



American Music: The Unanswered Question

A Course in Music Appreciation

**Lectures by Jonathan FIELDS and Maurizio MANISCALCO,
musicians and composers**

Music from the New World: Tradition and Newness in Great American Composers

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Vega: Good evening, and welcome to tonight's lecture, the second in a series of four entitled "American Music: the Unanswered Question." This week, Jonathan Fields and Maurizio Maniscalco will continue to lead us on a journey of sorts through the history of American music with tonight's theme: *Music from the New World: Tradition and Newness in Great American Composers*. I would like to make only one brief comment about what motivated our Cultural Center to organize this particular series.

As is true for many other disciplines, nowadays musicology and musical history have largely become yet another two specialized fields of scholarship, with their own methodologies and rules of expertise. While we should recognize the value of specialization and methodological rigor, we should also be aware of the danger of losing sight of the unifying point of all human activities, and especially of music, which is what Msgr. Luigi Giussani called "the heart."

By "heart" he understood, in a biblical sense, the fundamental human awareness, need and desire of a mysterious Other, which lies always beyond the horizon, but is the ultimate object of every human quest. Music, in particular, is the most direct expression of this human longing, and a presentment of its fulfillment. Moreover, music does not just express an individual heart, but becomes naturally the voice of a people who is brought together by the same shared needs, desires, hopes and sorrows. For this reason, we thought that it would be interesting to take a look at the music of our country "from the point of view of the heart," the heart of a people. In fact, without trying to anticipate any of our speakers' conclusions, I would suggest that the greatness and world-wide popularity of American music are due also to the fact that it was born from the experience of a people who lived the human drama intensely, for instance in slavery.

I would now like to introduce our speakers. Mr. Jonathan Fields is a composer, music teacher and lecturer, who graduated first in his class from Mannes College of Music, and then, in 1982, joined David Horowitz Music Associates, where he has been the award-winning composer of hundreds of television and radio spots. He has also composed a variety of musical works spanning multiple genres, including film scores, soundtracks for TV, a mass, hymns and many others. An accomplished guitarist, he has played in several bands including *The Michael Gordon Philharmonic*, *The Glenn Branca Ensemble*, and *The Bay Ridge Band*. In recent years, he has been a frequent lecturer and musical educator, and the author of several publications aimed at introducing new audiences to the world of classical music, including some of the listener's guide in the *Spirto Gentil* series.

Mr. Maurizio Maniscalco has been playing music and writing songs since the age of 10, while studying first and then working in human resources. Though born and raised in Italy, Mr. Maniscalco has been living in New York City with his family since 1994. A self-taught guitarist and percussionist, and a skilled singer and talented song-writer, Mr. Maniscalco throughout the years has developed a deep love for the blues—a music he knows thoroughly and performs in a very passionate way. He has recorded 3 albums with the Bay Ridge Band and one – “Blues and Mercy” – with his friend Jonathan Fields. He is also one of the authors of “Educating through Music” a four-volume series to be released this summer.

And now I hand the floor over to our musicians...

Maniscalco: For those of you who were not here last week, and also for those of you who were here and would like to be reminded of the kind of journey that we took, let’s review the origins and birth of this new breed of music. What is this music made of? On one hand we have European influences, traditions which somehow blended as people began to blend in this new world. On the other hand we had, together with all these European influences, the rhythms, the heart of Africa, abruptly taken to this new country, and impacting it, and impacting all that they found, including this unknown God of which the spirituals talked about and sang about. We saw the birth of the “Spiritual Music”, the spirituals.

Then we took a look at the blues, and we looked at it as the music of sadness. We used St. Thomas’s definition of sadness to describe it—“the desire for an absent good.” And we also took a deep look at this experience of being torn between good and evil—the blues as the possibility to express our darkest desires or our unfulfilled desires, and on the other hand, this cry for happiness that has its identification with the sufferings of Christ. And we also talked a little bit about music as such—Jonathan talked about “the blue note”, we played for you the “pentatonic scale” and how it began to trace a new path, a new musical journey.

Tonight we’re going to talk about what is called classical music, and apparently this could seem to be very distant from what we dealt with last week, but it is not. Music has many forms, as many forms as our heart can use to express itself. Think of when you love somebody. There are a myriad of ways in which you can express it. You can say, “I love you.” You can give the person a kiss, or even a single gaze. Music can express what’s in your heart. That’s the whole point of the series. Music can express the journey that your heart is taking and represent it in a variety of ways. To bridge what we experienced last week with the new step we are taking tonight, we invited a dear friend and a great singer. We are very happy, myself and Jonathan, that Vaneese Thomas is here because she certainly is a great singer. She is also a friend, and we have had the joy and honor to play for her. Now I will read just a few lines about Vaneese before she helps us bridge the past with the present by singing a couple of pieces.

