

The Star-Spangled Banner:

Striving to Define America and Americans

#1 “The Star-Spangled Banner” 1:19

Leonard Slatkin conducting the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (1991)
Victor 60778-2-RC

A traditional performance by an orchestra that markets itself as a champion of American music. Note the opening drum roll, the majestic, regular tempo, the polish of the ensemble, Slatkin’s dynamic shaping, and the slowing of the tempo to add drama and grandeur to the ending. For many Americans, this performance would represent the definitive performance type for the national anthem. But what’s missing? What does this music mean to you? Does it bring certain images to mind?

#2 “The Star-Spangled Banner” 3:11

Marvin Gaye (1984)
Motown 3746362552

This is the other typical performance format: a professional singer leading a crowd at a sporting event — here the 1984 NBA All Star Game. Yet, Gaye’s performance is anything but typical: using a drum machine and synthesizer, Gaye freely reinterprets the traditional harmonic setting and melodic contour. Listen closely to the crowd. How do they respond to Gaye’s arrangement? Why do you think that they respond in this way?

Oh, say can you see
By the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hail
at the twilight’s last gleaming.
Whose proud stripes and bright stars
Through the perilous hours
O’er the ramparts we watched
were so gallantly streaming.
And the rocket’s red glare
The bombs bursting in air
Gave proof through the night
that our flag was still there.
Oh say does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave?
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

#3 “The Star-Spangled Banner” 2:28

Red House Painters (1993)
4AD 945441

With the exception of the title, this performance by the Red House Painters has nothing (NOTHING) in common with example #1. What has changed? In your opinion, is their version the national anthem of the U.S? What do you think this band is trying to say through this particular performance?

#4 “The Star-Spangled Banner” 3:42

Jimi Hendrix (performing at Woodstock), August 1969
MCA 11063

Even against Roseanne Arnold’s crotch-grabbing performance and Abdul Raouf’s refusal to stand during NBA pregame performances, Jimi Hendrix’s performance of the SSB at Woodstock in 1969 still ranks as the most controversial rendition. Even today, commentators still disagree over what Hendrix may have meant by this personal interpretation. Is it revolutionary? Is it patriotic? Is it offensive? Certainly the place and time of the performance, (that is, a mass counter-cultural ritual

during the height of the Vietnam war), have greatly influenced the receptions of Hendrix's SSB. Listen to this performance a couple of times. Try saying the words softly to yourself as the tune progresses. What do you notice about the location and meaning of Hendrix's improvisations? Do you hear any other melodies other than the SSB? Who is playing?

Writing a memorial essay after Hendrix's sudden death in 1970, Bob Hicks wrote: Hendrix' interpretation of "The Star Spangled Banner"— is a slimy, rotting ooze seeping obliviously on through a madman's maze of snarling unleashed demonia. It is the vast underbelly of a culture sinking, in Hendrix' mind, smugly into its death pit. Self destruction: the mouth tears great chunks of flesh from the bowel.

The bombs burse, the rockets flash. The mother weeps over her dead child; the child wanders wailing from the brutalized body that had been its mother; the bayonet gorges; the cities flame; the armies crust; hollowed men stumble from starvation; children betray their parents, betray their brothers; crowds crush each other, gasp for breath; and always, always the song drones on, through the laaand of the freeee, and the hooooome of the braaave!—and then crash the song is over the power failure has come America it was falling down all around you and you didn't even look and chaos/struggle and suddenly a new raw driving orderly force and listen there's a melody, a vibrant honest melody.

(Hick's last remark refers to the way Hendrix seques into Voodoo Chile at the Woodstock performance.) Do you agree with Hick's reading of the Woodstock performance? What political aspects does Hick's emphasize? Hendrix, himself, said little to clarify his intentions:

I don't know man, all I did was play it. I'm American so I played it. I used to have to sing it in shcool, they made me sing it in shcool, so, it's a flashback. (September 1969)

Oh, because we're all Americans, you know, we're all Americans, aren't we? When it was written then, it was played in a very, very beautiful... what they call beautiful state, you know. Nice and inspiring, you know, your heart throbs and you say 'Great, I'm American!' But nowadays when we play it we don't paly it to take away all this greatness that America is supposed to have. But we play it the way the air is in america today. The air is slighly static, isn't it? You know what I mean? So therefore we played it. (September, 1969).

#5 "The Star-Spangled Banner" ca. 5 mins.

**Jimi Hendrix (Guitars), from Rainbow Bridge (Reprise K44159)
Recorded Record Plant (studios) March 18, 1969.**

Recorded exactly six months before Hendrix's first live public performance of the SSB, this version for the *Rainbow Bridge* soundtrack uses overdubbing to produce a choir of guitars. Hendrix is the only performer. What do you think of this performance? Does it change the way you think of the Woodstock rendition? Does this version say something different from the Woodstock version or do the two performances work together?

