Touting its "internationalism," this approach, as articulated by provocative, outspoken European advocates like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen and by Americans like Milton Babbitt, successfully pre-empted the American symphonic school. In 1952 Boulez wrote, "I . . . assert that any musician who has not experienced . . . the necessity for the [twelve-tone] language is USELESS. For his whole work is irrelevant to the needs of his epoch."1

With an abundance of theoretical writing to elaborate its principles and support its claims, Serialism lent itself to the academic propensity for abstract rationalization, aligning itself with subjects like mathematics, linguistics, and philosophy. Scholars who embraced the Modernist view of musical history propagated it in their teaching and writing, and, by suppressing or discrediting alternative interpretations, succeeded in achieving intellectual hegemony. Composers like Elliott Carter and even Copland, who had embraced the nationalist/populist aesthetic during the 1940s, began to incorporate aspects of Serialism into their work during the 1950s. Recalling in 2000 the "fractious decades after World War II," Anthony Tommasini described in the New York Times how university composers "seized the intellectual high ground and bullied their colleagues and students into accepting serial procedures as the only valid form of modernism. All those fusty holdouts still clinging to tonality were laughably irrelevant, the serialists argued. And if beleaguered audiences and even many critics recoiled from 12-tone music, well, . . . that was their problem."2

The contemptuous attitude of Modernist composers was crystallized in a notorious article, published with the title "Who Cares If You Listen?" by Serial composer Milton Babbitt.3 Sadly, force-feeding these nontraditional musical styles left the public increasingly uncertain of its own reactions and insecure in its own tastes, leading to a gradual estrangement of the audience from the music of its own time.

The disparagement and suppression from about 1955 until about 1975 of new music that retained a connection to tonality was reflected in dismissive reviews, few performances, and a minimal number of recordings. The most celebrated figures had admittedly enjoyed sufficient popular success to ensure their works an enduring foothold in the repertoire and other traditionalists who had achieved substantial reputations as a result of their positions as administrators or highly regarded pedagogues were accorded the nominal respect typically associated with such positions. But the works of even these figures, not to mention those with less prominent reputations, were simply disregarded, their contributions denigrated and relegated to the periphery of the musical arena. By the late 1980s serialism had lost many of its followers. Yet, as recently as 2007, critic Alex Ross made no mention of the Traditionalist alternatives to Modernism in his widely-praised book, The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century. 5
Some commentators do not accept the Modernist interpretation of musical history, nor many of the assumptions on which it is based. For example, while many theorists have argued that the tonal system served as a fundamental organizing principle for all Western classical music, this is really true only in the Austro-Germanic line of musical evolution; it is not so in the styles that evolved in the other surrounding countries, except insofar as composers in these countries chose to adopt the Austro-Germanic aesthetic. These commentators reject the belief that the evolution of the tonal system proceeded according to a linear progression that led inevitably to the dissolution of tonality altogether. More broadly, one might question the view that music is fruitfully studied as any sort of linear progression, with some hypothetical goal toward which all contenders are racing—the prize going to the one who gets there first.

By the late 1970s, Modernist attitudes had begun to lose ground. Discouraged by the unwavering hostility and indifference of audiences to their works, an increasing number of Modernist composers—most notably George Rochberg, Jacob Druckman, and David Del Tredici—began to question the linear view of music history that had served as their aesthetic premise. Many also acknowledged the intellectual snobbery, blind conformity, and self-serving careerism that underlay the agendas of many in the avant-garde and began to seek ways of achieving a meeting-ground with general audiences. Composers like Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and, later, John Adams had been developing a defiantly tonal, if not simplistic, approach that became known as “Minimalism.” A radical repudiation of the intellectual complexity of Serialism, Minimalism aroused an astonishingly enthusiastic response from audiences; however, most of the composers who had maintained their commitment to traditional tonality all along were now largely forgotten. While the music of a figure as prominent as Samuel Barber was soon heard widely again, he was still identified more as an anachronism than as the most prominent example of a significant aesthetic alternative.

