

ory, and reassert confidence in the possibility of grasping society as a whole. He reminds us that Eric Hobsbawm's landmark essay, "From Social History to the History of Society" (1971), demonstrated that the real point of the new approaches was not so much recognition of hidden or marginalized subjects or groups but opportunities presented for writing the history of society as a whole.

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**Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).**

**Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).**

To say that queer people have had a huge impact on music in America pretty much makes most of us say "yea, ok, now tell me something I don't know." Well, that is exactly what Nadine Hubbs and Judith A Peraino did with their respective books, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* and *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*.

Hubbs's book opens with the story of Aaron Copeland, a beloved American patriotic composer, who had much of his work released by none other than the United States Army. On the informational pages of the album the US Army went into great detail about Copeland's heritage (he was Jewish), his work ethic, his sensitivity toward those of different races—in fact they pretty much covered everything—except for his sexual identity, which was queer. As Hubbs ironically notes in her work "Copeland...who...has been dead for over a decade is treated here to (the US Army's) 'don't ask, don't tell' policy" (ii). In other words, even after death, and even in 2007, history is still being rewritten to exclude queer people, even as the unique and special things they have brought to that history are celebrated and embraced. Thankfully though, we have people like Hubbs to set the record straight—no pun intended.

Thoughtfully produced and meticulously researched, this book is a welcome addition to the field of queer history. Hubbs, an Associate Professor of Music and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, introduces her readers to the vibrant subculture of twentieth-century queer music in text, pictures, and yes, composition. But it is not just the work of the queer artists that she profiles handily, it is their personal and professional lives as well.

Hubbs's work is nothing in fact if not honest. Just as the title of her book states, her work is as much about national identity as it is about the impact of queers on American music. Thus we learn about such things as Virgil Thomson's

arrest on a pier known as a gathering place for male prostitutes, how cultural sexism impacted the contributions of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and how queers, like other Americans of the time, were bogged down by issues of race, class, and religion-sometimes to the detriment of themselves and others, and sometimes even to the detriment of their work. In other words, the people presented within Hubbs's pages are not caricatures. They are complicated, imperfect, and not everything they did was admirable, nor was everything they produced a masterpiece. Yet they were still a force to be reckoned with in the music industry, and their work as well as their lives have shaped and continue to shape American culture, both queer and non-queer.

Because Hubbs' work focuses primarily on the period of the 1930s through the 1950s she must, along with her picture of her subjects, paint for her audience a picture of life during that time. She has done this beautifully, enabling her readers to fully understand and embrace the struggles and subterfuge that was necessary for queer people to survive. Thus, the spectres of the Great Depression, World War II, and McCarthyism as well as America's own nationalistic bent and increased cultural conservatism post 1929 is covered in enough detail to provide context while not detracting at all from the specific theme of the book.

The book is divided into sections, much like a program at a symphony. While the four chapters listed deal specifically with queer life and queer composers, the *Introduction*, *Intermezzo* and *Coda* give us an opportunity to hear from the author more directly, as she recaps her argument and puts it in context with what we are experiencing today. She also shows just how queer artists of the twenty-first century, whether they know it or not, are beholden to these artists of yore. A wonderful resource made even better by clear writing, extensive (and extensively documented) research. *The Queer Composition of America's Sound* should be required reading in all history classes, queer or otherwise.

Peraino's *Listening to the Sirens* also looks at queer contributions to music, though in a much different way than the Hubbs's work. Peraino, an Associate Professor of Music at Cornell University, looks at how music has been used throughout time immemorial to question norms of gender and sexuality. To do this, she has studied everything from humans who produce music in interesting and sometimes frightening ways, to the depictions of Gods, demigods, and other mythical musical creatures in literature and art.

Peraino suggests that the invention of creatures like sirens and mermaids (which lured sailors to their deaths with their beautifully wicked songs) were designed as a way to express that which was different, without the author or artist specifically stating that the difference was queer orientation. The author also covers artists who make their gender and sexuality fluid in order to make their audiences think (Marilyn Manson), as well as those artists who, even though not necessarily queer, have become queer icons (Judy Garland, Madonna).

While Peraino's book is just as historically accurate and meticulously

researched as Hubbs's it is a bit more edgy and—dare I say it—fun. The author describes the cultural mores of various times throughout history and then discusses in detail how creations like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* have come along to set those mores on their heads. She then takes these relatively modern inventions and shows how they hearken back to earlier works, from Greek mythology to the Bible. She also breaks down the symbology of people, showing us how Garland's tragic life of excess and vulnerability struck a chord with gay men that placed her firmly in the annals of gay icons and discussing the reasons why certain artists have always been thought of as queer even when they personally and professionally embraced a straight orientation.

Peraino continues the symbology discussion by deftly showing that throughout history there have always been signs and symbols given by the queer community to the community at large in order to let non-queers know we were out there—while at the same time reaching out to those that were just like us in order that we might connect with them and offer them hope. These signs and symbols have been present, the author tells us, even in times, countries, and cultures where there was no tolerance of queerness whatsoever. In doing so Peraino shatters once and for all the myth that queer sensibility is something new that has just emerged post Stonewall. Queer sensibility has always been with us, from B.C. to A.D.; it is just that, until recently, only those 'in the know' were willing or able to recognize it.

Yet like Hubbs's observation that even in death the openly gay Copeland has been forced into a land of 'don't ask don't tell,' Peraino demonstrates how many artists' queer contributions have been minimized over time. Manson, it is said, does what he does just to get publicity and draw attention to himself—there is no queer sensibility there. Gay men, meanwhile, have embraced Madonna because in the past she has always surrounded herself with hunky male dancers, and, of course, has given tremendous support to queer causes. In other words, even as the queerness is recognized, it is simultaneously dismissed by the culture at large. A wonderful, edgy, and innovative book that anyone would be proud to own, Peraino's *Listening to the Sirens* serves as both a great educational tool as well as a truly amazing read.

Through their work, as well as their meticulous research and notes, both Peraino and Hubbs have given their readers plenty of ammunition with which to fight cultural homophobia. They have also given queer people everywhere a reason to hold their heads up high and claim (or should I say re-claim) their place in the history of modern and other cultures.

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