Vaneese was born in Memphis, Tennessee, the daughter of Rhythm and Blues legend, Rufus Thomas. She has cultivated her own style and blended all the influences of her background—Rhythm and Blues, Gospel, Blues and Jazz. Regarded by many industry insiders as an accomplished performer, songwriter, producer and actress, Vaneese is, above all, an extraordinary vocalist, and you will hear that right now.

Thomas: Good evening. Spirituals, I’m sure you got an earful about them last week, but I just wanted to say that the enslaved Africans who were brought to this country absorbed an enormous amount of culture. They could be standing outside of a church house and hear the litany of a church service or the

melody of a European hymn, and somehow the sincerity, despite their plight, of God's love for them permeated that and they were able to transform their despondency, their degradation, their pain through the messages that they were getting. And they didn't speak the language that well, but combined with their own cultural identity, they created what has become known as the spiritual. Of course there were no instruments, so these songs were created acapella, and I'd like to sing two segway spirituals, and then I'll talk a little bit about each. These two are: *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, which is obviously about being torn from your family. Families were not allowed to exist unless the plantation owner said so. So quite frequently mothers and children were separated, so the pain and angst of this emotion comes through this song. And the segway is going to go into *Go Down Moses* which is about coding. Let me sing these two for you.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 A long way from home.
 Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone
 A long way from home.

Go down, Moses,
 Way down in Egypt's land.
 Tell old Pharaoh,
 Let my people go.
 When Israel was in Egypt's land,
 Let my people go.
 Oppressed so hard they could not stand.
 Let my people go.

I used to find it odd that a people so oppressed could have adopted Christianity, and in reality I still find it a little bit bizarre. But the truth finds truth and these enslaved Africans found a means of spiritual expression in addition to coding, and you probably know what that is. You know that these spirituals were used not only as spiritual expression, but they were used to hide a code. It was a very intelligent way of masking their messages and their plots and their aspirations for freedom. So when you hear "across the Jordan" they're talking about the Ohio River. Over the Jordan might be nice in the great by and by, but right now we're talking about reaching freedom and crossing the Ohio River or the Mississippi—whichever is closer.

In case you ever run across any literature that tells you that coding didn't exist and that the enslaved Africans weren't bright enough to have constructed it, I'd like you to read this. It's called *Song Yet Sung* by James McBride who wrote *The Color of Water*. You probably know his work. This is his latest book and it talks about a small community on the eastern shore of Maryland, a general community—plantation owners and enslaved Africans, and how they communicate to one another—intercommunication and intra-communication. Each of those communities has its own way of seeing and dealing with one another. It's enormously complex. I highly recommend this book.

My second song is going to be gospel, *The Gospel Train*. It talks specifically about Harriett Tubman and the Underground Railroad. You know the analogies. The flight to freedom using analogies... so *The Gospel Train* is what specifically she called all the stops along the way. It was said that once you were on the Gospel Train, you couldn't get off; she was a task master when it came to getting enslaved Africans to freedom. So think about that as you hear the words to *The Gospel Train*.

The Gospel train's comin'
 I hear it just at hand
 I hear the car wheel rumblin'
 And rollin' thro' the land.

Get on board little children
 Get on board little children
 Get on board little children
 There's room for many a-more.

I hear the train a-comin'
 She's comin' round the curve
 She's loosened all her steam and brakes
 And strainin' ev'ry nerve.

The fare is cheap and all can go
 The rich and poor are there
 No second class aboard this train
 No difference in the fare.

Thank you.

Maniscalco: Thanks, Vaneese. And that was worth the ticket, I guess. Now, how do we move from what we just heard to what we're going to listen to tonight?

Fields: When we were trying to put this course together, we were just trying to think about what variety we could bring to it, and you can see from what Vanese was saying that there is a deep complexity to everything going on. It's a new music; it's a new land; there are a lot of extreme difficulties, shocking difficulties, but, as we said last week, what Big Bill Broonzy was talking about regarding the blues, he said, "It's the music of the heart." It's music that can mean lots of things, but it's the truth. The truth meeting the truth. The heart that is really looking for something beautiful is going to be ready for the truth. I guess when you think about your own life, when you suffer, you tend to be looking for the beautiful more than when you feel like you have everything you want. The heart is what connects everything.