One could argue that the marginalization of these “alternative” figures deprived the listening public of an important and rewarding repertoire; that the value of music lies in the myriad temperaments, personalities, perceptions, and perspectives on life-and-the-cosmos reflected in it; that the most interesting composers are those whose music reveals the most rewarding perspectives, and does so through the means that convey them most effectively and convincingly. One might further argue that the compositional languages adopted by the Traditionalists of the 20th century allowed for a richer, subtler, more varied range of musical expression than ever before in history. By retaining the notion of tonality as a center of gravity—but not as a fundamental structural principle and without replacing it with another arbitrary system like Serialism—they freed tonality to function as an expressive parameter of the greatest nuance, in conjunction with other parameters like melody, rhythm, tone color, and so on. “Traditionalist” refers to composers who embraced the continuing viability of tonality, as well as the musical forms and developmental principles on which the body of Western classical music has been based. Some of the Traditionalists even used atonality as a legitimate expressive device within tonal works. The most distinguished Traditionalist composers created substantial bodies of work notable for their richness, variety, accessibility, and expressive power; their music reveals distinctive individual features, recognizable stylistic traits, and consistent themes and attitudes, as did the acknowledged masterpieces of the past. Much of this music had—and still has—the ability to bridge the gap between composer and audience, to enrich a musical repertoire that has become stagnant with the endless repetition of the tried and true, and to engage the enthusiasm of those seeking the adventure of discovering new creative personalities and their masterpieces, rather than merely the reassurance and soporific comfort of the overly familiar.

Since the early 1990s, some have begun to reconsider the Traditionalist composers whose work has been languishing in the footnotes of mainstream textbooks. Dismissive judgments made decades ago are being re-examined. Conductors like Gerard Schwarz, Music Director of the Seattle Symphony for many years, undertook a series of highly praised recordings of American Traditionalists so that their music might enjoy a fresh hearing. These were composers who were more concerned with their own individual expressive purposes than with novel compositional procedures.
In an attempt to create clarity in identifying the common aesthetic elements embraced, American Traditionalist composers can be divided into five main categories. As with all such schema, this categorization represents something of an oversimplification; it doesn’t apply to every Traditionalist, and there are some who created works that fall into multiple categories.

1. “Neoclassicists” sought to return to the textural clarity, emotional restraint, and formal symmetry characteristic of music from the 18th century, while adopting bracing harmonic dissonance. They were strongly influenced by composers like Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith. Some of the best-known American Neoclassicists are Walter Piston and Robert Muczynski.

2. “Nationalists” and “Populists” created a distinctly American sound that would appeal to a broad public. Some used elements of jazz and popular music while others used actual American folk tunes. The most prominent examples among this group are Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and Roy Harris.

3. “Modern Traditionalists” continued to embrace traditional forms such as the sonata, symphony, and concerto, like the Neoclassicists, and they often employed harmonic languages that were quite dissonant. But unlike the Neoclassicists they did not necessarily aim toward clarity and restraint, but more often strove toward a brash, hard-edged monumentality. Many of the Modern Traditionalists displayed recognizably American qualities, but without using actual popular or nationalistic elements. Among the best-known representatives of this group are William Schuman and David Diamond.

4. “American Opera Composers.” Although many of these composers share stylistic features with some of the other groups of traditionalists, they warrant a separate category because these figures have concentrated almost exclusively on the venerable operatic genre. Examples of this group include Gian Carlo Menotti, Carlisle Floyd, and Dominick Argento.

5. “Neo–Romantics” are those composers whose work is primarily concerned with the evocation of mood, the depiction of drama—either abstract or referential—and the expression of emotion—personal, subjective emotion, in particular. The Neo–Romantics embraced many of the stylistic features of late-19th century music, and they may be viewed as the most conservative of the traditionalists. In fact, the very term “Neo–Romantic” is less than ideal, as the prefix “neo–” implies the revival of a stylistic concept from the past. But the early Neo–Romantics were not reviving a style from the past—they were evolving along a continuum still very much alive. The composers who served as their chief sources of influence and points of departure were Richard Strauss, Puccini, Rachmaninoff, Sibelius, Debussy, and Ravel. These composers were still active when the American arch–Neo–Romantic Howard Hanson began composing. And the younger Neo–Romantics viewed these same Europeans as their immediate antecedents. But while the term may not be 100% accurate, it has commonly been used to identify this group of composers.