#6 "The Star-Spangled Banner" 2:35

**Belá Fleck and the Flecktones: Flight of the Cosmic Hippo (1991)
Warner Bros. #26562**

This performance also reflects wartime. While recording their album, *Flight of the Cosmic Hippo*, in January of 1991, the United States went to war with Iraq. According to the liner notes, the band recorded the SSB the night fighting broke out: "We watched a lot of CNN in between taping songs. We can only hope for peace." Listen for the melody. How has the band divided up the phrases. Do they improvise additional melodies more or less frequently than Hendrix did at Woodstock?

#7 "The Star-Spangled Banner" 2:59

**Randy Coven (1989)
Guitar Recordings #88561-5011-2**

Hendrix has inspired myriad imitators. An electric guitarist can't play even a few notes from the SSB without invoking Hendrix for her or his listeners. Tributes by Kiss and U2 have been recorded, while guitar jocks, such as Randy Coven, use the tune as a virtuoso showpiece to prove their mettle against the reputation of the master. What do you think of Coven's performance. Is he a great player? Do you think he is American? Has the meaning of the song changed from Hendrix to Coven?

#8 “The Star-Spangled Banner” 1:08

Duke Ellington Orchestra

Cornell University Concert December 10, 1948

Music Masters #65114

Following the World War II patriotism was still in fashion and Duke Ellington’s big band began each of its concerts with the SSB. While there is more variety to the timbres and tempi in Ellington’s performance, the same values of beauty and polish that governed example #1 on this tape seem to be in effect. Do you agree?

#9 “The Star-Spangled Banner” 1:37

Igor Stravinsky: arranged for male chorus (1941)

Music Masters 67113

Born in Russia but known for a series of revolutionary ballets composed for the Ballet Russe in Paris, Igor Stravinsky emigrated to the United States in year? to escape the turmoil of World War II and settled in Hollywood. Possibly intended to show his gratitude to his new homeland, Stravinsky composed this arrangement of the SSB on its 10th anniversary as the US national anthem. While exploring modern extended harmonies, Stravinsky’s version carries the same solemn affect as more traditional versions, particularly because of the smoot. Authorities in Boston, however, did not agree and had the composer imprisoned (briefly) for desecrating a national treasure. Does this version sound offensive to your ears? Why might Stravinsky’s version created a controversy?

#10 “To Anacreon in Heaven” ca. 7 mins.

Text by Ralph Tomlinson (1770); Music by John Stafford Smith (1771)

Musical Heritage Society #512415X

Believe it or not — this is the original version of the national anthem of the United States. Basically it’s a drinking song written for a British social club. Apparently, the melody was well know in the colonies and was often given new sets of words, such as the poem written by Francis Scott Keyes during the Battle of Baltimore (1814) — i.e., the version the U.S. now recognizes as its national anthem. It’s also surprising that the SSB did not become the official anthem of the US until March 3, 1931. Criticised as a violent song of war by pacifists, as a drinking tune by prohibitionists, and as too difficult to sing, the SSB faced stiff competition from “America,” “Yankee Doodle,” “Hail Columbia,” “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” “Columbia, Gem of the Ocean,” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Inspired by the US bicentennial in 1976, a scholar named William Lichtenwanger traced the roots of the song. His research is summarized by Kenneth Cooper in the liner notes to MHS 512415X: “The song *To Anacreon in Heaven* was written for the Anacreontic Society founded in 1766 by a ‘sprightly class of citizens’ who met once a fortnight at the London Coffee-House on Ludgate Hill, eventually moving to the Strand. The society’s legendary patron was the Greek lyric poet Anacreon (ca. 570–478 BC), whose love and drinking songs, according to [traveller] Dr. [Charles] Burney, ‘were distinguished by their... voluptuous gaiety.’ The club’s motto was: ‘Here sadness were a sin.’ The text of *To Anacreon in Heaven* was submitted in 1770 by the club’s president, Ralph Tomlinson, and set to music in 1771 by John Stafford Smith (1750–1836), an organist, composer, and tenor.

“In the text, the ‘sons of harmony’ (aka. society members) appeal to Anacreon for inspiration, and he agrees to help them enjoy the mingling of love (the “myrtle of Venus”) and drink (the fruit of “Bacchus’ vine”). Up on Mount Olympus, old thunderous Jove objects, arguing that if these mortals have so much fun, the goddesses will not be able to resist them, and , in fact, they are already abandoning Parnassus for Rowley’s (the liquor merchant on Ludgate Hill), as are Apollo (the “yellow-hair’d god”) and his nine muses. Apparently the gods, too are succumbing, because Idalia (Venus’ temple) and the “bi-forked hill’ (Olympus) are nearly deserted. Apollo pleads with Jove in Latin not to bother with his thunder, saying ‘these thunderclaps are avoidable, you know’ and offering to protect the club and its members from his ‘crackers.’ Momus, the god of mockery and ridicule, then threatens to join Apollo, imploring Jove not to be ‘jealous of these honest fellows’; Jove relents, and swears by the river Styx that the club shall long entwine love and drink.”

