

An American Songbook

If we open our Songbook, our American Songbook, we will find more than a collection of words and notes. We will find our strength, our passion, our hope. For in the poetry of the words is the conviction of our beliefs, in the sound of the notes is our love of beauty, and in the rhythm of the beat is our joy of life.

Tonight we select a few pages from this songbook to share with you – each song making a contribution to an ever-growing collection that reflects where we came from, who we are, and what we hope to be.

With lyrics based on the 95th Psalm, our first selection tonight like many other pages from our American Songbook, invites us to worship – to come and sing with joy to the Lord.

Oh Come Let Us Sing With Joy to the Lord

“An American Fanfare” turns one of our favorite patriotic hymns into something fast and energetic. Although this dynamic ceremonial flourish is certainly a different interpretation from what you’re use to, you’ll be sure to recognize the tune right away. It is actually a borrowed page from the English Songbook where it is called “God Save the Queen”. Of course we know it as “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” and was adapted from the English version by Baptist Minister Samuel Smith.

An American Fanfare

After two miserable months at sea 102 pilgrims reached American soil in 1620 aboard the Mayflower. In England they left behind severe persecution and hoped to make a better life for themselves in the New World. But an arrival later than planned meant were ill prepared for the harsh New England winter. Malnutrition, disease and exposure claimed the lives of half the pilgrims.

When the Mayflower set sail to return to England that spring not one of the surviving pilgrims chose to sail with her. They all stood on the stony beach and watched their only link with their homeland disappear into the horizon.

Today over 30 million Americans can trace their heritage to those 51 pilgrims who stayed. Their descendants include movie stars, presidents, writers, poets, and musicians. Governor of Plymouth Colony William Bradford would later write:

“Thus out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by His hand that made all things of nothing, and gives being to all things that are; and, as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone unto many...”

Pilgrim Song

Singing in the rain is considered by many to be the greatest movie musical and one of the greatest American films. The story of silent era actors having to adapt to the new technology of “Talkies” connected deeply with its 1950s audience, and still does today. Its upbeat message encourages us to persevere through change and even find joy in adversity.

And now, as Lina Lamont would say, “What’s wrong with the way talk? Of course I can talk. Don’t everybodies?”

I’ve just always wanted to do that.

Singing in the Rain

Because slaves were forbidden from expressing themselves, religious music was often the only way they could safely voice their sorrow, pain and hope. These spirituals provided comfort and encouragement for their ongoing struggle for freedom.

In Africa, stories of courageous ancestors served to inspire, but over time slaves began to embrace heroes from the Old Testament, finding in them examples of determination, fortitude, and a firm faith in a God who would deliver them.

Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel

In many ways Appalachia was American’s first frontier. Home of the iconic Daniel Boone, by the mid 18th century it had been settled primarily by Scottish and Irish immigrants whose culture would come to dominate that region.

In his composition “Appalachian Morning”, Robert Sheldon hints of that heritage, as well as the beautiful sweeping views of mountains and wood that

greeted those early pioneers every morning as they went about their daily business of forging a new life in a new land.

Appalachian Morning

Most of us today know the first step to singing is learning do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do, but in the early 19th century people still struggled with the best method for teaching music to children and adults alike. Young America yearned to become more musically literate and the shaped note method seemed to fit the bill.

In this singing style, triangles, ovals, and squares were used instead of musical notes. An experience reader could quickly master the notes and then replace them with the words.

The method grew in popularity and spread across America. It was particularly effective for congregational and community singing and a tune book, “The Sacred Harp” was published that was exclusively shaped note songs -- “Saints Bound for Heaven”, being one them.

Although the popularity of this technique has dwindled Shaped Note groups still gather to sing today using this uniquely American musical tradition.

Following Saints Bound for Heaven we will hear variants on other selections from The Sacred Harp.

Saints Bound for Heaven

Variants on a shaped Note Tune

At first listen you might mistake “Simple Gifts” as a traditional Celtic tune but it is in fact all American, written by Joseph Brackett, a lifelong resident of Maine. He was a faithful member of the Shakers religious sect, so named because of their ecstatic behavior during worship services.

Reflecting a lifestyle based on humility and simplicity “Simple Gifts” was written as a dance song for the Shaker community. Shakers believed dance liberated the soul and this song invites us to turn, turn and turn ‘til we come round right.

Simple Gifts

Believed by many professionals to be the greatest movie song of all time “Over the Rainbow” was not included in the original cut of “The Wizard of Oz”. Producers thought it “slowed down the picture” and that it didn’t “sound like something a girl would sing in a barnyard”. Fortunately the producers eventually yielded to the persistence of the associate producer and Garland’s own vocal coach, and the song became the theme of the movie as well as a cultural touchstone.

