

# America's Musical Voice Comes Alive after the Civil War

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In the decades following the Civil War and leading up to the First World War, American writers and composers increasingly turned away from Europe to their own regions for subject matter and artistic inspiration. The war's devastation, the end of slavery, and the turmoil of Reconstruction made the landscapes, dialects, and social conflicts of the United States freshly urgent material. In literature, this impulse appears in local color and realist writing: Mark Twain's Mississippi River, Kate Chopin's Louisiana bayous, Sarah Orne Jewett's New England villages, and Charles Chesnut's Black communities in the postwar South. Their works foregrounded regional speech, customs, and racial tensions, insisting that American life could not be adequately captured by European forms or settings.

Similarly, composers such as New Orleans's own Louis Moreau Gottschalk, later followed by Charles Ives and the early collectors of spirituals and folk songs, sought musical material in plantation melodies, West Indian field songs, Native American tunes, hymnals, and popular song rather than in imported Italian or German models alone. This shift helped lay the groundwork for the twentieth century's jazz and blues idioms and a broader vernacular concert tradition.

The emergence and legal codification of the term "citizen" after 1865, most notably in the Fourteenth Amendment, intersected directly with this aesthetic turn. Citizenship redefined who counted as part of the nation, at least in principle, and sharpened the question of whose stories, voices, and musical idioms had any right to represent America. As formerly enslaved people, immigrants, and women pressed claims to cultural as well as political belonging, artists responded by depicting distinctly American experiences, regions, and conflicts. The post-Civil War discourse of citizenship and the arts' movement toward regional, homegrown themes were not parallel developments running alongside each other; they were the same argument made in different registers. However tenuous it seemed at

times, together they became the musical score for the emergence of a more self-aware, pluralistic American cultural identity.

The composers examined below are among the most consequential voices in that argument. They worked across an extraordinary range of settings and traditions: some traditional musical settings, some unusual or itinerant locations which only serves to make the collective story more fascinating. Their lives collectively map the social egalitarian and aesthetic tensions of an era in which American music was still in the process of deciding what it was to be and who had the power or moral authority to condone it.

### **Francis Johnson: The First Name in Print**

Any honest account of American composition must begin not in Boston's concert halls but in Philadelphia, with a man whose short life predates the period in question, but who nevertheless helped set the stage for musical innovations to follow. Francis Johnson was born around 1792, probably in the Caribbean, and by the 1810s had established himself in Philadelphia's musical life as a bandleader, performer, and prolific composer for bugle, brass, and wind ensemble. What distinguishes him above all is a fact that sounds almost arcane until you weigh its full implications: in 1818, Johnson became the first Black American composer to have his music formally published. To appear in print was to be acknowledged, in the legal and commercial record, as the originating intelligence behind a work. In a country actively debating whether Black people possessed full humanity, the published score carried a meaning that extended well beyond the musical.

Johnson's compositions, which included marches, cotillions, and promenade pieces, satisfied the tastes of white Philadelphia society while embracing a rhythmic confidence and improvisational energy that would resurface, in various transmuted forms, across the next century of Black American music. In 1837 he took his ensemble to Britain, becoming one of the first American bandleaders of any background to perform abroad to significant public reception. He died in 1844, celebrated in his own city and nearly forgotten everywhere else. That pattern of local renown and national obscurity would repeat with painful regularity across the lives of Black American artists throughout the nineteenth century.

## **George Chadwick and New England Ambition**

Where Francis Johnson represents what American music accomplished despite institutional exclusion, George Chadwick represents what it could achieve with institutional blessing, and the constraints that blessing sometimes imposed. Born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1854, Chadwick trained in Leipzig and Munich, returned to Boston, joined the faculty of the New England Conservatory, and eventually became its director. He was a central figure in what came to be called the Second New England School, a group that included John Knowles Paine, Amy Beach, John Knowles Paine, and Arthur Foote, all of whom were determined to demonstrate that Americans could meet the formal standards set by Brahms and Wagner.

By those measures, Chadwick largely succeeded. His *Second Symphony* and his *Symphonic Sketches* show a composer of real invention, and his harmonic language occasionally ventured past the comfort zones of his European models. What is most telling in retrospect are the moments when his native American ear breaks through the German training: pentatonic figures and syncopated rhythms that surface unexpectedly, as though something in the surrounding musical environment simply insisted on being heard. Chadwick lived until 1931, long enough to watch the conservatory tradition he represented begin to seem provincial to a younger generation whose models were early modernist like Stravinsky and Debussy rather than Brahms. His was a complicated legacy of a gifted composer who did everything the musical establishment required, and yet whose work is now most valued precisely because he was prepared to move beyond those boundaries.

