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Stylistic Change in the Music of Elie Siegmeister, 1940-1970

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STYLISTIC CHANGE IN THE MUSIC OF ELIE SIEGMEISTER, 1940-1970

By

Kyle Riquet Lynch

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
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STYLISTIC CHANGE IN THE MUSIC OF ELIE SIEGMEISTER, 1940-1970

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The life and career of American composer Elie Siegmeister (1909-1991) spanned most of the Twentieth century. His music provides a unique voice in classical music of the United States. With an acute awareness of social issues, Siegmeister desired for his music to communicate with audiences. His love of American folk music, blues, and jazz contributed to his distinct compositional style, first overtly with lyrical folksong-like melodies in the 1940s before becoming sublimated into a dissonant idiom by the 1960s.

This thesis provides a survey of the change in Elie Siegmeister’s compositional style, specifically the years between 1940 and 1970. I provide an overview of Siegmeister’s entire compositional career in Chapter One. Chapter Two finds Siegmeister’s involvement with folk music coalescing into a lyrical and tonal style during the 1940s. With Chapter Three, I reveal pivotal events that urged Siegmeister to concentrate on form and thematic development during the 1950s. In Chapter Four I look at the 1960s as a synthesis of his past compositional styles.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To my friends the Frost School of Music: We could cheer each other’s successes but more often commiserate in our trials and tribulations with our theses. Much thanks to my close friend Courtney Wilkins in lending her keen editorial eyes and providing perceptive feedback. Last but not least, I thank my family for their loving support in my endeavors.
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Introduction

The American composer Elie Siegmeister (1909-1991) had a long and prolific career, yet his music is now largely neglected and forgotten. Born in New York City, Siegmeister lived most of his life in Brooklyn. He studied composition with Seth Bingham at Columbia University, and later with Wallingford Riegger and Nadia Boulanger. During a brief period in the early 1930s after his return from Paris, Siegmeister composed in a modernist vein influenced by Charles Ives. Due to a strong social and political awareness, while taking an active role in the Composers’ Collective alongside Charles Seeger and Marc Blitzstein, he began writing mass songs to be sung by musically-untrained workers. He simplified his compositional style for workers’ choruses, a change that influenced his other works. Siegmeister believed strongly in “communicating” with audiences through his music. He achieved his greatest fame as a composer with a series of symphonic works written during the 1940s. These populist pieces, which include folk or folk-influenced melodies and rhythms, are Ozark Set (1943), Western Suite (1945), and his first symphony (1947). They were premiered by Dmitri Mitropoulos, Arturo Toscanini, and Leopold Stokowski, respectively. By the 1960s, however, Siegmeister had returned to a more dissonant and complex style, in works such as I Have a Dream (1967). Unlike many of his contemporaries, he never embraced serialism, remaining firmly opposed to that technique on aesthetic grounds.

In this thesis I examine Siegmeister’s evolving style from the 1940s through the late 1960s. There has to date been no study on the causes and influences of this shift in
I suggest that a combination of factors influenced this gradual stylistic change, including Siegmeister’s increased attention to form and organic development, his perception of a decline in optimism at the onset of the Cold War, and a synthesis of earlier styles.

From 1950 onwards, his colleagues and critics considered Siegmeister old-fashioned. In music history, much attention is given to influential innovators of new compositional techniques. Because Siegmeister went against the grain of this teleological line of innovation and complexity, his works have been neglected. The significance of this thesis is to bring these compelling and unique works forward. I aim to provide insight into Siegmeister’s stylistic shift to enable a greater understanding and appreciation for this neglected composer.

This thesis draws on a variety of sources: unpublished interviews, music scores, and secondary sources. One invaluable source is a set of interviews conducted by Berenice Robinson Morris for the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. These seven lengthy interviews occurred during the summer of 1975 and cover a wide range of topics including Siegmeister’s biographical history, influences, musical aesthetics, and major works. Although conducted from a later period outside of my study, these interviews provide an essential resource and are at times the most detailed source on some subjects. The Oral History of American Music project at Yale University.

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1 With Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography (Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Press, 2010), Leonard J. Lehrman and Kenneth O. Boulton provide the most complete study on the composer to date, but do not completely account for all the factors that motivated Siegmeister’s stylistic change.

acquired a complete copy of the unpublished transcript. I also make use of Siegmeister’s published writings.

Unfortunately, many of Siegmeister’s music manuscripts and personal items which have been deposited at the Library of Congress are inaccessible due to severe restrictions placed by his daughters Nancy and Miriam. A complete appraisal of Siegmeister’s life and works will not be possible without unlimited access to this collection. However, I do believe that the available sources and materials are sufficient for this study. The published scores I will analyze include Ozark Set (1943), String Quartet No. 2 (1960), and I Have a Dream (1967). I selected these works because they are representative of Siegmeister’s compositional style in each era.

Lehrman and Boulton’s recently published Elie Siegmeister, American Composer provides a general biographical sketch of the composer with an exhaustive bibliography that includes publications, discography, and works with performance, reception, and recording history.3 “Composer with a Conscience,” an excellent article by Carol Oja from 1988, examines Siegmeister’s oeuvre throughout his career and provides a model for further research by surveying representative works.4 Oja’s analysis jumps from Western Suite (1945) to Madam to You (1964) and Shadows and Light (1975), leaving much more to explore. Furthermore, Oja notes the stylistic change in Siegmeister’s work, yet does not attempt to explain its causes.

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A few theses and dissertations have been written during the past three decades, most notably Jack Gallagher’s “Structural Design and Motivic Unity in the Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies of Elie Siegmeister” (1982) and Boulton’s “The Solo Piano Music of Elie Siegmeister” (1997).  

Gallagher focuses on the symphonies of the 1950s and 1960s—an exciting area of Siegmeister’s development as a composer. Gallagher provides an informative analysis, particularly with the Wedge Theme prominently used in those symphonies and many other works, including *I Have a Dream* and to some extent, String Quartet No. 2.

Due to the paucity of scholarship on Siegmeister, I also draw upon studies on a few of his contemporaries. While Siegmeister did not subscribe to any styles or schools, his music of the 1940s fits with the nationalistic American Style produced by Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and William Schuman. Research on these composers provides a supplement for insight into the culture of the 1940s and 1950s.

The four chapters of the thesis explore Elie Siegmeister’s evolving compositional style within a cultural context. The first chapter situates Siegmeister’s life and career within a historical framework, focusing on the period beginning in the 1940s through the ensuing decades of the Cold War. The next three chapters examine his stylistic shift, and feature in-depth studies of pivotal pieces. These chapters exhibit my research on the causes of Siegmeister’s stylistic evolution. The second chapter focuses on Siegmeister’s populist American style found in his popular symphonic works of the 1940s, with an analysis of *Ozark Set* (1943). The third chapter considers his work during the 1950s, culminating with his Second String Quartet (1960). In my analysis of this work, I discuss

Siegmeister’s use of form and organic development, exemplifying his focus on “complex inner struggles.” The final chapter looks at the 1960s and a synthesis of his past styles in *I Have a Dream* (1967). With this era I pay close attention to Siegmeister’s increased chromaticism, stylistic synthesis, and his continued commitment to social issues.

The goal of this thesis is to provide a theoretical analysis in a cultural and historical context. I will examine the three compositions in full detail, and highlight significant examples from other pieces by Siegmeister to contextualize the period under investigation. Aside from the sources mentioned above, there is a dearth of research and scholarship devoted solely to Elie Siegmeister. I believe this thesis will shed light on this part of his career and contribute to the state of Siegmeister research.
Elie Siegmeister was born on 15 January 1909 in Harlem, New York City, to William and Rebecca Siegmeister. The young family moved to Brooklyn shortly afterwards. By 1918 Siegmeister had begun piano lessons, yet he disliked practicing, especially pedagogical pieces. Hearing a Tchaikovsky symphony at the Brooklyn Academy of Music piqued his interest, and attending a performance of *Aida* at the Metropolitan Opera enraptured him. Siegmeister began to go the opera house whenever possible and studied numerous libretti. He was a precocious student and soon matriculated into Columbia College—now Columbia University—in 1924. There he studied composition with Seth Bingham. During the same year, he began taking piano lessons privately with Emil Friedberger. He also studied counterpoint with Wallingford Riegger during the summer of 1926. Siegmeister’s father was skeptical of his son’s choice to become a composer and musician until Bingham convinced him.

After graduating college in 1927, Siegmeister travelled to Europe to continue studying composition in Europe. He wanted to work with Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna; he admired the *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11. Siegmeister never reached Vienna, however,
or even met Schoenberg.\(^9\) He first arrived in Paris, where he met a few Americans, such as Israel Citkowitz and Roy Harris, who were studying with Nadia Boulanger.\(^{10}\) He had already heard of Boulanger from Aaron Copland before he left the U.S. for Europe but was skeptical. He was finally convinced when he heard that Igor Stravinsky had set up lessons with Boulanger for his son. Siegmeister studied with Boulanger for nearly five years, beginning with the basics of harmony for one year, followed by over two years of counterpoint and one year of fugues. Included in Boulanger’s regimen were in-depth studies of Mozart’s symphonies and Beethoven’s piano sonatas and string quartets. One influential course for young Siegmeister was studying Beethoven’s quartets for two years. Although Siegmeister disliked Boulanger’s methods, he received a thorough grounding in harmony and counterpoint.\(^{11}\) Regarding Boulanger, Siegmeister said: “She was very mean … I think it was terribly wrong to try to force the neoclassical style on somebody…She robbed me of my self-confidence for a time.”\(^{12}\)

Siegmeister returned to New York in 1932 and led an active musical life in the city. He won a fellowship to study conducting at the Juilliard School with Albert Stoessel.\(^{13}\) During the Great Depression, Siegmeister sought numerous jobs to make ends meet. He gave piano lessons, accompanied, lectured on modern music to community

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 20.; It is for the best that Siegmeister did not go to Vienna in 1927 because unbeknownst to him Schoenberg had already moved to Berlin.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 21-35.


groups, wrote articles, and taught harmony and counterpoint. For one semester in 1934, he taught modern music at Brooklyn College. Siegmeister also cofounded the Young Composers Group, which included Arthur Berger, Henry Brant, Israel Citkowitz, Lehman Engel, Vivian Fine, Irwin Heilner, Bernard Herrmann, and Jerome Moross. They gravitated around Aaron Copland, whom they adopted as a mentor figure. This fostered a community for composers in their twenties to discuss music. The short-lived group presented only one concert on January 15, 1933.

Siegmeister grew concerned about the role of classical music in the United States during the Depression and began writing music such as *May Day* for orchestra (1933) and the “Agitprop Sketch” *Hippip Hooray for the NRA* (1933), his first stage work. He believed an artist should have a commitment towards society and the issues of life, a stance that Jean-Paul Sartre would later term *engagée*. 1933 also saw the publication of two politically charged articles in *Modern Monthly* of his views on Classical music during the Depression in the United States: “Social Backgrounds of Modern Music” and “The Class Spirit in Modern Music.”