In the movie, Dorothy, played by the young and talented Judy Garland, dreams of going over the rainbow to a place where she imagines she won’t be plagued by worries or trouble. Her wish is granted, but she soon finds that even over the rainbow fear must be overcome and learns to do so with intelligence, love, and courage.

The Depression era audience must have found this message especially relevant and today it is no less so. Its haunting melody and poignant words has earned “Over the Rainbow” an enduring place in the American Songbook, and our hearts.

Over the Rainbow

As the depression grew smaller and smaller in America’s rear view mirror music took on a new whole new energy that was exciting and hot. America was swinging to a whole new beat and big band music was playing it.

Someone once noted of American swing, “Swing is so much more than a dance, it’s a way of life. The music gets stuck in your mind and the dance is in your heart and the whole scene is engraved on your soul. You can fly.”

And as America celebrated it’s victory after World War 2, boy oh boy, where we ever flying.

Swing’s the Thing

In 1892, not even 30 years had passed since the Civil War and national unity was fragile. Daniel Sharp Ford, owner the magazine “Youth’s Companion”, sensed the U.S. needed a boost of patriotism. He gave an assignment to Francis J. Bellamy, a former minister and member of his writing staff. He asked Bellamy to write a Pledge of Allegiance. Bellamy fulfilled his assignment; the pledge was published in the magazine, and soon after became wildly popular.

Now, as we approach Memorial Day, it is our privilege and pleasure to honor all those who have served in our military. During this tribute as we play the anthem for each military branch we invite anyone who has served, or has family who has served, in that branch to stand up. At the appropriate time, you will be prompted to sing the “Star spangled Banner” and recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Armed Forces Salute

Hold Me, Rock Me

The American Landscape has inspired great art of all kinds, and music is no exception. Chesapeake Bay with its miles of picturesque coastlines and rivers, colonial lighthouses, and secret islands certainly inspired musician Vince Gassi to capture its beauty in notes when he composed “A Chesapeake Bay Adventure”.

Chesapeake Bay is known for its rich maritime history that includes pirates such as the infamous Blackbeard. So, a vast ye scurvy knaves, be ye prepared, for swashbuckling themes be part of this here musical adventure! Arrrrrr!

A Chesapeake Bay Adventure

“The cost of freedom is always high, but Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender, or submission.” John F. Kennedy

In its 239-year history, war has not been a stranger to these United States, both abroad and on our own soil. But no matter where they are fought, all wars require leaving. To a veteran soldier perhaps it is part of the job, to the young soldier perhaps a chance at adventure, for both it is only with the greatest courage and conviction that they take those steps away from home.

And all soldiers hope for the same thing; when the job is done or the adventure is over they can turn their feet toward those they love, and return home again.

Homeward Bound

When young John Philip Sousa tried to run away with the circus at 13, his father convinced him instead to join the Marine Band. He would play with the band, while still studying music composition until he was 20 years old. Later, he would happily accept the offer to lead that same band and did so for 12 years before creating and touring with his own band for 40 years. The patriotic “March King” was

indisputably the most famous musical act not just in the U.S., but also the world. Over his lifetime he would compose 70 songs, 15 operettas, and 136 marches including "Stars and Stripes Forever", "Semper Fidelis", "The Liberty Bell", and our next selection, "The Thunderer".

He once said; "I firmly believe that we have more latent musical talent in America than there is in any other country. But to dig it out there must be good music throughout the land, a lot of it."

Well Mr. Sousa, we couldn't agree with you more!

The Thunderer

It would be vain and narrow minded for us to believe that all the music from our American Songbook is strictly American. Our music has been influenced by countless other cultures that have contributed to the Great American musical Melting Pot.

It would not be our music without their influence, and to show our eternal gratitude tonight we borrow a page from our Swedish friend's songbook -- "Thank You for the Music", by ABBA.

An interesting note, when recording for the United States audience, members of ABBA had to learn the songs by rote because none of them actually spoke English. So to make sure our Swedish friends understand I'd like say "Tack for musiken".

Thank You for the Music

T. S. Eliot once said, "You are the music while the music lasts." And you have lasted a good while this evening.

We have heard many wonderful songs tonight from our American Songbook, but of all our songs the greatest is this – Freedom.

Freedom inspired pilgrims to stay through that first devastating winter, freedom was the hope of the slaves as they sang their spirituals, freedom allowed the Shakers to dance to music that redeemed their souls, freedom to express yourself created the new music that pulsed with a Swing beat, and freedom is the song in every soldier's heart.

Without freedom there is no American Songbook for it is on every page. We could not be who we are without it, we could not have music we have without it! May music and freedom continue to ring through this land and may we forever be adding pages to our American Songbook.

Let Freedom Ring

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