## **Harry T. Burleigh and the Dignity of the Spiritual**

Harry Thacker Burleigh was born in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1866, the grandson of a man who had been enslaved, and yet he carried that legacy with him into rooms that had rarely admitted a Black man before. A scholarship brought him to New York's National Conservatory of Music in 1892, where the director was the visiting Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. The encounter between the young baritone from Erie and the internationally celebrated Dvořák would have consequences for both. Burleigh sang African American spirituals for Dvořák in the evenings, songs he had absorbed from his grandfather, and Dvořák, who had been searching

for the sonic materials of an authentically American music, listened with the attentiveness of a composer on the edge of a discovery.

Burleigh emerged from the conservatory with the formal training to do something no Black composer had yet accomplished at scale: he began arranging spirituals for solo voice and piano, transforming communal folk expressions into concert pieces suitable for the recital stage. His arrangements of "Go Down, Moses," "Deep River," and "Every Time I Feel the Spirit" gave these songs a new kind of institutional visibility without stripping them of their gravity. Burleigh himself was a celebrated baritone who sang for decades at Saint George's Episcopal Church in Manhattan, and his presence on the concert platform helped establish the spiritual as serious art deserving the same attention as the European *lied* tradition. He received the NAACP's first Spingarn Medal in 1917, and his work stands as a crucial bridge between the oral tradition of Black sacred music and its eventual place in the formal concert repertoire.

### Scott Joplin and the Architecture of Ragtime

Scott Joplin was born in Texas around 1868, grew up in a household that managed to acquire a piano, received formal musical training, and spent his early career moving through the saloons, dance halls, and social clubs of the Midwest. By the time he settled in Sedalia, Missouri in the 1890s, a style of syncopated piano music was cohering into something defined enough to name. Ragtime, a term most likely derived from "ragged time," referring to the rhythmic displacement of melody against a steady, march-like bass, was dance music performed with a broad smile, physically irresistible and formally rigorous at once.

Joplin was not ragtime's only practitioner, but he was its most rigorous architect. His "Maple Leaf Rag," published in 1899, became one of the first pieces of American sheet music to sell over a million copies and established the form's template: a series of sixteen-bar strains, each meticulously constructed, the syncopated right hand in constant productive tension with the grounding left. I can clearly recall my grandmother, who was born in 1897 pounding the ivories on our old basement upright, with that same inexorable smile on her face.

Joplin's ambitions extended beyond the dance floor, though. He composed a ragtime ballet and, most daringly, a full-scale ragtime opera, *Treemonisha*,

completed in 1911, whose failure to receive proper staging broke something in him. He died in 1917, nearly forgotten. Rehabilitation came in the 1970s, partly through the popular success of the film *The Sting*, as scholars gradually recognized the scale of his accomplishments. Ragtime matters not only on its own terms but as historical preparation: its polyrhythmic energy, its reconciliation of European formal structure with African-derived rhythmic phrasing, and its vernacular confidence fed directly into the emergence of jazz in the early twentieth century. Joplin did not live to hear that music called by its new name, but without him it would have taken longer to arrive.

### **Gussie Davis and the World of Tin Pan Alley**

Gussie Lord Davis worked not in the concert hall or the opera house but in the commercial song marketplace, and specifically in the world that came to be known, with cheerful irreverence, as Tin Pan Alley. The name has an agreeably accidental origin. In the 1890s, the popular music publishing industry had concentrated itself along West 28th Street in Manhattan, between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, where songwriters hammered away simultaneously at upright pianos in adjoining offices. The journalist Monroe Rosenfeld, visiting the block to write a piece on the industry, reportedly found the collective racket reminiscent of tin pans being banged together. The name stuck, and it came to designate not just a street but an entire commercial ecosystem: publishers, song pluggers who promoted new numbers to performers, and the vast public appetite for sentimental ballads, novelty songs, and weepy tributes to home and mother.

Davis was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1863 and taught himself music while working as a janitor at a Cincinnati music school, reportedly absorbing lessons by listening through doors to classes he could not afford to attend. He eventually made his way to New York and became one of Tin Pan Alley's most commercially successful songwriters, producing hits that included the tearful narrative ballad "In the Baggage Coach Ahead," which sold in enormous quantities in the 1890s. Davis was Black, working in an industry where barriers facing Black artists were formidable and persistent, and his commercial success was both a personal achievement and evidence that popular music, driven primarily by whether a song would sell, was already becoming a space where those barriers, while real, were somewhat more permeable than in the formal concert world.

## Charles Ives and the Connecticut Modernist

Charles Ives was born in Danbury, Connecticut in 1874, and the sounds of his childhood saturated his musical imagination so completely that he spent the rest of his life finding ways to put them back on paper: marching bands, competing hymns drifting across a village green, parlor songs, fiddlers at outdoor gatherings, the overlapping noise of ordinary American life. His father, a bandleader of pronounced experimental inclinations, had a habit of conducting in one key while a pianist played in another, out of sheer curiosity about the collision. The son absorbed that temperament alongside the repertoire.