In 1933 and the following year, Siegmeister became involved with another group, the Composers Collective. It began as part of the Workers’ Music League at the Pierre Degeyter Club—named in honor for the composer of “The Internationale”—to address

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15 Ibid., 45.; Siegmeister’s employment at the college was brief, probably because he skipped a day of work to march on May Day. The department chair questioned Siegmeister the following day about his absence. Unsurprisingly, Siegmeister’s contract was not renewed.


17 This piece praised the National Recovery Administration created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal.

18 Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 405-06.
the role of music during the Great Depression. Founded by Jacob Schaeffer, Leon Charles, and Henry Cowell, the Collective’s membership list fluctuated, including Siegmeister and other regular members Charles Seeger, Marc Blitzstein, Norman Cazden, and Herbert Haufrecht, as well as more sporadic participants like Copland and Ruth Crawford. Among the goals of this group was to write music for the common worker. The main output of the Collective was two volumes of the *Workers Song Book*, released in 1934 and 1935. The Collective was short-lived and never agreed about a common style of music, as an examination of these songbooks suggests. One of Siegmeister’s contributions to the first volume of the *Workers Song Book*, “The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die,” protests the arrest and unfair trial of nine black teenagers in Alabama.

Siegmeister began to receive recognition with his song, “The Strange Funeral in Braddock.” This piece premiered in 1934 at a concert for “International Music Week Against Fascism and War,” and focused on a factory worker’s death in a steel refinery because of unsafe conditions and poor equipment. It was also his first published work, appearing in Henry Cowell’s *New Music Editions* in 1936. The song received many performances, was popular with audiences, and in 1935 Anna Sokolow choreographed it into the ballet *Strange American Funeral*. It also provoked criticism, including sharp words from Siegmeister’s friend Charles Seeger. In a review for the *Daily Worker*, Seeger wrote that the song was effective for the concert stage yet too difficult for amateurs to perform. Copland criticized the song privately and publicly, first telling

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Siegmeister that the song was old-fashioned and suggesting that he adopt a neoclassical style.\(^{22}\) In 1936, Copland included Siegmeister in an essay about young composers for *Modern Music*, in which he wrote:

Siegmeister, who is far better known in the environs of Union Square than he is up town, has had difficulty in adopting a real simplicity in his more serious works. Too often, as in “The Strange Funeral in Braddock,” we get a kind of crude effectiveness, quite undistinguished in style. What is needed here is more honest self-criticism.\(^{23}\)

During the mid-1930s, Siegmeister became interested in transcribing and arranging folk songs. After a workers concert, Aunt Molly Jackson approached the young composer. She asked him if he wanted to hear “real American music.” Siegmeister transcribed a few dozen of her songs, and was fascinated by the changes each time she sang the same song. During this time, he also met Woody Guthrie, Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly), and Cisco Houston.\(^{24}\) Lawrence Gellert gave him a “box of old aluminum disks” he recorded in the “Deep South,” which Siegmeister transcribed and published as *Negro Songs of Protest* in 1936.\(^{25}\)

In 1938, Siegmeister published *Music and Society*.\(^{26}\) This Marxist booklet expanded on his earlier writings and argued that music should strongly connect with people’s lives and the pressing issues of society. He firmly believed that music and art should engage with all people. Siegmeister was suspicious of elitism in music: “Art with


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 68.

a capital A is a menace.” He continued to compose socially aware music, but in genres beyond mass songs. These pieces include Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight for orchestra and chorus (1937), the song cycle Elegies for Garcia Lorca (1938), and the radio play Created Equal: A “Living Newspaper on Democracy” (1938).

In 1939, he organized a vocal sextet, The American Ballad Singers (SSATBB). During the previous years of transcribing, arranging, and compiling folk songs, he felt that they needed to be performed. This repertoire included minstrel tunes, spirituals, and works by early American composers such as William Billings. The American Ballad Singers debuted at Town Hall in January 1940 and were so successful that they toured the country multiple times.27 Siegmeister published A Treasury of American Song, a book of his arrangements of folk songs, in 1940 as a result of his work with the sextet. Between 1940 and 1941, Elie Siegmeister wrote songs with strong connections to American history and folklore, especially “Johnny Appleseed,” “Davy Crockett,” “The Lincoln Penny,” “Daniel Boone,” “Paul Bunyan,” and “Ann Rutledge.” He created these pieces—all premiered by the American Ballad Singers—in a folksong style, yet without borrowed tunes.

With the onset of U.S. involvement in World War II, Siegmeister began to write pro-war works. These include “We’re the U.S. Merchant Marine” (1942), “When a Soldier Writes a Letter” (1942), and The Ballad of Douglas MacArthur (1942). With a growing young family (his daughters Willa, Nancy, and Mimi were born between 1932

and 1943), it is no surprise that he started to write lullabies and songs about children, such as “Sleepy Time” and “To a Little Girl.”

In 1942, John Gassner of the Theatre Guild asked Siegmeister to write incidental music for a play set in the Ozarks. This play was never produced, but Siegmeister used that music and orchestrated it to create *Ozark Set*. In *Ozark Set*, Siegmeister wrote simple folk-like melodies and long lyrical lines in a tonal setting. This marked an important moment in Siegmeister’s career, as he began a series of orchestral works in a similar style. These include: *Western Suite* (1945), *Wilderness Road* (1945), *Prairie Legend* (1945), and *Sunday in Brooklyn* (1946). These works garnered Siegmeister much recognition and many performances, with premieres by leading conductors, including Dmitri Mitropoulos, Arturo Toscanini, Antal Dorati, and Leopold Stokowski.

In 1943, *The Music Lover’s Handbook* was published. Elie Siegmeister edited this book, and wrote many of the articles in it. A compendium of essays on classical music with brief biographies of composers, the collection also includes writings on folk and traditional music from America and throughout the world. In 1973, Siegmeister revised and updated this work.

The Theatre Guild, the same organization that asked Siegmeister to write music for a play set in the Ozarks, commissioned him to arrange and orchestrate folksongs from his *Treasury of American Song* for a musical. This project became *Sing Out, Sweet Land* and opened in New York in late December of 1944. The production starred Alfred Drake and a young Burl Ives. It garnered success and many positive reviews on Broadway.

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28 Ibid., 29. “To a Little Girl” and “When a Soldier Writes a Letter” are quite similar in topic. They address children whose father is away, possibly as a soldier stationed overseas.
In 1949, Siegmeister joined the faculty of Hofstra College—now Hofstra University; in 1966, he became the University’s permanent composer-in-residence, a position with a reduced teaching load, allowing more time for his creative work. Siegmeister remained on the faculty of Hofstra until his retirement in 1976. Among the courses he taught were composition, orchestration, American music, form and analysis, counterpoint, and twentieth-century music. He also conducted the Hofstra Symphony for fifteen years.29

Between the premieres of his Symphony No. 1 (1947) and Symphony No. 2 (1950), Siegmeister began to focus on form in his compositions. This emphasis on large-scale structure continued throughout the 1950s and beyond. His Second Symphony features his efforts to unify a large-scale work. In 1951, Siegmeister began a lengthy study of thematic unity and form prior to his Third Symphony (1956-57). His String Quartet No. 2 (1960) is another excellent example of his attention to form and motivic development.

Siegmeister’s Second String Quartet led to another shift in style during the 1960s. His melodies, although still lyrical, lost the simplicity of folk songs, and his harmonies became denser and more dissonant. Siegmeister believed these works were stylistically related to his compositions from the early 1930s, such as “The Strange Funeral in Braddock.” He said, “The clashing style of the 1930s and the more lyrical, folk-like style of the 1940s and 1950s began to coalesce in the 1960s.”30

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30 Ibid., 193.
In 1967, Siegmeister continued his commitment to social issues with two works: *I Have a Dream* and *The Face of War*. He was vehemently opposed to the Vietnam War and composed a song cycle setting five of Langston Hughes’s poems. This work was premiered at Carnegie Hall at the “Composers for Peace” concert that Siegmeister helped organize. *I Have a Dream* is a cantata featuring a narrator, baritone, and choir based, the text based on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous speech. This remarkable work is an example of Siegmeister’s compositional style of the 1960s, which uses vernacular-inspired music (the blues, in the case of the cantata) but within the context of his dissonant style in a large-scale formal framework.

After 1970, Siegmeister continued to write many orchestral works, including six more symphonies (for a total of nine compositions in the genre), and several operas. Carol Oja observes that Siegmeister was inspired during this late period to compose from outside stimuli, whether from social issues, folk music, literature, or art. Siegmeister wrote a number of orchestral works during this time based on paintings or literature. These include *Shadows and Light, an Homage to Five Paintings* (1975); *Fantasies in Line and Color* (1985), based on five American paintings; *From These Shores* (1985-86) with each of five movements devoted to an American writer; and the earlier *Five Fantasies of the Theater* (1967) focusing on playwrights.

Siegmeister devoted much of his late output to opera, composing five works in the genre after 1968. His grand opus is *The Plough and the Stars* (1968-69), based on the play by Sean O’Casey. Other works include *Night of the Moonspell* (1976), which set William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* amidst a bayou in Louisiana. In

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1988, Siegmeister wrote two one-act operas based on stories by Bernard Malamud: The Lady of the Lake and Angel Levine.

In a 1976 interview, Siegmeister lamented that he received little recognition from his peers and committees for awards and commissions. However, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979 and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1990. His eightieth birthday in 1989 saw a surge of performances of his music around the country. On March 10, 1991, Siegmeister died of medical complications from a brain tumor. On his deathbed, he named the Symphony No. 3 as his most important orchestral work and The Plough and the Stars as his most important opera.

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33 Lehrman and Boulton, Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography, 154.
Chapter 2
The American Style (Pre-1950s)

Elie Siegmeister’s compositional career developed during the 1940s when he found his real direction.\(^\text{34}\) He felt that the 1930s were difficult artistically—at least for him—and his music only began to coalesce when the new decade began. Becoming more involved with folk music and incorporating that style in his music was a significant reason for this change. Siegmeister simplified his style, and it became more tonal and consonant. While it is true that he was heavily involved with creating songs for “the people” in the *Workers Songbooks*, those pieces were written in an austere, dissonant idiom.

During the late 1930s, a number of events contributed to Siegmeister’s exposure to American folk music. His interaction with traditional singers, especially Aunt Molly Jackson, showed him the simplicity and directness of folk song, as well as its mutability. Siegmeister’s efforts with the American Ballad Singers—including his work directing, organizing, and arranging music from America’s vocal tradition—provided the primary impetus for this direction. Politics, including the Popular Front movement, also had an effect on his work.