Perhaps more than any other group among the American traditionalists, the Neo–Romantics have borne a stigma of disrepute. Certainly the general listening public is most readily drawn to music with the qualities associated with the Romantic aesthetic. But an implied assumption underlying much critical and musicological commentary suggests that a direct appeal to the emotions represents a lower form of artistic expression, as if accessibility somehow diminished the magnitude of a work’s aesthetic achievement. Such an attitude plagued the reputations of earlier Romantics like Tchaikovsky, Puccini, Strauss, and Rachmaninoff for years; indeed, it is only since the end of the 20th century that the critical community has acknowledged their greatness without significant reservations. Compounding the problem for the American Neo–Romantics are the additional stigmas of being Americans in a field still considered to belong chiefly to Europeans, as well as continuing to embrace a style whose time has allegedly passed. In 1978, when an interviewer inquired of Howard Hanson whether his famous “Romantic” Symphony perhaps appealed to a lower order of listener, the composer commented, “That’s what the intellectual would like to have you think . . . [but] I get letters to this day from those who are not morons saying that their favorite [symphonies] are the Fourth of Brahms and [my] Romantic.
As recently as 2002, a New York Times critic capped off a begrudging acknowledgment of the effectiveness of a neo-Romantic opera with the revealing statement that it “seems to be a solid work at the lower end of the artistic spectrum, like a piece of furniture from Ikea: secretly better than it’s supposed to be.” Similarly, just a couple of years ago Howard Hanson’s opera Merry Mount—a huge hit when it was premiered by the Metropolitan Opera in 1934—was performed for the first time in New York since its premiere. Writing in The New Yorker, Alex Ross gave the performance only passing mention, describing the work as “entertainingly schlacky.”

What does that mean? It seems Ross enjoyed it, but felt the need to protect himself from criticism by his peers by adding the word “schlacky,” derived from a Yiddish word meaning cheap, inferior, or trashy. Both these reviewers acknowledged the appeal of the works they were covering, but felt the need to deprecate their own favorable reactions.

There may be some truth to the claim that composers whose music appeals directly to the emotions may be less concerned with matters typically viewed as “intellectual,” such as formal coherence and structural complexity. But one may legitimately question why an appeal to the intellect necessarily represents an order of artistic experience superior to an appeal to the emotions (except insofar as it satisfies humanity’s vain quest to elevate itself above the animal kingdom). But perhaps a more important question is whether an appeal to the emotions must somehow compromise legitimate formal and structural values. One might argue that there is a Neo-Romantic ideal, in which the expression of emotion, depiction of drama, and evocation of mood are joined with, rather than opposed to, formal coherence, developmental rigor, and structural economy. Instead of representing mutually exclusive polarities, these two aesthetic objectives can complement each other in producing a heightened, intensified artistic experience. It is this ideal toward which the greatest Neo-Romantic composers have striven, and have, at times, achieved.

Like their European predecessors, the American Neo-Romantics tended to emphasize intense, passionate emotional expression, lavishly colored instrumental sonorities, and a rich, chromatic harmonic language derived from expanded triadic harmony. Though they may have been unapologetically conservative, there are points that distinguish them from their European predecessors. For one, most American Neo-Romantics use Classical forms more frequently, economically, and in a more disciplined manner than their European models, such as Mahler and Strauss. Second, they display certain characteristics often identified as “American”—chiefly a heightened importance of rhythmic drive, with patterns that are often irregular, asymmetrical, and syncopated—and, associated with this, a greater and more varied use of percussion instruments. Third, especially later in the 20th century, the Neo-Romantics expanded the language of their predecessors by raising the “dissonance quotient,” so to speak. Such harmony added richness, harshness, or both, thereby expanding the expressive potential of the language. Fourth, the later American Neo-Romantics used the flow between tonality and atonality as an expressive device, its relative strength or weakness contributing to a sense of emotional stability or lack thereof in the work at hand. Further, in these later Neo-Romantic compositions, a subjective perception of tonality may be absent altogether for periods of time, allowing for the expression of more extreme emotional contrasts. But even when a tonal center is barely perceived, subjectively experienced tensions rooted in tonal expectations serve as important expressive elements.

While the American Neo-Romantic approach emerged during the 1930s, it did not end with that generation of composers. As has been stated, many later composers followed this path, adopting the aesthetic values of their predecessors and extending them in their own personal directions. One of the most distinguished American Neo-Romantics of the “next generation” is Samuel Jones. Jones was born in 1935 and, now in his 80s, continues to actively compose. He was a composition student of Neo-Romantic pioneer Howard Hanson at the Eastman School of Music, where he earned his Master’s and Doctoral degrees. Although his early compositions show Hanson’s strong influence— and one of his later compositions, A Symphonic Requiem, is based on Hanson’s best known melody— Jones has developed his own musical
Compositions, A Symphonic Requiem, is based on Hanson’s best-known melody—Jones has developed his own musical language, one that is considerably more technically sophisticated and varied in its expression than that of his mentor.