Now, what was happening at the end of the 20th Century, we haven't talked about New York yet. All the music we've talked about really has happened in the South. We've talked about the Delta, Memphis, this whole area. But by the turn of the century or a little bit before that, New York City is becoming a very, very powerful city. We talked about Chicago, or after slavery there was a place where men could get work, so Chicago was the obvious place.

Maniscalco: It was also the only place where the train would go. Just one train, the Pacific Delta, went straight to Chicago. That's why the blues somehow migrated from the Delta to Chicago.

Fields: But in the meantime, New York is growing. There is a huge vitality in America. You could even hear it in the music—the spirituals and the blues. There's something happening here in the hearts of people here. In New York you have a city that's beginning to see itself, that could become the future city of the world. It's beginning to get this awareness in the 1890s. The Erie Canal is in that area. New

York is now connected to the West. Everything is feeding into New York. Europe and now all the culture we're talking about coming from Chicago.

What happens is there's a philanthropist named Jannette Thurber and she is thinking that there has got to be an American national classical music because music by Americans is kind of borrowed, distinctive from Europe, and by Europe we mean Germans—Beethoven, Bach, Brahms. Thurber had a different idea. She wanted to start something national. What was happening in Eastern Europe, the Russians, the Czechs, the Slavic people were developing a new classical music over there, and it was very connected to their country, to their people, to their communities, to their folk melodies. And she had this brilliant idea, let's get one of those guys to come over here and help us start a national music. Now, it's kind of silly to get somebody from Czechoslovakia to start a national music, but still it was kind of an adventurous idea given the culture of New York where the intellectual community was saying, "only German music." He was pretty successful in Europe at that point. He was at the top of his career. They offered him so much money that he couldn't really say "no."

Maniscalco: Just to give you an idea, at the turn of the century he made \$15,000.00 here in New York City.

Fields: Which was equivalent to a \$200,000.00 salary. Now I would say 2 million. He left. He brought two of his children and his wife here. He left four of his children in Czechoslovakia. At that moment he couldn't say that he was going back. He's from a peasant Czech background. This is not typical of composers. They usually came from upper class, educated families. He worked very hard. He was very poor. He had to beg his parents to send him to a conservatory. It was a difficult story for him. He was looked down upon by the Germans. It was hard for him to get a break. It was because Brahms heard his music and said that his heart and the heart of the people that he belongs to are beautiful, and we're stupid if we don't help this man. And Brahms is why we know Dvorák. They were very close friends to the day they died and Brahms was very generous in his friendship with him and Dvorák was very grateful to him for all those years. But that's the only reason we know—Brahms was strong enough to say, "This is the future of music." It's from the east, not from our country that's falling apart right now.

Maniscalco: The only thing that Brahms didn't get was his faith.

Fields: That's right.

Maniscalco: More than anything, if you look at him at the level of basic factors—he loved drinking, he loved smoking, he had lots of kids, and he was Catholic.

Fields: He used to drink all night and go to daily mass in the morning.

There's an essay...when Dvorák came, Janette Thurber hired a guy to keep track of him, to go around with him. He was a proper kind of upper class man, probably one of her friends, and he took him to the pub and apparently he talked about Dvorák being on his sixteenth beer and his guide was saying, "Shouldn't we go eat now, Dvorák?" And Dvorák said, "No. We don't eat." And Dvorák wanted to go to another bar, and the guide asked Janette Thurber never to send him out with Dvorák again. So this is the man. He was painted as an intelligent, not a complex man, but he's a very intelligent man with complex thinking, but he was always kind of being pushed down as a peasant composer, not as great as the others.

So when Dvorák came here, what Janette Thurber did do was to offer him a European conservatory. He lived on 17th Street and they knocked down his home. In one of the housing projects there there's a

statue to him. Janette Thurber gave scholarships to every type of American, especially those that were poor. So there were many young African American composers there. So Dvorák would ask them to sing their spirituals, sing the blues, and he was blown away by the range of human emotion and experiences that were transmitted, and right away he said, “Okay, you don’t need to look for your national music anymore. If you want to be a composer, this is where you start.” And he wrote a big article in *The New York Times* about it. And he said, you know, I struggle and I believe that that music is created by people who struggle. You can hear it. The heart is clearer when crying for something real, for something true. The truth wants the truth. And he really immediately felt at one with the music here. And he told all the muckety-mucks what he thought and they said, “You’re crazy! This is a slave people.” And he said, “Alright, I’ll show you!” Because he had already done this. He had already built his whole career on the folk melodies of his people and combined it with classical music. Again, that’s what American music is; it’s this combination of everything, people discovering that if your heart is true, it seeks for the truth in everything, it looks for the truth in everything.