Throughout the thirties, Siegmeister perceived his interest in folk music as separate from his compositions.\(^\text{35}\) He credits the song “Johnny Appleseed” (1940) as his

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\(^{34}\) Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 41.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 71.
first attempt to write in a new style that combined both interests. An American Ballad Singers concert provided an opportunity to exhibit this song as part of a larger work American Legends. This is Siegmeister’s first composition in the folksong style. He later included it in A Treasury of American Song under the section “Big Men and Bad Men” alongside “John Hardy,” “John Henry,” “Old Abe Lincoln,” and “Jesse James.” It is a cheery song, yet rather complex. It exhibits a few meter and tempo changes, an accompaniment riddled with seventh chords, and interesting harmonies that stray from common chord progressions. In his inscription to the work, Siegmeister notes: “I have always thought there must be a song somewhere about this unique character of American history and folklore. Not finding any, I wrote one.” He dedicated this song to his second daughter, Miriam, four weeks after her birth. Emil Renan, a baritone from the American Ballad Singers, premiered this piece with Siegmeister at the piano.

Excited by this new path, he wrote more music in this style. The choice of an American folk hero for these songs became a theme over the next two years, in works like “The Lincoln Penny,” “Paul Bunyan,” “Abraham Lincoln,” “Anne Rutledge,” and “Daniel Boone.” He also wrote the music for a children’s play in 1942, Doodle Dandy of the USA, which toured the country that year before coming back to New York City.

One day in April 1942, Siegmeister received a telephone call from John Gassner, a theater producer. Gassner asked the composer if he was interested in writing music

36 Ibid., 70.


for a play for the Theatre Guild of New York. The producer was aware of Siegmeister’s affinity for folksongs, perhaps from his work with the American Ballad Singers. The play was to be set in the Ozark Mountains, and Gassner was curious whether Siegmeister had collected any folksongs from that region. He wanted authentic incidental music.40 After Siegmeister’s somewhat negative response, Gassner replied, “Oh, don’t worry… you know the folk style. Why not write something of your own?”41

Siegmeister worked quickly and was excited about the project because he saw this as an opportunity to break into the theater.42 He recalled that the music “poured out of me so freely and spontaneously,” and that he finished composing the piece in four days.43 The young composer wrote out the music as piano sketch set in four movements.44 He phoned Gassner to share the good news, but was met with a sheepish silence. Gassner informed Siegmeister the Guild’s plans had changed and the play had been scrapped.45

Siegmeister set the sketches aside and returned to them during the summer of 1943.46 He enjoyed writing the music and did not want it to go to waste. While in Oliverea, New York, he created an orchestral suite out of the sketches and completed the

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43 Siegmeister, Ozark Set, liner notes, Columbia Records, ML 2123, LP, 1950.


45 The Theatre Guild had decided to focus on another show set in the Midwest, Oklahoma!. The first joint project between Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II was further along in production and premiered March 31, 1943.

score on August 28, 1943.\textsuperscript{47} Within a month, a notice appeared in the \textit{New York Times} announcing the work’s completion.\textsuperscript{48}

He decided to entitle the new work \textit{Ozark Set} after the initial impulse for the music. The use of the word “Set” is an Americanization of “Suite,” and has precedence in the Orchestral Sets of Charles Ives. It also refers to the sets of dances used in square dance that play a prominent role in the work’s final movement.\textsuperscript{49}

The premiere of \textit{Ozark Set} occurred because of a visit by Siegmeister to Dmitri Mitropoulos. The American Ballad Singers were on tour that winter; while in Minneapolis, Siegmeister telephoned to see if he could visit the Greek conductor to show him \textit{Ozark Set}.\textsuperscript{50} Even though the two had never met, Mitropoulos warmly invited Siegmeister to his apartment. The American composer played the piece on Mitropoulos’s piano and received an enthusiastic response.\textsuperscript{51} Mitropoulos said that he would perform the work with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. \textit{Ozark Set} premiered the next season on November 11, 1944.\textsuperscript{52} The conductor liked the work so much that he adopted it and performed it on tour with the orchestra. He also performed it as a guest conductor with the NBC Symphony Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra.\textsuperscript{53} Mitropoulos recorded the piece on the Columbia label ML 2123) with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra.

\textsuperscript{47} Inscription in score. \textit{Ozark Set, for Full Orchestra}, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music, 1944), 96.


\textsuperscript{50} Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 80.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 81.

\textsuperscript{52} Lehrman and Boulton, \textit{Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography}, 195.

\textsuperscript{53} Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 117.
Orchestra.\textsuperscript{54} Siegmeister was unaware of the recording until someone sent him a record.\textsuperscript{55} Ozark Set was performed elsewhere, including at an all-American concert in Moscow for a Fourth of July 1945 event, where it was warmly received.\textsuperscript{56}

Over the next ten years came a stream of orchestral pieces with rural or natural settings for titles: Western Suite, Wilderness Road, Prairie Legend, Summer Night, and Lonesome Hollow, all completed in 1945 or 1946. Others that followed were From My Window (1949) and Riversong (1951). Sunday in Brooklyn (1946) is an urban counterpart, yet also focuses on depictions of ordinary human life and activities. The movement titles support this depiction: “Prospect Park,” “Sunday Driver,” “Family at Home,” “Children’s Story,” and “Coney Island.” These pieces continue in the stylistic vein of Ozark Set. Many of the melodies Siegmeister used were original, yet sometimes he incorporated folksongs, such as with cowboy songs in Western Suite.

Siegmeister’s rapid musical production, including these large orchestral works, came from a compulsion to prove himself as a composer.\textsuperscript{57} He felt that he needed to compose a lot, and at a fast pace. Nadia Boulanger enforced this way of thinking when talking about Mozart’s speedy methods. A sly joke on Siegmeister’s speediness can be found in the pen name he employed in the Workers Song Books: L. E. Swift.

\textsuperscript{54} Siegmeister, Ozark Set, Columbia Records, ML 2123, LP, 1950.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} The concert preceded the Fourth of July by one day. The quotation appears in Charles Friedman, “Russia Hears American Music,” The New York Times, August 5 [1945]. The Russian musician and critic Grigory Shneerson documented another account of the concert.

\textsuperscript{57} Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 132.
The American Style

Nicholas Tawa refers to American classical music during the 1930s and 1940s as “an uninhibited exaltation of the American spirit” by composers.58 The populism in American classical music embraced traditional and popular music, resulting in “comprehensible melody, functional harmony, and clear structures.”59 Occasionally, composers went beyond imitating a traditional style and incorporated actual melodies from existing sources. A prime example of the use of quotations by Siegmeister is Western Suite. Examining this work, Carol Oja admits that others have used this technique in the preceding decades, specifically Charles Ives and Virgil Thomson in the 1920s, and Aaron Copland and Roy Harris during the 1930s.60 Siegmeister cherished a lineage of what he called “the American Style.” He viewed William Billings and Louis Gottschalk as precursors, and hailed Ives as the Walt Whitman of American music.61 Siegmeister reveled in the thought that many composers, including Scott Joplin and George Gershwin alongside the aforementioned, were part of a “tradition of a rugged, native American spirit.”62 He was fully aware that other composers such as Copland, Thomson, and Blitzstein were also attempting to write in an American style during the late 1930s.


62 Ibid., 380.
The confluence of Siegmeister’s interest in folk music with his compositional activities reflected a continuation of his Marxist views of music from the 1930s. In an autobiographical sketch he wrote in 1943, Siegmeister declared that “the old-time division of music into ‘fine art’ and ‘common’ music is growing less meaningful every day.”\(^{63}\) He continued to proclaim that “folk music or any kind of influence is a necessity for great works.”\(^{64}\) Siegmeister was not stringent on the inclusion of folk music per se. He strove to connect with people through various types of influences. There is a strong element of humanism in his music and beliefs. Just as he revered ruggedness in the music of his forbears, Siegmeister worked earnestly to incorporate a certain wildness in his own music. He felt that music should not be divorced from people, but should get into all the activities of daily life and go where the people were. Along with basic musical elements such as form and melody, Siegmeister considered this “certain wildness” among the five principal characteristics of his music.

**Folk Music**

Siegmeister’s definition of “American folk music” is expansive; he found it difficult to define or to “find a proper name” for it.\(^{65}\) He considered any type of music with a strong heritage and tradition of the working classes to be folk music, including ballads, work songs, spirituals, traditional music, or blues. Siegmeister did not make significant distinctions between these genres. In fact, he classified jazz and traditional


\(^{64}\) Ibid., 561.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 449.
music within the broad category of folk music. Despite the apparent naïveté of this approach, he knew a considerable amount about jazz, as evidenced by an article on the subject that he authored for The New Music Lover’s Handbook. Siegmeister admired and enjoyed indigenous genres of music, particularly because they were created and performed by the common people. His embrace of various styles of American folk music developed during the 1940s and continued throughout the rest of his career. He revered folksong as “the natural expression of our people” and as the “most democratic layer of our American musical culture.” He once expressed this egalitarian stance with the statement that he hoped to write music “that will speak the language of all our people.”

Siegmeister’s democratic views on music are best demonstrated in his essay on American music for The Music Lover’s Handbook, when he asked: “Is [American music] jazz, blues, folk songs, spirituals, musical comedy, boogie-woogie, or some of these modern symphonies or cantatas that we hear on the radio?” Siegmeister believed this wide-ranging mixture of styles had an equally valid claim as American music.

As a creative artist, Siegmeister desired to express the world around him. Writing in the American style was important to him, as was letting his works reflect the

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70 Ibid., 562.
72 Ibid., 409.
time in which he lived. Siegmeister once stated that “a composer who has achieved his own identity also reflects his time and place.”\(^{73}\) It was this reflection of the world that he wished to portray in his music. By making his works more clear-cut and communicative, Siegmeister shed his early, dissonant ways.\(^{74}\) Gone were the tone clusters, polytonality, and jagged rhythms of previous works. The composer had transitioned from Ultramodern to American Pastoral.

What brought on this shift? In his autobiographical sketch written the same year he completed *Ozark Set*, 1943, he wrote that he sought opportunities to write for many different media, not just traditional genres. This included “dance, theater, and radio, for schools, amateur performers, and children.”\(^{75}\) By 1943, his hard work paid off, and he wrote the music for the successful children’s play *Doodle Dandy of the USA* and caught the ear of the Theatre Guild.\(^{76}\) Although the play set in the Ozarks was quickly discarded, Siegmeister used the opportunity to consider composing in a different way. From his autobiographical sketch he explains that “contact with the various agencies stimulated me to think along new lines, musically speaking…what might be called the ‘American’ flavor in some of my scores… was probably a result.”\(^{77}\) Siegmeister’s colleagues, notably Aaron Copland, also wrote for many different media during this era, including the children’s opera *The Second Hurricane* (1936), and *Music for Radio* (1936).

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 77.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 193.

\(^{75}\) Siegmeister, *The New Music Lover’s Handbook*, 561.

\(^{76}\) Doodle Dandy of the USA previewed at Hunter College, and opened at the Belasco Theatre 26 December 1942. It enjoyed a brief run through 2 January 1943. This play should not be confused with the song “The Doodle Dandy Boy,” more commonly known as “(I’m a) Yankee Doodle Dandy” from the Broadway musical *Little Johnny Jones* (1901) by George M. Cohan.