(Paraphrased from liner notes of Musical Heritage Society 512415X written by Kenneth Cooper.)

The 4 Spheres of US Music: the Religious, Folk, Popular, & Classical

RELIGIOUS SPHERE

#1 “Emmaus” (1788) 1:45

William Billings (1746–1800)

His Majestie’s Clerkes conducted by Paul Hillier

Harmonia Mundi HMU #907048 ©1992

Although there are approximately 40 European-influenced compositions that were probably composed and published in the new world before William Billings wrote a note, the lack of author’s names or direct historical evidence for the early works has led many historians to name Billings the first “American” composer. A Boston tanner and singing master who was apparently self-taught as a composer, Billings wrote music primarily for churches. “Emmaus” is from his most successful publication, *The Singing Master’s Assistant* (1788).

Emmaus (1788)
When Jesus wept, a falling tear
In mercy flow’d beyond all bound,
When Jesus groan’d, a trembling fear
Seiz’d all the guilty world around.

#2 “Sherburne” (1803) 1:52

Daniel Read (1757–1836)

Field Recording made by Alan Lomax in 1959

Alabama Sacred Harp Convention

New World Records #80205 ©1977

Compared to the polished and studied delivery of the professional choir that recorded example one, this live field recording sounds raw and unfettered by conservatory traditions. Although no one knows for certain, this ecstatic style of singing was probably the norm at the time these compositions were written. Notice that the performers sing the song three times: first they warm up using solfege syllables (Fa, Sol, La, and Mi) to learn the notes and then they perform the whole tune again using the hymn text (2 verses). How can you explain the vocal quality? Is this simply a bad performance or do these performers use a different set of aesthetic standards? How would you contrast the value systems behind these first two examples if you were to hazard a few guesses?

Sherburne

1. While shepherds watch’d their flocks by night, All seated on the ground.
The angel of the Lord came down, And glory shone around...

FOLK SPHERE

#3 “John Henry” 2:42

Performed by Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston in the 1940s

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40007 ©1989

#4 “John Henry” (a version published in 1940s) 3:10

Performed by Mike Seeger (banjo/vocals) and Peggy Seeger (guitar)

Music arranged by Ruth Crawford for her book, *American Folksongs for Children* (ca. 1950s).
Rounder CD 11544 ©1987

#5 “8 Hour Day”

Text by John Hory (1886); music (“Wild Amerikay”) trad./colonial.
Perfomed by Pete Seeger
Smithsonian Folkways SF 40058 ©1992

#6 “John Riley” 2:24

Perfomed by Pete Seeger
Smithsonian Folkways SF40018 ©1993

POPULAR SPHERE

#7 “Old Folks at Home” 1851

Stephen Foster
Perf. by the Robert Shaw Chorale (1958)
RCA Victor 09026-61253-2 ©1993

#8 “Swanee River Rock (Talkin’ ‘Bout the River)” (1957)

Ray Charles
Rhino / Atlantic 71722 ©1994

Note use of conga player. This was an intentional attempt by Charles and Atlantic to create a teen hit. (They were largely successful as this tune hit #14 on the R & B charts and #34 on the pop chart.) If you listen closely to the words, you’ll notice that it’s an obvious take off on example #7. The layers of authorship and narrative voice are fascinating: here we have a black man singing a song by a white man written in the narrative voice of a black man. What do you think Charles is saying here?

CLASSICAL SPHERE

#9 “The Circus Band” (1894) 1:55

Charles Ives (1874–1954)
Perf. by Jan DeGaetani (mezzo-soprano) and Gilbert Kalish (piano)
Elektra Nonesuch 9 71325-2 ©1976

Ives is considered by many to be the first original American composer in that his work makes a break with European tradition and focuses on the experimentalism that would define music in the twentieth-century United States.

#10 “The Indians” (1921) 2:10

same as #9

#11 “Overture: Parachute Dancing” (1983) 5:28

by Libby Larsen (b. 1950)
Perf. by London Symphony Orchestra, directed by Joel Revzen
Koch 3-7370-2 ©1997

According to the composer...

During the Renaissance, there was a spectacular court dance involving parapluie, or umbrellas, the forerunner of the parachute. Dancers would climb atop courtyard walls carrying enormous brightly colored silk umbrellas. They would begin dancing short, hopping steps which became raucous leaps along their precarious ledge until suddenly, they would hurtle themselves off the wall, umbrellas overhead, and float down into the midst of the spectators.