Maniscalco: If I can make an observation that may sound theoretical. Where does classical music come from? Because most of the times, and that’s what we probably feel unless we were trained, unless we’re used to listening to classical music, our first reaction would be, okay, this is just sophisticated. This doesn’t really have much to do with me, my life, or my heart. As a matter of fact, classical music is like a deeper reflection and a deeper understanding, and therefore a deeper representation of what is at the root of a people’s heart, otherwise it’s just an invention; it’s not seated on anything. So particularly since tonight we’re talking about Dvorák, there was a time he did this listening to the music of his people in the Czech Republic, and he ended up doing the same thing here faced with a different tradition, with a different form of expression of the human heart. He befriended this guy, Harry Burleigh, who was a black singer who was actually making this music get out of a niche and become something valuable for everybody. So whatever we listen to tonight, it’s not something that comes out of the blue. Music has to be rooted somewhere, and if it’s not rooted in the heart of a people, it’s fake.

Fields: I think what’s beautiful, I didn’t hear it at first, is that in this period he was longing for his home. He really did miss his kids. He had eight kids, but he lost two; two died. He wrote this beautiful *Stabat Mater* after he lost two of his children, so his life was always moving in a difficult way. However, at this point, he was really missing his home, and here he wrote music, American film music, because what he was able to do was depict—he vacationed in Spillville, Iowa, which was a horrible western type of expansive environment. He would take long walks, one person, alone, and he picked up on it, and he used the orchestra to kind of give that feeling of that big expansive land with very few people, with that kind of loneliness that was there. America is this country of the man alone, or the woman alone, trying to make it, trying to strive. There’s a kind of loneliness. There’s a greatness and a loneliness; it’s both.

So we’re going to play the Second Movement of the *New World Symphony*.

Maniscalco: Which is something he wrote here in New York City.

Fields: He wrote it here, but he wanted to write it kind of like a spiritual, so listen in this to what Vanese was singing before. Then at a certain point he goes back to his spirituals, and you’ll hear his, probably like what his mom used to sing to him. So you’re going to hear both, and then they work together because I do believe it’s that same look.

[Second Movement of the *New World Symphony* plays.]

Maniscalco: We said that from the very beginning we have to proceed. We skip lots of things that would be beautiful to listen to together. You probably have in mind when the music explodes.

Fields: Yeah, that's the next thing.

Maniscalco: Well, we can't do everything, so we're giving you hints, kind of provoking your curiosity and your desire to go beyond the surface of things. Hopefully that's what's happening here. And now we've got to take one of these leaps and we want to jump to another New Yorker.

Fields: We're staying in the same city, though.

Maniscalco: We're staying in the same city, but we're moving a few blocks more, and since Vanese is with us and we want to take full advantage of her presence among us, we ask her to sing a piece from Duke Ellington.

Fields: What happens is, Dvorák's prophesy comes true twenty years later. You have some great composers, both American and European-American, who begin what is called the Golden Age of Song Writing. Jazz has a lot to do with it, but really there are incredibly classic songs being written. You have Gershwin on one hand who is from an Eastern European background—for some reason these two cultures really make an explosion of music in this country—the Eastern Europeans and the African Americans. And then you have Duke Ellington who isn't called "Duke" for no reason. He is basically royalty of American composition. He wrote many things—suites, symphonies, he conducted an orchestra, his thinking about music—he wrote with his musicians' persons in mind, making a very unique sound and color. He also wrote a bunch of fantastic songs. You probably know *Take the 'A' Train* and *Satin Doll*. Those are the ones everyone knows. But there are many, many more standards.

Thomas: Once again, enormously complex. This is a man who was from D.C. He lived here a long time, but he was from Washington, D.C. and he wrote from a spiritual perspective. He had a lot of sacred music—*Come Sunday* and many other sacred pieces. But he really is the blend that Jon is talking about. Classical music and this intrinsic, what did you call it, mesh of music? It is, in fact, that. He's a really brilliant composer. His melodies will live long after most music is dead. Alright, I'm done!

You ain't been blue; no, no, no.
 You ain't been blue,
 Till you've had that mood indigo.
 That feelin' goes stealin' down to my shoes
 While I sit and sigh, "Go 'long blues".