Siegmeister was not alone in his idealistic soundscapes of the West. Other American composers shifted their focus towards rural landscapes, particularly the West. This new style continued in absolute music without any extra-musical features. These composers adopted the “traditional mythology of the American West,” as Richard Taruskin notes: “In place of bustling urban scenes—crowds, haste, frenzy—[composers] emphasized open space, imperturbable vision, fortitude, and self-reliance, in other words the pioneer spirit.”

A strong impetus for this drastic change was political pressure from the Popular Front. One of the failures of the Composers’ Collective, according to critics, was the incompatibility of the music with actual workers. Charles Seeger criticized Copland’s bimodal mass song “Into the Streets May First” as too harmonically complex for a marching song. His son, Pete Seeger, took a dubious view of the Collective’s efforts in general, claiming that “the proletariat was not interested in their music. Aaron Copeland [sic] won the prize for a May Day song but it had to be sung by a very skilled tenor and accompanied by a very skilled pianist. Do you really think this is going to catch on?” Other folk musicians, including Lead Belly and Aunt Molly Jackson, criticized the Composers’ Collective as well.

The Popular Front set forth by the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 had a significant effect on the Collective. With the Popular Front, The Comintern


79 Peter L. Gough, “‘The Varied Carols I Hear’: The Music of the New Deal in the West” (PhD, UNLV, 2009), 24.

desired to align all international communist and socialist parties as antifascist. The largest communist party in the United States at the time, known as the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), sought a more moderate position, such as dropping opposition to the New Deal. CPUSA invoked populism by embracing Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and folk culture including folk songs and legendary figures such as Jesse James and Paul Bunyan. The party’s slogan for Earl Browder’s presidential campaign in 1936 was “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism.” Eventually, most of the composers of the Collective began cultivating folk songs as sources, or at least adopting a folk idiom. As a result, their ultramodern style gave way to a more tonal and consonant musical manner. Among those composers whose styles changed in this way were Siegmeister, Copland, Ruth Crawford, and Charles Seeger. In *Music and Society*, Siegmeister declared: “The composer of the people’s movement and of the collective society will utilize all the skills and techniques he has inherited from the past to write not luxury music for the few, but music which shall be of, for and about the many.” Besides this style change, folk songs were “researched and performed as an adjunct to political action.” Crawford and Seeger worked closely with John and Alan Lomax, and invested much of their musical efforts in transcribing folk songs. Crawford in particular, gave up composing original music, and created unadorned and idiomatic accompaniments to folk songs. Siegmeister did his part by creating arrangements for folk song compilations, including *Negro Songs of Protest* and *A Treasury of American Song*. Neither Siegmeister,

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Copland, nor the Seegers were ever members of the Communist Party. Yet they and other sympathizers had supportive views that sustained the Popular Front. Unfortunately, their left-wing views would come back to haunt them during the Cold War, when they would be labeled “fellow travelers,” resulting in serious ramifications that I discuss in further detail in Chapter 3).

By the time *Sing Out, Sweet Land* premiered in 1944, many composers had adopted the simpler American nationalistic style. Folk songs permeated mainstream culture and were no longer associated exclusively or automatically with protest movements or the political left.84 While reflecting on this era, Arthur Berger reminisced:

> Americanism went hand in hand with political leftism… Now it should be obvious that the demands of a proletariat music required greater accessibility than could be vouchsafed by the type of music emanating from Vienna. We found [twelve-tone music] too highly imbued with the atmosphere of Central Europe, of gaslit attics in Vienna.85

This new style shared similar feature among many different composers. What Taruskin calls the Americanist idiom features “melodic breadth; a basically diatonic (though often dissonant) harmonic idiom; ‘asymmetrical’ rhythm; sonorous, often percussion-heavy orchestration.”86 While Roy Harris may have first captured America’s attention with this style in his Symphony No. 3 (1939), Copland popularized it in works such as *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Copland infused his music with wide intervals in chords and orchestration,

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84 Ibid., 659. Taruskin makes the important distinction of claiming that “white rural folk song” became mainstreamed, thus implying that spirituals and, say, the contents of *Negro Songs of Protest*, would still be considered as part of the fringe, even insidious.


and placed prominence upon chords such as the tonic, dominant, and subdominant—what Taruskin calls “primary-colors” harmonization. Taruskin characterizes nationalism as a construct—that its authenticity comes from acceptance by both audiences and other composers. Many composers never really embraced the use of jazz idioms in the 1920s and beyond, feeling that jazz defiled art music. This “American” style, on the other hand, specifically Copland’s, was emulated by many others, including film composers.

This style flourished during the rough years of the Great Depression and World War II. The music may have functioned as a comfort to audiences. Taruskin has suggested that the word “Coplandesque” conjured a variety of moods -- pastoral, wistful, sanguine, and domesticated -- presenting a “comforting vision of home.” Annegret Fauser goes further, arguing that this style creates a “pastoral fantasy” in which urban audiences can escape to a wholesome and healthy alternative utopia of rural environs.

Along with comfort, much of this music presented optimism.

The power of evocation in the music can be found in reactions to non-programmatic works. Roy Harris’s Third Symphony evoked bucolic and rural images, such as “the bleak and barren expanses of western Kansas,” for one critic. Even in a

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87 Ibid., 668.

88 Ibid., 673.

89 For the reception of jazz in the concert hall, Gershwin’s in particular, see Carol Oja, “Gershwin and American Modernists of the 1920s,” The Musical Quarterly 78, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 646-668.

90 Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music, 668.


92 Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music, 642.
recent survey of American music, Richard Crawford wrote that Harris’s long arching melodies suggests the vastness of the nation’s spirit.93

Orchestras and conductors welcomed this new style as well. The influx of performances of American works during the 1940s coincided with the fervent patriotism felt during World War II. Arthur Berger remarked:

Artists were being supported and commissioned to carry out projects with Americana as their subject matter. You can easily understand that the mannerism and devices issuing out of Vienna were too remote for this purpose.94

Siegmeister said something similar yet more pragmatically: “I began to find a broader acceptance of my music, and this enabled me to see myself a little bit more clearly. When you’ve found an avenue, a language, an inflection that seems to work for you, you carry it on and develop it.”95

**Ozark Set**

It is not altogether clear if Elie Siegmeister had visited the Ozarks prior to working on *Ozark Set*. There are conflicting reports from the composer himself on this matter. In the anecdote of the piece’s origins related in the 1975 interview, he told John Gassner that he had not collected songs from the region, to which Gassner replied: “You know the folk style.”96 In the liner notes for *Ozark Set*’s vinyl record of 1945, however,

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96 Ibid., 51
Siegmeister gives a different story. He states: “I passed through [the Ozarks] on several occasions but without any prolonged stops.” In addition, while in that region he mentions that he had the chance to hear local musicians, such as singers and fiddlers. Perhaps this was while travelling on tour with the American Ballad Singers. He says in the liner notes that, with his group, he performed a number of songs from the Ozarks. All this information is remarkably forgotten in the 1975 anecdote, where he claimed no familiarity with folk music of the Ozarks.

This, however, is a moot point, as Siegmeister never intended to incorporate actual folk melodies into the music. Moreover, this author did not find any unintended quotations, including the “hymns” of the second movement, “Camp Meeting.” To remark on his straightforward style, Siegmeister turned to none other than Mark Twain, a direct writer with folksy charm: “I have tried to write music as clear and familiar to the average American as a story by Mark Twain.”

*Ozark Set* is programmatic, and Siegmeister provided a detailed synopsis:

I. **Morning in the Hills**: A quiet backcountry landscape; the stillness of dawn; the gradually awakening sounds of early morning; the full warmth of daylight as the people start their daily rounds.

II. **Camp Meeting**: The lively sounds of a camp meeting in full progress: the enthusiasm, the wild exuberance of a great crowd roaring, stamping, singing, shouting. Snatches of joyful camp meeting tunes are mingled with the laughter, cries, hallelujahs.

III. **Lazy Afternoon**: The feeling of lonely valleys, open fields and prairies and of men working slowly, taking time off to enjoy the warm sun, the sweet smells and quietness of a summer day.

IV. **Saturday Night**: When Saturday Night rolls around there is the inevitable Square Dance. The fiddlers scrape out a lively

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98 Ibid.
breakdown, the caller shouts, and the boys swing their girls. This is the night to ‘blow the lid off.’ 99

The first movement, “Morning in the Hills,” begins with a hushed chord in the strings. In open-fifths on D, the clarinets continue the modal ambiguity with a simple melody (Example 2.1). The first theme, begun by the upper strings at measure 13, leaves no doubt that the key is D major, and begins a slow lyrical ascent. Following Siegmeister’s program, the opening modal melody represents the quiet dawn, while perhaps the first theme represents a slow and peaceful start to the day—“the gradually awakening sounds of the early morning.”


The trumpets introduce a more active second theme at a quicker tempo at measure 43 that emphasizes repetition. Other instruments pick up this melody, first the trombones, followed by the French horns with oboes. This short-lived section emphasizes the “daily rounds” of people working. It gives way to an affirmative F major chord played by the whole orchestra. These themes are not really developed significantly, and it is a rather short movement with a length of under five minutes.

This is idyllic music, which depicts a peaceful morning scene. It is overwhelmingly tonal and consonant, with hardly a shred of dissonance. The open-fifth

99 Ibid.
chords of the beginning suggest comparison to Copland’s ballet *Billy the Kid* (1938).

Further shared traits with the American pastoral style are the orchestration and chordal voices. The string section provides a strong backdrop with melodies featuring solo winds. The chords are widely spaced. Furthermore, there is a predilection for modes, not just at the beginning, but with descending Dorian and Locrian scales just before the recapitulation. This passage is heard in the flutes and clarinets at measure 64, and is continued by the violins before returning to the woodwinds.


The second movement, “Camp Meeting,” marks a great contrast in mood. It brims with energy, with a repetitive figure of sixteenth notes hammering out the same pitch. Siegmeister certainly achieved his goal of creating a lively atmosphere portraying a bustling camp meeting. His program specifically refers to these events. Although he successfully calls to mind the enthusiastic setting, specific occurrences of hymns and hallelujahs referenced in the program are not entirely clear. Perhaps the figure of three sixteenth notes that is exchanged by the horns, flutes, and upper strings represents laughter (Example 2.2). The arching musical idea that appears right before the climax of the movement might represent the hallelujahs (Example 2.3). Yet, the six notes do not perfectly match the four syllables of the word. They seem to align if one compares the
syllabic stress of the word “hallelujah” with the accentuated pitches. Siegmeister treats the “laughing” figure similarly to the “hallelujah” figure, overlapping each in a stretto texture when more instruments contribute. It is much more obvious, however, with the hallelujah, because of its length. The violins first introduce the laughter figure, after which the oboe and English horn join in with the viola, followed by the trombones.


The hymns are more problematic to identify. All the main themes give the illusion that they possibly might be hymns disguised with extra notes for rhythmic variety. They are consonant and mostly stepwise. On closer inspection, the themes share a family resemblance. Siegmeister mentions “snatches of joyful camp meeting tunes” in the liner notes. However, none of the themes appears to be a quotation from an actual hymn source.