Jones was born in Mississippi, where he grew up and received his education through his undergraduate degree. In addition to composing, he has been active as both a conductor and a member of the academic world, in the dual roles of teacher and administrator. As conductor, he founded the Alma Symphony Orchestra in Michigan, led the Saginaw Symphony (also in Michigan), and finally served as Music Director of the Rochester Philharmonic—a major orchestra in the city where he received his professional education. He held this position from 1965 to 1972. Perhaps his most distinguished academic accomplishment was founding the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in 1973, serving as Dean for six years, and remaining there in various capacities for 24 years. After retiring from the Shepherd School in 1997, he served for 14 years as Composer-in-Residence with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra.

But it is Jones’s compositions that represent his primary achievements. Over the years he has amassed a varied output of more than 40 works, including three symphonies, a touching opera based on Truman Capote’s well-known story A Christmas Memory, a religious oratorio, and even a children’s piece for narrator and orchestra based on a story by Eudora Welty. Among his most distinguished contributions are a series of six concertos, all written since 2006. These feature the tuba, the French horn, the cello, the violin, the trombone, and the flute. In many ways these concertos establish Jones’s place among contemporary composers as a mature, confident, and eloquent compositional voice. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and commissions from many of the country’s most auspicious musical organizations, and his works have been performed by some of America’s finest orchestras.

Although Jones’s productivity as a composer dates back to the late 1950s—the period when twelve-tone music was dominating the compositional scene—he remained loyal to the Neo-Romantic ideal, and has continued to do so to this day. This can be observed in his rich treatment of the orchestra, as well as in his receptiveness to extra-musical influences, from the wedding anniversary of friends and the Palo Duro Canyon in Texas to the relationship between fathers and their daughters. But in keeping with the Neo-Romantic ideal, his use of extramusical sources of inspiration does not in any way compromise clarity of formal logic. Regardless of its program, each work stands as an abstract, autonomous entity that does not require an awareness of its source of inspiration in order for it to make sense. Jones’s music offers a generous flow of melody, the readily discernable expression of emotion, and a clear sense of tonality, despite a harmonic language that some might at times describe as dissonant.

Samuel Jones is one of the foremost American Neo-Romantics of his generation. His music displays a direct connection to those of his predecessors who followed this aesthetic path. Familiarizing oneself with his works and programming them in orchestral concerts is rewarding to conductors and performers, as well as to audiences, while demonstrating that American composers have continued to create appealing and deeply moving contributions to the repertoire.

**FOOTNOTES**


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Walter Simmons is a musicologist and critic who has been intensely interested in 20th-century music since his early teens. Holding a master’s degree in theory and musicology from the Manhattan School of Music, he has contributed to several editions of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, *American National Biography*, the *AllMusic Guide*, and scores of other publications, including the *American Record Guide* and *Musical America*. In addition, he was a regular contributor to *Fanfare* for 35 years. Simmons has been active as a radio host and producer, a program annotator, lecturer, and teacher, a repertoire consultant, and a producer of recordings and educational materials about music. Through his recording productions—as well as his recommendations to record company executives, conductors and soloists—he has made
productions—as well as his recommendations to record company executives, conductors and soloists—he has made available commercially more than 85 works never before recorded or, in some cases, even performed. Simmons is a recipient of the ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award for music criticism and the National Educational Film Festival Award. In 2004 his book, *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo–Romantic Composers*, was published by Scarecrow Press, a subsidiary of Roman and Littlefield. This was followed by a second book, *Voices of Stone and Steel: The Music of Schuman, Persichetti, and Mennin* (2011). Simmons is supervising editor of Rowman and Littlefield’s ongoing music series, Twentieth–Century Traditionalists. Hundreds of his writings can be found on his website: [www.WalterSimmons.com](http://www.WalterSimmons.com).

Walter Simmons

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**Previous:**
ROSNER: Five Ko-Ans for Orchestra; Unraveling Dances; The Parable of the Law

**Next:**
The musicologist Winton Dean has suggested that "music is probably the most difficult of the arts to criticise."[2] Unlike the plastic or literary arts, the 'language' of music does not specifically relate to human sensory experience – Dean's words, "the word 'love' is common coin in life and literature: the note C has nothing to do with breakfast or railway. subjective issue. "There is no counter-check outside the critic's own personality."[4]. What does a Musicologist do? Learn the definition of musicology, as well as the career path and salary data for a Musicologist who studies music in context. Career Overview. Musicologists study music in a historical, critical, or scientific context. The majority of Musicologists are employed by institutes of higher education, where they conduct research, publish papers, and teach college-level classes. Alternate Titles. Professor of Musicology. A music critic is someone who writes about concerts that have taken place or new music that has been written. They write reviews about this in newspapers or journals. What they write is called musical criticism. When people write about the history of music or compare musical styles, this is called musicology. Musical criticism is about what is going on in the musical world at the moment.