Always get that mood indigo,
 Since my baby said goodbye.
 In the evenin' when lights are low,
 I'm so lonesome I could cry.

'Cause there's nobody who cares about me,
 I'm just a soul who's
 bluer than blue can be.

When I get that mood indigo,
I could lay me down and die.

Maniscalco: Among other things, time goes fast, and we want to close with something that keeps the wound open, and the wound is the wound of, what is my heart all about? And what is all this music that has happened all about? And interestingly enough, the music we will listen to comes from a guy who is an accomplished musician and businessman at the same time. He was from Connecticut, but very much a New Yorker. I remember one of my early experiences here in New York. You would bump into people and they would tell you, “I’m a singer, but I work as a waiter,” or “I’m an actor, but I work as a secretary.” This guy worked and then created his own business, an insurance company—Charles Ives. But he wrote music. I don’t know exactly how his music generated from his heart and mind, but for sure there was a split between business and the need to go beyond even what appeared to be so concrete and fruitful in many ways. The wound was there so much so it was what he called *The Unanswered Question*.

Fields: We could talk a lot, but it’s self-explanatory, but two things: Listening a lot to the blue note, I think we heard it expressed a lot today. Ives was from Connecticut and he also was interested in church music, church music coming from around here, so again, a complex man. He wrote this piece of music in 1906 and this reflected his personal life. There was a lot going on there. He was trying to say, look, there are some who are trying to answer the ultimate questions. He was saying, does my successful career, do these things really answer that wound? So he tried to express this melodically, and you’re going to hear muted strings playing a very kind of static, silent, quiet, chords changing. And then you’re going to hear six times a trumpet, and it’s not in the same key at all as the strings. It’s completely by itself, but it’s the same notes every time, and that’s the question. And the question is: What is the meaning of everything? What is the meaning of existence? Then you hear the flutes answer. And the first time they try to give an answer, they try to give a nice answer to it, but each time they answer, they get more and more frustrated because they realize that we, men and women, we can’t answer. As much as we try, as strong as we are, as great as we can be, that question is beyond, is deeper, is deep. So they basically scream at the end, and peter out, and you’re just left with the strings and the question one more time. It’s interesting. *The Unanswered Question*, 1906.

[music plays]

Fields: This is 1906, and Ellington is right after that. But there’s a lot going on, a lot of searching. When I was in college and beginning to study composition, I would play this piece. I didn’t really have much of a knowledge of religion at the time, but this piece really struck me as, I have this question, and I had been a blues guitar player of some kind. That question provoked me. It’s a deep thing. Life is deep like the strings. This question I have is deep and it’s true; those professors at that school couldn’t answer me. They couldn’t answer those questions. The question is deep and I think that what moves me about great music is that it’s complex, but I think it’s...being very honest about...that even my heart will go forth to express the wounds and the hope...

Maniscalco: I was asked a question last week about the blues and it’s very consistent with what we just heard. Ives called this piece in many ways; one of the ways was “the unanswered perennial question”—something that repeats, the trumpet, it’s the same cry, it’s the same need that Jonathan was talking about, and it repeats, like the blues repeats. If I can draw a comparison, I don’t know if you’re familiar with *The Raindrop* by Chopin. It’s a beautiful piece for piano in which at first you’re taken by big chords and a melody that seems to describe life through its peaks and valleys. But then, if you

really pay attention, you begin to realize that the one thing that really institutes the fabric of all these is that one note that repeats over and over and over again, like the trumpet question repeats over and over again, like the cry of the blues repeats over and over again, because it's like the heart, the heartbeat pulsing, throbbing, begging for meaning; that is the real fabric of life, and true music is capable of expressing that cry.

Next week we'll try to see how, through another form of music, for the hobos to Bob Dylan, how the same serious matter was expressed as the history of this country and its people continued to unfold.

Thank you and good night.

Vega: Thank you again. If you have any unanswered questions for our presenters about this evening's topic, please feel free to send them via e-mail at info@crossroadsnyc.com and our speakers will try to answer them at our next lecture, which will be on Wednesday, May 28, again at 7 pm, in this very room where Mr. Fields and Mr. Maniscalco will continue with our third lecture of the series and the topic will be *Music for a Young People: The Birth of American Folk*.

If you want to receive information about Crossroads' activities and upcoming events, please feel free to leave your contact information at the table outside this room. And last, but not least, in order to defray the expenses of this seminar, we invite you to consider a free will donation either by cash or by check which you can place in the box at the exit.

Thank you and see you next week!

Fields: Just one more thank you to Vaneese Thomas!