“Lazy Afternoon” is the monothematic third movement. Siegmeister created it as a theme and variations, yet the variations do not stray far from the original melody. There are subtle adjustments consisting only one or two changes in rhythms and pitches. They are akin to the variants he encountered when he transcribed Aunt Molly Jackson’s folksongs. This movement is similar to the first in its pastoral sentiment, but more so because it is harmonically static and never ventures beyond D major. The melody is folklike and made up of short, simple parts of equal length. The melody appears as either a solo or duet between two instruments and is restricted to the winds, accompanied by a
subdued orchestra with broken chords. The texture is songlike with a simple melody and supportive accompaniment. The lyrical theme lends itself well to song, so it is not terribly surprising that the melody was supplied words by Leo Israel and performed and recorded as an art song. Siegmeister also arranged the movement for choir in various formations, first for the standard SATB, then as two versions for women’s choirs, SSA and SSAA.


The concluding movement, “Saturday Night,” provides an energetic and entertaining finale. The melodies, particularly the country fiddle style and calling melodies imitate square dance. The first theme features the frenetic fiddling in the violins (measure 3). An interesting facet of the movement is that subsequent melodies mimic the caller of a square dance; which is part of Siegmeister program for this movement. The brass section takes this role first with a short, repetitive and speech-like melody (measure 19). A second calling set becomes more obvious when the texture thins out, featuring the bassoons playing a short pattern accompanied by the lower strings (measure 37). Other instruments try their hand at different calling sets, such as the clarinets in unison with an

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100 This melody is first introduced by a bassoon, and then presented by an oboe and the second French horn before it returns to the bassoon in a duet with a flute. Siegmeister gives the opportunity for the bass clarinet to play the first solo instead of the bassoon. As in the case of Mitropoulos’s live recording with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, the theme is played exclusively by members of a traditional woodwind quintet. Siegmeister, *Ozark Set*, Dmitri Mitropoulos, NBC Symphony Orchestra, Urania, 110, CD, 1999.


102 Ibid., 195.
oboe at measure 55 and the trumpets with the oboes and trombones joining in briefly in measures 71-74 (see example 2.4).

One other unique feature is the extended harmonic drone produced by the string section for much of the movement, from measure 35 – 85. The “scrapes” Siegmeister refers to in his liner notes are nowhere to be found in the score. Yet there are ascending slides in the violins produced by glissandi in the beginning “country fiddle style” section. This movement also has echoes of Copland, particularly of “Hoe Down,” the exuberant dance finale of Rodeo (1942). Both movements are based on American folkdances, and feature energetic rhythms. Copland’s influence on Siegmeister is an interesting matter. In the early 1930s, the younger composer looked to Copland as a mentor until Siegmeister began receiving criticism concerning his work during the mid-1930s. Although Siegmeister does not claim Copland as an influence on his style of the 1940s, there are striking enough similarities to suggest otherwise.

Elie Siegmeister earned recognition for his pieces in this new style that featured a tonal and consonant lyricism. Although he embraced the American Style during the 1940s, he continued to shift his aesthetic orientation in the following decades. Critics and listeners, however, continued to identify Siegmeister with the American style. By 1964, some categorized these works as “entertainment” pieces.103 In his later life, especially after his style changed drastically, Siegmeister bristled whenever someone called his music “old-fashioned Americana.”104

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103 Liner notes, Siegmeister: String Quartet No. 2, Galimir Quartet, Composers Recordings, 176, LP, 1964. The other two categories for Siegmeister’s works were “absolute” and “theatrical.” The unnamed writer thus implies that all of Siegmeister’s programmatic works are merely for entertainment.

After World War II, Elie Siegmeister continued to receive commissions and performances from leading orchestras and conductors throughout the country, yet he began to notice some of this popularity slip away by the 1950s. In addition, Siegmeister sensed the Cold War tangibly, primarily due to McCarthyism beginning in 1948. The feeling was quite palpable: “There was a certain fear, a feeling that you’d watch your step.” This was particularly true for those who held socialist views. Siegmeister expressed his dismay at this political culture change, “If your music dealt with the common people, with the struggles of a farmer or worker or black man, this showed you were probably a disloyal American.”

The Cold War significantly affected American classical music. We need look no further than Aaron Copland, the “dean of American composers” and exemplar of the American style. He began using twelve-tone methods with his Piano Quartet in 1950. Jennifer Delapp-Birkett investigated Copland’s shift in style because of the Cold War. Copland received negative attention and pressure after giving a keynote speech at the 1949 Waldorf-Peace Conference. Copland’s difficulties with McCarthyism are also well known—particularly the cancellation of *A Lincoln Portrait* at Dwight D.

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106 Ibid., 166.

107 Ibid., 181.

108 Ibid.

Eisenhower’s inauguration festivities. Furthermore, Copland appeared in May of that year before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations for his alleged connections to communism. It was not commonly known at the time, yet Siegmeister faced similar tribulations. Federal Bureau of Investigation agents questioned him in 1952. The inquiry came after allegations identifying him as a member of the Communist Party. Siegmeister denied the allegation. The agents also questioned Siegmeister about the party affiliation of Marc Blitzstein, Leonard Bernstein, Serge Koussevitzky, and Olin Downes. They left empty-handed, however, after Siegmeister responded, “I don’t know. Maybe they are. Maybe they aren’t. I don’t know what their religions are, whom they sleep with, or what their parties are. I’ve never asked them.”\footnote{Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 168.}

Siegmeister also faced pressure at his workplace, Hofstra University. A political action group called Aware hounded Hofstra to fire Siegmeister, claiming that he was a member of the Communist Party. Yet the university’s administration stood by him. Even as late as 1959, Siegmeister nearly lost an opportunity for a contracted movie score, \textit{They Came to Cordura}. Columbia Pictures hesitated after someone contacted the studio claiming Siegmeister was a communist.\footnote{Ibid., 298.} The studio offered Siegmeister $10,000 not to come to Hollywood or write a single note for the movie. Siegmeister consulted with a lawyer, decided to reject the hush money, and threatened to sue the studio for defamation of character. This worked to Siegmeister’s advantage and the studio continued to engage him as the film’s composer.
For a few decades, Siegmeister felt his perceived connection with the Communist Party haunting him. He tried to distance himself from socialist associations, for example, by changing the title of one of his first orchestral works, *May Day* (1933), to the more patriotic-sounding *American Holiday*.\(^{112}\) It is difficult to say whether the association cost him any commissions. Siegmeister was bemused when he received a commission in the 1980s from a federal agency. The United States Information Agency Artistic Ambassadors Program asked for a work to be performed overseas. When approached by the program’s organizer, John Robilette, Siegmeister asked, “Do you know that people think I’m a communist?” Robilette replied that he did not care and proceeded to commission *From These Shores* (1985).\(^{113}\) The fact that a government employee was so flippant about communism exemplifies how much the Cold War had thawed by the 1980s.

Elie Siegmeister stated that he was never a member of the Communist Party.\(^{114}\) Although he was sympathetic to it and active in a few related causes—The League Against War and Fascism, the Spanish loyalist movement—Siegmeister did not join because he did not want to be dictated to, particularly in his musical endeavors. Siegmeister felt, “If I’m going to become a political person, my music is going to suffer. They’re going to start telling me what I can write, [and] what I can’t write.” Yet his activities, including organizing the Soviet-American Music Society in the early 1940s, engendered suspicion.

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\(^{112}\) Ibid., 46.


The apogee of serialism in America is linked with the Cold War. Richard Taruskin argues that composers adopted serialism due to the volatile political situation. In shifting to serialism, “composers sought sanctuary in the abstract and universal (hence politically safe) truth of numbers rather than the particular (hence politically risky) reality of nation.” A significant change in the perception of communism also aided this shift. Whereas many of the composers of the American style viewed communism favorably before World War II, after the war liberal viewpoints rejected Stalinist communism. While the Soviet Union enforced tonality and rejected serialism as formalist via the Union of Soviet Composers, in the US and western Europe, many composers embraced twelve-tone techniques as well as serialism. In Germany, specifically, embracing a dissonant and formalist style may constitute as a reaction of anti-Nazism, because of that regime’s favoring of tonal, folklike classical music and strictures against formalism and Entartete (degenerate) music. Before the war, those who had already rejected totalitarian and Soviet realist art as “mass art” anticipated this sociopolitical change. In an article entitled “Avant Garde and Kitsch” in the Partisan Review (1939), the art critic Clement Greenberg praised modernism and the avant-garde over art which incorporates mass culture. Greenberg, alongside Dwight Macdonald and Sidney Hook, influenced Milton Babbitt to reject mass art. Babbitt proceeded to write the first work in total serialism, Three Compositions for Piano (1947), superseding oft-noted European innovators Olivier Messiaen and Pierre Boulez. Martin Brody posits, “During the early 1950s, in the context

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of Cold War, anti-Soviet sentiment, a critique of mass culture along Greenbergian lines echoed loudly in the American discussion of culture.”

Some composers were chagrined to see many American composers employing twelve-tone techniques. William Schuman’s term for serialism—internationalism—is quite telling of his views. Schuman lamented that younger American composers had given up their heritage to follow European systems and devices. Siegmeister held similar views and felt the change was deeply rooted in cultural conditions:

With the end of World War II, new disasters soon appeared: the cold war, the threat of nuclear annihilation, McCarthyism, renewed Stalinism, the cult of technology (as distinct from science itself)—all led to the age of alienation, anxiety, dehumanization.

Siegmeister was most dismayed that music, in his view, became disconnected with society and humanity. He termed this as “Cold Art” where “feelings of enthusiasm and faith in an ideal … gradually fell away, and were replaced by a deep unbelief, a corrosion of feeling, a shying away of one human being from another.”

Siegmeister also felt that classical composers and musicians lost interest in folk music, or perhaps composers did not want to write music connected with folk songs. In one way,
Elie Siegmeister stands as a counterpoint to Milton Babbitt. The latter embraced the university for “the survival of serious music.” Babbitt perceived universities as “The mightiest of fortresses against the overwhelming, outnumbering forces, both within and without the university, of anti-intellectualism, cultural populism, and passing fashion.” Yet while Siegmeister rejected serialism as a compositional tool, his music underwent a change during the same time that other composers adopted serialism. Without embracing twelve-tone techniques, his music became more complex and dissonant. One could say that this change was a reaction to the anxieties of the Cold War. Yet the change was also very personal, and came from within as well as from society.

Elie Siegmeister experienced grave loss in 1947 in the death of his father-in-law. That same year saw the premiere of Symphony No. 1, performed by the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Leopold Stokowski. Siegmeister called the premiere his “biggest success yet.” Shortly after these two events, he sank into a severe depression. Siegmeister had experienced episodes of depression before, yet he only sought a psychiatrist after this occurrence. For the next seven years, he was under the therapy of Daniel E. Schneider, M.D. Dr. Schneider specialized in the psychoanalysis of artists, and published a Freudian study on the subject in 1950. During the course of the treatment, Dr. Schneider focused on Siegmeister’s anxieties associated with composing. Starting with the period of studying with Nadia Boulanger in Fontainebleau, Siegmeister

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125 Ibid.


lacked confidence in his abilities. The reason why he was so prolific—especially during the early 1940s—stemmed from the urge to prove himself as a composer and write quickly. Siegmeister’s successes during that decade gave him confidence. Even so, Siegmeister realized his anxieties lingered—only masked.