After Yale, where he studied composition with the thoroughly traditional Horatio Parker, Ives made what proved to be a creatively liberating decision: he entered the insurance industry as an actuary with Mutual Life Insurance Company in New York City. He eventually co-founded the firm of Ives and Myrick, which became highly successful, and composed evenings and weekends, entirely outside the professional music world and therefore free of its expectations. The results were unlike anything else being produced in America at the time. His four symphonies, two substantial piano sonatas, and more than a hundred songs incorporate hymn tunes and popular melodies embedded inside dense polytonal or atonal textures, multiple rhythmic layers proceeding simultaneously, and structural experiments that anticipate techniques European composers were developing independently and with no knowledge of what Ives was doing in Connecticut.

Because he neither sought performance nor pursued publication during his most productive years, his music remained largely unknown until the 1930s and 1940s, when compositions like *Three Places in New England* and *Concord Sonata* began generating something close to astonishment among musicians encountering them for the first time. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1947, which he accepted with characteristic indifference. Ives represents a peculiarly American paradox: the successful businessman as radical, the arch-modernist who was simultaneously the composer most saturated in the sounds of the American past.

## Antonín Dvořák and the American Summer

No account of this period is complete without Antonín Dvořák, who arrived in New York in 1892 to direct the National Conservatory of Music and left

two years later having composed some of the most recognizable music ever associated with the American landscape, while retaining his distinctively Czech identity and compositional style. He had been recruited by the conservatory's founder, Jeannette Thurber, who believed that a composer of his international standing could help American music establish the credibility it still lacked in European eyes. Dvořák was curious about the project and listened carefully to American musical idioms he was exposed to, absorbing the pentatonic contours and modal character of the spirituals and integrating them into his *Symphony #9 From the New World* (1893) and the works that followed.

That summer of 1893 proved decisive, indeed. Dvořák's Czech secretary, Jan Kovařík, was from Spillville, a small farming community in northeastern Iowa settled by Czech immigrants who had maintained their language, customs, and folk traditions with remarkable fidelity. Dvořák spent that summer in Spillville, playing the church organ in the mornings, walking the surrounding countryside, and listening to everything the place offered: birdsong, the Cedar River, and the music of a Kickapoo band camped nearby, whose melodies he noted in his sketchbook with evident fascination. The Iowa landscape felt recognizably like home to him, and in that state of relaxed receptivity he composed, in a matter of days, his *String Quartet No. 12 in F major*, known ever since as the "American" Quartet.

The quartet's opening theme, a long-breathed, pentatonic melody of striking simplicity, sounds less invented than discovered, as if recovered from the ground beneath the Iowa fields. Drawing on the folk idioms he had absorbed all year and filtering them through his Bohemian musical sensibility, Dvořák produced something that is neither straightforwardly Czech nor straightforwardly American but a compelling synthesis of both. He returned to Prague in 1895, and the conservatory gradually lost the momentum his presence had given it. But the *"American" Quartet*, the *New World Symphony*, and the *String Quintet #3 in E flat-Major*, also composed that summer in Spillville, entered the permanent repertoire and the sustained conversation about what American music was and could be.

### **Conclusion: Emerging Voices, Evolving Sounds**

The questions Dvořák posed during his two years in the United States were not musicological abstractions. They were political ones: whose traditions

deserved to be heard as the foundation of a national style, and whose contributions a predominantly European culture had made a habit of ignoring. He posed them as an outsider with enough standing and from an established, recognizable platform like New York's National Conservatory, its director Francis Johnson, and renowned Black vocalist Harry Burleigh, to make the American musical establishment sit up and listen.

Those questions did not resolve when Dvořák returned to Prague in 1895. They passed, with increasing urgency to the generation of composers who followed: to figures who had absorbed ragtime and the spiritual not as exotic borrowings but as the actual sound of the country they lived in, and who would eventually build jazz, the blues, and the American modernist tradition out of exactly the materials the conservatory world had spent decades treating as beneath serious consideration.

The arc from Johnson's published score of 1818 to Dvořák's Iowa summer of 1893 is best understood in that light. It is not a story of steady progress toward some agreed-upon destination. It is a record of persistent pressure: composers from every background and circumstance finding ways to be heard in a culture that was selective, often in bad faith, about whose voice counted as American. That pressure did not ease after 1893. It became the defining condition of American music, as early compositional modernism, Black jazz idioms, and the ebullient post-war era, "Roaring '20s" emerged in the century that followed.