The impact of this extensive therapy on Siegmeister’s music was significant. Alongside his insecurities about composing, he discovered that he was limiting himself by not concentrating on form in works—an avoidance of “super-intellectualism” and “formalism” in his art. In addition, Siegmeister seemed to have conflated formalism with “the artificial theories of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, et al.” He revealed a lack of confidence when he suggested that focusing on form and “the abstract side of music” would overwhelm him, or he would lose his personal style. Siegmeister prided himself in his artistic independence and did not subscribe to any school of thought. Yet he realized that his lack of attention to form was limiting, and he felt he could “branch out.” His self-imposed strictures on form resulted in under-developed themes, as seen in Ozark Set.

Critical reception of the first two symphonies was unfavorable, especially regarding form. Although, as noted previously, Siegmeister considered the First Symphony “his biggest success yet”—perhaps because it was his first work performed by the New York Philharmonic—the piece received unfavorable criticism, particularly from the New York Times critic Olin Downes. Downes panned the work and castigated

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129 Ibid., 132.
130 Ibid.
Siegmeister’s lack of technique and command of the material.\textsuperscript{131} Critical reaction to the Second Symphony was more positive. Siegmeister completed this symphony in 1951. The work received an overall positive response, including a favorable review from Virgil Thomson.\textsuperscript{132} However, Siegmeister’s execution of form drew mixed commentary; as Paul Affelder remarked: “The thematic material within each movement is admirably planned” yet lacking “a unity in spirit and style to bind” the disparate movements.\textsuperscript{133} Douglas Watt of \textit{The New Yorker} wrote that the symphony “sprawls all over the place.”\textsuperscript{134}

During this period in 1951, Elie Siegmeister read Rudolph Reti’s \textit{The Thematic Process in Music}. Reti, a Serbian pianist and music theorist, proposed that “one identical thought” unified a well-written work—a kernel that permeates the whole work yet that should outwardly appear in a variety of ways.\textsuperscript{135} Reti’s book begins with studies on Beethoven’s \textit{Symphony no. 9} and Schumann’s \textit{Kinderszenen}, and illustrates that each work’s contrasting themes demonstrate an underlying “inner essence.” After studying the book diligently, Siegmeister examined Beethoven’s sonatas and string quartets further.\textsuperscript{136}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{133}] Paul Affelder, “Symphony by Brooklyn Composer Given World Premiere at Carnegie Hall,” \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, February 26, 1952.
\item[\textsuperscript{134}] Douglas Watt, “Nothing Gained,” \textit{The New Yorker} 28, no. 3 (March 8, 1952), 115-16.
\item[\textsuperscript{136}] Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 198.
\end{itemize}
Siegmeister greatly admired Beethoven, primarily for his ingenuity in architectural and organic form. Siegmeister had already studied the quartets in depth under the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger. Regarding these pieces, he commented:

They’ve always remained with me—especially the last Quartets—a great model of perfection, of structural interplay, of the evolution of a large organism from small elements, from germinal motifs, from a basic concept that flowers in so many different ways, but always with a great architectural mastery.

Siegmeister’s compositional process changed drastically as a result of his study. Rather than trying to mimic Mozart by composing quickly, he took a Beethovenian route by meticulously revising and rewriting. Instead of constantly revising a phrase by “polishing” and “hammering,” he would write another version, and then attempt to rewrite it in a different way. A comparison of the length and compositional speed of his First and Third Symphonies provides an excellent example in the change of Siegmeister’s compositional process. The First Symphony is forty-four minutes long, and he composed it within eight months. The more compact Third Symphony—eighteen minutes long—took eleven months to complete.
String Quartet No. 2

Elie Siegmeister began composing String Quartet No. 2 during the summer of 1960.\textsuperscript{142} He wrote the work shortly after returning home from Hollywood, where he worked on \textit{They Came to Cordura}. This movie starred Gary Cooper, Rita Hayworth, and Van Heflin, and depicted a small group of soldiers making an arduous and dangerous trek from Mexico to New Mexico during the Mexican Expedition of 1916. The difficulties Siegmeister faced in Hollywood seem to have spurred on the new quartet as a reaction. There were some aspects of Hollywood that he enjoyed, such as composing for a major motion picture and then hearing the score recorded by the studio orchestra. However, the day before the recording session, the music director of the film, Maurice Stoloff, asked Siegmeister to take out some dissonances, specifically from the fight scenes.\textsuperscript{143} Siegmeister declined, contending that there was no sense in having tender music for fistfights and shooting. Stoloff, for example, wanted Siegmeister to replace a dissonant polychord with a D-major triad in a scene where one character attempts to kill another with a rock.\textsuperscript{144} The final point that upset Siegmeister was being completely shut out of the dubbing process.\textsuperscript{145} Siegmeister was aware of the collaborative nature of a motion picture score and its role in a film. He complied with rewriting a few sections after producers deemed the movie too long following a San Francisco sneak preview. Yet there was a resigned dissatisfaction when Siegmeister said: “I’ve spent the last four or five

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Siegmeister, liner notes, \textit{Siegmeister: String Quartet No. 2}, Galimir Quartet, Composers Recordings, Inc., 176, LP, 1964.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 287-89.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 289.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 293.
\end{itemize}
months writing the score for this picture, and although I participated in it and gave my best, I was writing music for their film and they could do what they want with it.”

This lack of control led Siegmeister to write “something for myself,” resulting in his String Quartet No. 2. No one commissioned the new quartet, nor was he asked to write it. Siegmeister joked that it was “the least commercial in the world.” After *They Came to Cordura*, which may have reached the largest audience for his music, Siegmeister turned inward and wrote introspective music. On the personal nature of the Quartet, he commented: “I wanted to write something that I felt deeply in my own life. I had to write a piece of music that expressed what I felt and thought, regardless of its practicality, its relation to anybody else, the outer world.”

Siegmeister’s first foray in this genre, String Quartet No. 1, was composed in 1935, and premiered at a Composer Forum-Laboratory concert in 1937. One critic detected an influence from Alban Berg. Comparing genres, Siegmeister stated that although string quartets lack the range of color and impact of an orchestra, they allow for “a more private, more introspective world” that distills the composer’s “thoughts and feelings.” Siegmeister’s views of what sounds and idioms were not compatible with a string quartet greatly informed his style in the String Quartet No. 2. He stated that: “I didn’t see myself writing in a jazzy or folk way for string quartet. I just didn’t know how

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146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
to do it, maybe, but I don’t think it works as well.” 151 As with his previous pieces of the 1950s, Siegmeister constructed String Quartet No. 2 focusing on organic development and large-scale form. This piece and much of Siegmeister’s works of the 1950s consisted of absolute music and explored a personal and introspective side of himself.

The Galimir Quartet previewed the String Quartet No. 2 at a concert at Hofstra University on January 28, 1961. The official premiere occurred at Carnegie Hall two weeks later on February 10 on a program that featured works from different points of Siegmeister’s life.152 The Galimir Quartet also recorded the Second String Quartet for Composers Recording, Inc. in 1964.153 Galimir Quartet and other groups, including the Juilliard Quartet, the Hofstra String Quartet, the Alard Quartet, the Colorado Quartet, and the Ellsworth String Quartet have performed String Quartet no. 2 on many occasions. The work received a hearty reception by critics, who took particular notice of the change in Siegmeister’s style from his works of the 1940s. One critic, nearly ecstatic about the difference, wrote: “The composer’s idiom—and probably to a certain extent his temperament—underwent a sea change from the populistic vernacular to the violently visionary.”154 This piece has also been compared to the music of European composers such as Paul Hindemith and, on more than one occasion, Béla Bartók.155

151 Ibid., 195.

152 Lehrman and Boulton, Elie Siegmeister, American Composer (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 275.


Elie Siegmeister discussed his Second String Quartet in liner notes of the Galimir Quartet recording, he stated that:

In an expressive sense, the Quartet contains elements of energy, lyricism, and wildness that have always been part of my music, welded into a tight organic structure. The overall formal plan involves transformation of the root ideas of the first movement during the course of the two that follow. Thus, the opening unison theme is metamorphosed into the secondary viola theme of the slow movement and again into what becomes the beginning of the third movement. The interweaving of such metamorphosed material throughout the quartet can be sensed by the listener who has heard the work two or three times, but complexities of structure can be discussed in detail only with score in hand. Nevertheless these same complexities, I believe, define the impact of the work and whatever challenge it may have for the listener.156

Example 3.1, String Quartet No. 2, movement I, measures 1-6.

\[ \text{Allegro con fuoco} \quad \text{I} = 132 \]

The string quartet begins with all four instruments playing a bracing theme in unison that emphasizes the tonal center of D. After repeatedly hammering a series of eighth-note Ds, the quartet begins to ascend using a sequence (Example 3.1). The sequence quickly disbands, allowing a freedom within the scale. This theme, as stated by


Siegmeister, provides much material for the work. The theme spans measures 3 to 6, yet the crucial kernel of the theme is found in measure 3 (Example 3.2). The relationship among these three pitches is explored, especially the minor third. Another significant feature is groupings of three notes, especially a leap followed by a return to the first note or its neighbor.

Example 3.2. Kernel from String Quartet No. 2, movement I, measure 3.

Shortly afterwards, a melodic counterpoint emerges in the violins. Beyond the ascending perfect fifth, the melody features a minor third, half steps, and a tritone. After this, an ascending chordal scale ends this opening section. Played by the viola and cello, this scale comprises parallel major triads (Example 3.3). A closer examination of one line shows a telescoping of notes from the unison theme.

Example 3.3. String Quartet No. 2, movement I, measures 30-32, reduction.

The lyrical theme at measure 58 begins a new slower section. This soaring melody features an octave descent from B flat to B flat only to return to the intervening F (Example 3.4)
Another interesting feature of this movement is the transition sections, which feature an increased chromaticism. Between the first two sections is an angular melody that ascends and then descends. This serpentine musical idea begins in the second violin, and the first violin restates it in exact contrary motion (Example 3.5).

Another transitional section calls for all parts to participate in a heightened chromatic interlude. The first violin plays all twelve pitches in m. 155, while the other parts play nine to eleven different pitches in the same measure. At first, it seems as though they are embarking on a serial row, with each part beginning to play at least seven distinct pitches. Yet this brief section is atonal rather than serial (Example 3.6).
Example 3.6. String Quartet No. 2, movement 1, measure 155.

The second movement provides an introspective relief and begins with a theme somewhat similar to the lyrical melody of the first movement. It shares the contour by descending nearly an octave before gliding up over two octaves. Also prominent are three-note groupings, particularly triplets (Example 3.7).

Example 3.7. String Quartet No. 2, movement II, measures 1-5, violin I.

A solo viola plays the second theme, marked recitativo (Example 3.8). This is a transformation of the first movement’s opening theme, yet much more agitated. As elsewhere, the triplet is prominent, including groupings of upper neighbor tones and minor thirds. The first violin soon takes over the theme, again with the other parts playing supportive roles, mimicking and accompanying the figures.

As if trying to solve a problem, the parts focus on the minor-third grouping, which transitions into a new theme centered on the grouping (Example 3.9).

Example 3.9. String Quartet No. 2, movement II, measures 45-50, violin I.

While exploring the relationship of notes with the minor third and surrounding notes, Siegmeister comes close to using his wedge motive (Example 3.10). Termed as such by Jack Gallagher perhaps from the shape of the grouping, Siegmeister used this four-note theme in his Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies and the Sextet for Brass and Percussion (1965). The figure beginning in measure 45 has the same notes, yet they are arranged differently. Rudolph Reti would term this *interversion*. It is notable that

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Siegmeister chose not to use the wedge motive in its original form and instead focused on the relationship of the inner notes, the minor third.

Example 3.10. Wedge Motive.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{example3.10.png}}
\end{array}
\]

The third and final movement begins with all parts playing dissonant pizzicatos before the first violin launches into another version of the first movement’s opening theme (Example 3.11). While the repeated notes occur at the end of the theme, the beginning features the kernel rearranged by interversion.

Example 3.11. String Quartet No. 3, movement III, measures 4-10, violin I.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{\includegraphics[width=0.7\textwidth]{example3.11.png}}
\end{array}
\]

This movement abounds with material from the preceding movements, yet the themes always appear transformed. While a ghostly new theme emerges in the first violin, composed of another interversion of the kernel (Example 3.12), the viola and cello provide a hushed, broken accompaniment. Just as they share turns in the accompaniment, both instruments alternate between bowing and pizzicato. This accompaniment features
another iteration of the kernel, although here it is transposed and interverted (Example 3.12).


With String Quartet No. 2, Siegmeister created a piece that emphasized its thematic development and atonal interludes. The work contains tonal centers, but eschews major and minor modes. It is no surprise that commentators were reminded of Bartók, considering the similarities between the Second String Quartet and Bartók’s later string quartets, specifically his Fifth String Quartet (1934). Siegmeister’s muscular Second String Quartet shows a complex conception of form and themes and calls for snap pizzicato in the third movement. The composition is in no sense derivative, however, and exhibits the composer’s full maturity and capabilities. While his String Quartet No. 2 is very much a product of his study of form, it is also a pivotal work. The composer
claimed: “This work brought to fruition the dramatic, abstract style toward which I had been moving for some years.”

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Elie Siegmeister’s Second String Quartet was pivotal in that it led him to pursue a more dissonant vein in his compositions. He remarked that it opened up “another channel.”\textsuperscript{159} Yet rather than constituting an entirely new direction, his 1960s style was, according to Siegmeister, a return to the dissonant and angular style of the 1930s, yet with the architectural framework and thematic development that he concentrated on during the 1950s. Siegmeister’s compositional style during the 1960s can more accurately be seen as a composite of all his past styles, including the lyricism of his American style of the 1940s. Social issues once again took a prominent position in Siegmeister’s output in the sixties, particularly with issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War raging across the nation. Siegmeister responded musically to the Vietnam War with \textit{The Face of War} (1967) and civil rights with \textit{I Have a Dream} (1967).

Now that Siegmeister felt a new stylistic freedom in his compositions, he began to write in a more dissonant style while experimenting with extended techniques. This is most evident in Second Piano Sonata (1964), which calls for plucked strings, tone clusters, and silently pressed chords to resound with sympathetic harmonic overtones. Siegmeister began using cluster chords freely when writing for piano, as seen in his Theme and Variations No. 2 (1967) and \textit{On This Ground} (1971). One explanation for the increased dissonance in his music was his renewed interest in the music of the modernists. On this subject, he stated: “I became more attracted to people like Riegger,

\textsuperscript{159} Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 294.
Varèse, Ives, and Bartók in the 1960s, feeling that I could afford to develop more fantasy elements, rich dissonances and rhythmic freedom in my music.”  

The most prominent feature of his new style was an incorporation of blues and jazz idioms. The song cycle *Madam to You* (1964), set to Langston Hughes’s poetry, features a musical language steeped in syncopations and seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords. The Second Piano Sonata contains a brief, demonic ragtime passage with off-kilter syncopations. Often, slow movements possess a languid bluesy quality. The use of blues and jazz idioms may have been Siegmeister showing solidarity with the civil rights movement, specifically in *Madam to You* and *I Have a Dream*.

Siegmeister touched on another stylistic influence when he stated, “Perhaps a touch of Hebraic melody appeared here and there as well. There's a kind of a freedom, a chant-like quality that you get in some of my later things.” The Hebraic influence to which Siegmeister referred first occurred in *I Have a Dream*, which was commissioned and premiered by Temple Beth Sholom in Long Beach, New York. Cantillation informs the solo baritone’s melodies in the work that are often stepwise or declamatory on repeated pitches (Example 4.1). This influence is also apparent in String Quartet No. 3 (“On Hebrew Themes”) (1973-74) and the two one-act operas based on Bernard Malamud short stories, *Angel Levine* (1984) and *Lady of the Lake* (1984-85). Temple Adath Jeshurun of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, commissioned a string quartet to contain traditional Hebrew themes. Siegmeister chose Hebraic melodies for each of the three

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[160] Ibid., 193.
\item[161] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
movements: a Yemenite chant, two Yiddish Chassidic tunes, and two Ashkenazi prayers.\footnote{Siegmeister, liner notes, \textit{Elie Siegmeister}, Composers Recordings, Inc., NWCR814, CD, 2007.}


\begin{multicols}{2}

Siegmeister also employed atonality in his music for effect, what he termed “fantastical elements.” Yet Siegmeister mingled atonality with tonality, believing this combination could enrich a composer’s style.\footnote{Siegmeister, “Reminiscences of Elie Siegmeister,” 381.} Even while writing music with a tonal center, Siegmeister began to move beyond the common practice of traditional harmonic progressions and structure, as seen in his String Quartet No. 2. As with that piece’s brief atonal transitions, he frequently produced an improvisatory effect. Siegmeister noted this improvisatory quality as one of the five most important characteristics of his later music. In his own words, these five characteristics were:

1) Melody: The core of music
2) Wildness: a balancing force to lyricism which includes a craggy, harsh feeling that appears in violent rhythms and biting harmonies
3) An improvisatory quality: New sonorities and structures using color-play and fantasy, reflecting the cruelty and violence of our time
4) Architecture: The freer a work becomes, the more vital are its structural underpinnings
5) The Dramatic: No gulf exists between the world of the theater and that of concert music\footnote{Siegmeister, \textit{The New Music Lover's Handbook}, 566.; Siegmeister is much more expansive and descriptive in his essay. Here, I have taken the most essential idea for each characteristic.}
Even with the significant changes in Siegmeister’s music, there was no sharp break in style. A testament to this is an occasional return to past styles, such as in *American Harp* (1966), which sounds like it could have been written during the 1940s in his American Style. Furthermore, he did not believe in making manifestos or “earth-shaking pronouncements” about drastically changing his style and aesthetics in the fashion of Igor Stravinskiy, George Rochberg, or Pablo Picasso.\(^{165}\)

A strong link between Siegmeister’s music of the 1930s and the 1960s are works connected with current social issues. The composer remained attuned to the current social situation and professed a need for idealism in art.\(^{166}\) His aesthetics aimed for the affirmation of humanity, and he believed there was too much pessimism in music. Similarly to “The Strange Funeral in Braddock” (1933), which took on issues of unsafe working conditions and the dehumanization that resulted from industrialization, *The Face of War* (1967) was politically edgy, in this case, serving as an anti-war protest.

Siegmeister was vehemently against the Vietnam War, and wrote this song cycle to the poetry of Langston Hughes.\(^{167}\) He composed the piece for baritone and piano (later creating a version with orchestral accompaniment). William Warfield premiered the original composition at the Composers and Musicians for Peace Concert on May 24, 1968 at Carnegie Hall. This concert was held in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated one month earlier. Siegmeister, as Artistic Director, helped

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\(^{166}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^{167}\) Siegmeister preferred Hughes’s poetry above all others—setting many of the poet’s works. Siegmeister also began collaborating with Hughes in 1951 on an opera, *The Wizard of Altoona*, which was never completed due to a growing disinterest on Hughes’s part. Lehrman and Boulton, *Elie Siegmeister, American Composer*, 45-47.
organize the event. All the performers volunteered their services. The program included David Diamond’s *Prayer for Peace*, William Mayer’s *Letters Home*, and works by Roger Sessions, Aaron Copland, George Crumb, Ulysses Kay, Ezra Ladermann, Benjamin Lees, and George Rochberg. Siegmeister’s high ideals and optimism brought him to the point of naïveté when he expressed his wish for his work: “Obviously, I hoped that *The Face of War* would shorten the miserable Vietnam disgrace by at least one minute—maybe it did!”

### I Have a Dream

The genesis of *I Have a Dream* was in a meeting in 1965 between Solomon Mendelson, cantor of Congregation Beth Sholom in Long Beach, New York, and key representatives of Hofstra University. Cantor Mendelson wanted to commission Siegmeister on behalf of his temple’s Men’s Club. He envisioned a work based upon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s historic “I Have a Dream” speech. The work would feature Cantor Mendelson as soloist, an African-American narrator, and an interfaith and interracial choir. Cantor Mendelson had already received Dr. King’s endorsement for the project, pending his approval of the completed work, and with the stipulation that tickets for the performance would be free.

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169 Lehrman and Boulton, *Elie Siegmeister, American Composer*, 73.; The Hofstra representatives were Donald Rowe, chairman of the Music Department; William P. McEwen, Provost and Dean of Faculties; Joseph Armur, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences; and Luis E. Bejarno, coordinator of Development for Hofstra.

170 Ibid., 74.
When commissioned by Cantor Mendelson and his temple, Siegmeister was slightly dubious because he had never written for a temple and was not religious. Yet he was touched when the temple representatives said to him “If Judaism doesn’t stand for brotherhood, what does it stand for?” This idea resonated with Dr. King’s message of brotherhood and freedom in his speech held at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963. Siegmeister believed music should address political and social issues. Regarding these issues, he stated: “They are a basic part of life. My music reflects my interests in the world—in life.”

Siegmeister spoke of Dr King’s speech: “The thoughts and feelings expressed in this moving statement proved a powerful stimulus to the writing of the composition.” He conceived a dramatic work with a symphonic structure. With Cantor Mendelson as the soloist, Siegmeister incorporated ancient Hebraic chants within the piece. His study of cantillation with Cantor Mendelson included synagogue chants and phrases from Torah and Haftarah blessings. He turned to librettist Edward Mabley, with whom he frequently collaborated, to adapt Dr. King’s speech. Mabley expanded some phrases for greater inclusion, as in “judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” becoming “not by the color nor by their creed—by their character only shall they be judged.”

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175 Ibid.
Siegmeister completed the work on January 14, 1967, according to the published score. The premiere on April 16, 1967 was planned as a significant occasion, with many notable politicians, musicians, and civil rights leaders planning to attend. Temple member and New York State Assemblyman Arthur Kremer chaired the concert committee, and U.S. Congressman Herbert Tenzer headed the advisory committee. The honorary committee included Marian Anderson, Leonard Bernstein, Ossie Davis, Langston Hughes, Jackie Robinson, Virgil Thomon, Hugo Weisgall, and U.S. Senator Jacob K. Javits (chair).\textsuperscript{176} Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were invited and expected to attend.\textsuperscript{177}

Only a handful of these celebrities came to the premiere because Dr. King gave a controversial speech at the Riverside Church in Manhattan less than two weeks before the premiere, in which he called for an end to the Vietnam War and heavily criticized the U.S. government’s involvement. He asked for an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, and lambasted the U.S. government as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”\textsuperscript{178} These bold statements drew ire from many quarters including President Johnson’s administration, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, much of the press, and even from the NAACP.\textsuperscript{179} This also brought negative attention to Siegmeister’s work, with the American Legion threatening to picket Dr. King at the premiere. Only a handful of

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 75.

\textsuperscript{178} King, Jr., Martin Luther, “Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam,” in \textit{Against the Vietnam War: Writing by Activists}, ed. Mary Susannah Robbins (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 107.; Dr. King outlined out a five-step plan of the U.S.’s withdrawal. While it was an anti-war speech, he also spoke of poverty and the disparity of classes. He criticized Congress for spending more on war than anti-poverty and social welfare programs.

celebrities attended: Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, businessman Charles Avnet, Manhattan Borough president Percy Sutton, Jewish liturgical scholar and composer Max Wohlberg, and a young Leonard J. Lehrman. Members of the John Birch Society also arrived to picket outside the temple.\textsuperscript{180}

\textit{I Have a Dream} premiered as scheduled on April 16, 1967. The work is scored for one baritone soloist, a narrator, a mixed choir, and a piano accompanist. Cantor Mendelson was the soloist, with William Warfield—a noted African-American singer and actor—as the narrator. It was the wish of both the commissioning temple and Siegmeister himself that these two parts be performed by members of different races. The choral forces consisted of the temple’s Ronim Choir and the Cornerstone Baptist Church Choir, conducted by Herbert Beattie with Philip Evans as pianist. William Warfield championed this piece, performing it numerous times in subsequent decades. He also premiered the version with orchestral accompaniment with the Omaha Symphony in 1968. In addition, Warfield participated in the work’s Manhattan premiere celebrating Martin Luther King Day and Siegmeister’s eightieth birthday in 1989, an event that was organized and conducted by Leonard Lehrman.\textsuperscript{181} The original version of the piece with piano accompaniment has been performed no less than ten times, mostly in the New York metropolitan area, but also in Rhode Island and Maryland. The orchestral version has received at least ten performances by groups such as the Colorado Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, Houston Symphony Orchestra, Gateway Festival in St. Louis, Roosevelt University, and Queens College, along with performances in Washington, D.C.

\textsuperscript{180} Lehrman and Boulton, \textit{Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography}, 75.

\textsuperscript{181} Siegmeister and Dr. King shared January 15 as a birthday.
The work has received mixed reviews over the course of its performance history. After the orchestral premiere in Omaha, one critic praised it as “a new cantata destined for greatness.” The demanding nature of the work was particularly noted in a Rhode Island performance, with one critic berating the ill preparedness of the choir. A 1989 review was tepid, citing “jabbing assertiveness as uncharacteristic of Dr. King’s liquid style of delivery.” The review also complained of “cartoonish” instrumental effects employed for word painting. David Ewen, chronicler of modern American classical music, has praised the work, hailing it as “a powerful, deeply moving cantata.” The work has also been praised by choral scholars who called for more performances and recognition.

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182 Lehrman and Boulton, Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography, 208.

183 The instrumentation for the Small Orchestra version: 1+pic.1.2(B-flat)[+optional Alto Sax].1 2.2(B-flat).2(1 Tenor, 1 Bass).0 Piano. Strings. 1 Percussionist [2 Timpani, Snare Drum, Large Tom-tom, 2 cymbals, triangle, wood block, 2 bongo drums, cowbell, xylophone, glockenspiel, tambourine]. Large orchestra: 2+pic.2.2+Alto Sax(opt.).2 4.2.3.1 Strings. Piano. 2 percussionists sharing duties on same instruments.

184 Omaha Air Pulse, quoted from Lehrman and Boulton, Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography, 208.


188 The first is Georgia Ryder, “Another Look at Some American Cantatas,” The Black Perspective in Musc 3, no. 2 (May 1975), 139.; David P. DeVenney takes a closer look with Varied Carols: A Survey of American Choral Literature (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 138.
Siegmeister divided *I Have a Dream* into ten movements:

1. “Introduction”
2. “The Sound of Freedom”
3. “Exile”
4. “There Comes a Time”
5. “No Man is an Island”
6. “We are not Satisfied”
7. “Orchestral Commentary”
8. “I Have a Dream”
9. “Let Freedom Ring”
10. “The Sound of Freedom” (Finale)

The first two and last two movements function as bookends and share musical material. The finale, “The Sound of Freedom,” is a reprise of the second movement of the same title, yet this time the piece ends triumphantly. The fifth movement, “No Man is an Island,” represents the central portion of the work and contains a wonderful fugue. David P. DeVenney writes that Siegmeister composed this work in a symmetrical form, yet it is not that clear or simple. DeVenney asserts that the fourth movement, “There Comes a Time,” balances movements six and seven. This argument is problematic because “Orchestral Commentary” does not mirror any movement. Rather, it revisits all the themes from previous movements.

The Narrator takes the oratorical role of Martin Luther King, Jr., while the Baritone soloist mainly provides further reflection and commentary. Siegmeister’s wedge motive unifies the work, and the motive’s dissonant profile outlines the frustrations of inequalities and injustice (Example 4.2).

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189 Ibid., 158.
Example 4.2. *I Have a Dream*, movement 2, “The Sound of Freedom,” measure 38, wedge motive.

The work begins in a dissonant manner, with the first movement “Introduction,” replete with quartal chords that form eleventh chords. The wedge motive is stated a few times within the instrumental introduction. Between the Narrator’s first sentences of the Emancipation Proclamation and the resulting freedom for slaves, there is a rising figure closely related to the wedge motive. The chorus rejoices with “We are free! Free men and women! Free at last!” while the Baritone sings “we hear them chanting” and “we hear them singing” between these interjections using the wedge motive (Example 4.3). With the numerous uses of the wedge motive and its variants, Siegmeister aligns the motive with the pursuit of freedom.

The second movement, “The Sound of Freedom,” is a choral celebration with brief jazzy interludes in the accompaniment. Siegmeister incorporates jazz and blues idioms in his work, with syncopated rhythms and eleventh and thirteenth chords. This musical language is akin to the symphonic jazz of Gershwin and Copland of the late 1920s and 1930s. However, the celebration is cut short with the Narrator’s words “But one hundred years later the Negro still is not free.” The wedge motive reappears, creating a transition into the next movement.
The idea of brotherhood and the shared history of hardships between African-Americans and Jews is made explicit in “Exile,” the third movement. The text reads:

“Exile! What a bleak, bitter word / Spoken by the Hebrew children as they sat by the waters of Babylon / Spoken by the Negro children as the sit by the waters of … all the
rivers of America.” This passage also suggests a connection to Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” linking the Nile, Congo, and Euphrates Rivers with the Mississippi.190

With the fourth movement, “There Comes a Time,” the chorus sings in unison about taking action for civil rights. By setting the line in unison, Siegmeister unites the choir, literally, to confront this problem. His use of a unison chorus harkens to the mid-1930s when he wrote and conducted mass songs. “No Man is an Island,” the central portion of I Have a Dream, contains an unaccompanied choral fugue. Siegmeister indicates that only a small group should sing the fugue. It presents difficulties and Siegmeister provides the option to skip the fugue. The brief seventh movement, “Orchestral Commentary,” revisits all past themes in quick succession. The medley provides momentum into the next movement, “I Have a Dream.” It begins with the Baritone delivering Dr. King’s famous message. Those words are set in a lyrical line, with an optimistic upward direction. The wedge motive reappears with the entrance of the chorus on the words, “This is our Hope,” and again in the next movement, “Let Freedom Ring.” The inherent nature of the motive—that of tonal ambiguity and dissonance—jars against the hopeful themes and optimistic words. The work’s finale, “The Sound of Freedom,” is unambiguously hopeful. It reprises the second movement, beginning in the same celebratory fashion. The chorus, set in D major, is clear of all dissonances, and is not cut short abruptly but ends jubilantly on a D major ninth chord.

In I Have a Dream, Siegmeister celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words and ideas. Siegmeister supported the Civil Rights movement, and championed Dr. King’s speech with I Have a Dream. Through the tumultuous 1960s, Siegmeister remained

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190 Lehrman and Boulton, Elie Siegmeister, American Composer: A Bio-Bibliography, 74.
optimistic in his ideals for the United States. In his last decades, he softened his dissonances yet continued to use jazz and blues idioms in his music, most notably in *Prelude, Blues & Toccata* (Piano Sonata No. 4) (1980).
Conclusion

Elie Siegmeister’s compositional style changed many times in his active musical life. Driven by his social conscience, he wrote “The Strange Funeral in Braddock” and mass songs for the common worker in the 1930s. Siegmeister’s enjoyment of American folk songs led him to organize the American Ballad Singers to disseminate the varied songs of the United States. Writing Ozark Set in a tonal and melodic style influenced by folk song initiated a very productive period during the 1940s. The psychoanalysis Siegmeister received beginning in 1947 helped him pursue form and development in the 1950s. His Second String Quartet, which he wrote after an unpleasant experience in Hollywood, brought about a return to sinewy dissonance and a synthesis of his past styles.

I Have a Dream exemplifies not only the synthetic style of the 1960s, but also Siegmeister’s entire life. It contains a truly diverse mixture of styles. More significantly, the cantata addresses the issue of civil rights and freedom. Siegmeister considered it important to engage with the world, and to connect his music with society. He strove to confront social issues in his music, which he achieved in his own personal way. Siegmeister’s works, such as the anti-war song cycle, The Face of War, continue to resonate with the contemporary problems of society.

With this investigation, I documented Siegmeister’s shifting style by identifying and presenting an array of causes and motivations for the change in his musical language. I hope that this study provides a compelling and more complex perspective of the composer’s development as the basis for further research and understanding. The significance of Elie Siegmeister’s creative production has been neglected in recent years.
His artistic profile is limited, with few public performances and even fewer commercial recordings of his works. He has received the most recognition for his orchestral music of the 1940s. Yet Siegmeister composed a diverse array of music in many genres and styles that expressed his unique and compelling American voice.
Bibliography


———. *I Have a Dream: Cantata for Mixed Chorus (SATB), Baritone Solo, Narrator and Orchestra (or Piano)*. New York: MCA Music, 1968.


