

DON GILLIS'S *SYMPHONY NO. 5½*: MUSIC FOR THE PEOPLE

Sean Morrison, B.M.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2013

APPROVED:

Hendrik Schulze, Major Professor  
Mark McKnight, Committee Member  
Bernardo Illari, Committee Member  
Frank Heidelberg, Chair of the Division of  
Music History, Theory, and  
Ethnomusicology  
John Murphy, Director of Graduate Studies in  
the College of Music  
James Scott, Dean of the College of Music  
Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate  
School

Morrison, Sean. Don Gillis's *Symphony No. 5½*: Music for the People. Master of Music (Musicology), May 2013, 50 pp., 7 figures, bibliography, 56 titles.

Don Gillis wrote *Symphony No. 5½* (1947) in order to reconcile the American public with modern art music. By synthesizing jazz (as well as other American folk idioms), singable melodies, and humor, and then couching them into symphonic language, Gillis produced a work that lay listeners could process and enjoy. The piece was an immediate success and was played by orchestras across the globe, but it did not retain this popularity and it eventually faded from relevancy. This study focuses on elements that contributed to the initial efficacy and ultimate decline of the work. Due to its pervasive popular influences, *Symphony No. 5½* is a crystallized representation of time in which it was written, and it soon became dated. Don Gillis did not harbor the idea that *Symphony No. 5½* would grant him great wealth or musical immortality; he had a more pragmatic goal in mind. He used every musical element at his disposal to write a symphonic work that would communicate directly with the American people via a musical language they would understand. He was successful in this regard, but the dialogue ended soon after mid-century.

Copyright 2013

by

Sean Morrison

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES.....	iv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Don Gillis’s Traditional Influences .....	3
State of Research and Literature Review.....	7
Chapter Overview .....	9
CHAPTER 2 WHY A “SYMPHONY FOR FUN”? .....	12
CHAPTER 3 REACHING THE PEOPLE .....	19
CHAPTER 4 THE PEOPLE RESPOND.....	31
Morton Gould’s <i>American Symphonette No. 2</i> .....	37
The Decline in Popularity of <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> .....	40
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	47

LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

	Page
1 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 2, Opening Melody, mm. 9-16.....	22
2 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 1, all parts (in unison at the octave), mm. 1-8 .....	23
3 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 3, Opening, mm. 1-4. (Score reduced by author).....	24
4 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 3, Blues, mm. 36-42. (Score reduced by author.).....	25
5 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 3, Latin Jazz, mm. 59-63. (Score reduced by author.).....	25
6 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 3, Brass fanfare, mm. 84-89. (Score reduced by author.).....	25
7 Don Gillis, <i>Symphony No. 5½</i> , Movement 2, reference to Kern's "Ol' Man River," mm. 1-2. ....	26

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*My feeling is that music is for the people and that the composer's final aim should be to reach them.*

-Don Gillis

Don Gillis's *Symphony No. 5½* (1947) is a humorous four-movement work, which reflects the formal aspects of a ubiquitous classical symphony: the first movement, "Perpetual Emotion," is in sonata-allegro form; the second movement, "Spiritual?," exhibits a slower melody-driven form; the third movement, "Scherzofrenia," is not in triple meter, but it is a lively musical "joke"; and the fourth movement, "Conclusion!," takes up a rondo structure. Where *Symphony No. 5½* makes its most marked departure from symphonic tradition is in the composer's infusion of jazz harmonies and rhythms (as well as other folk idioms) into nearly every aspect of the composition. The work is also atypically compressed; the score indicates that an entire performance should last a mere thirteen minutes and thirty seconds, with each movement taking under five minutes apiece.<sup>1</sup> Although compact, the opus was imbued with popular influences that would engender a disproportionately large response from contemporary audiences.

When Gillis wrote *Symphony No. 5½* his goal was to communicate with the American public by means of a symphonic language they would immediately understand and enjoy.<sup>2</sup> In Gillis's estimation jazz was the most direct means of communication with the everyday American, and he incorporated jazz-inspired melodies and rhythms throughout *Symphony No.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5 ½: A Symphony for Fun* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1948), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Don Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," ca. 1948, the Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX, 214; The terms "public," "the common man," "lay listener," and "masses" will refer to lay people who may or may not have an affinity for symphonic music.

5½ in order to elicit a visceral response from the audience.<sup>3</sup> After the NBC Radio premiere of *Symphony No. 5½* (21 September 1947) the work was performed fifty times over the next six months.<sup>4</sup> It proved to be Gillis’s most popular symphonic piece and was played hundreds of times by orchestras all over the world.<sup>5</sup> Despite this initial popularity, however, it did not become part of the standard repertory. By Gillis’s own admission, popular music was at the mercy of the American public’s changing tastes; even well-liked tunes quickly became passé. While Gillis did acknowledge the mercurial nature of public opinion, he failed to see how his use of popular influences would subject *Symphony No. 5½* to the fickle preferences of the American public.<sup>6</sup> In summary, by featuring the elements of popular music so prominently in *Symphony No. 5½*, Gillis made it immediately accessible to contemporary audiences, but that same popular quality dated the work and kept it from becoming part of the symphonic repertory.

Don Gillis was born on 17 June 1912 in Cameron, Missouri and his musical experiences there shaped his conception of “music for the people.” He was raised in a musical home; his father (who played everything “from the violin...to the tuba”) and mother joined Gillis and his five siblings to create an eight-instrument ensemble. Some of Gillis’s “fondest memories” were associated with this “little orchestra.”<sup>7</sup> It was his early band experience – not orchestral – that “nurtured the beginnings of [his] creativity.”<sup>8</sup> Throughout his youth he played the trombone in community bands and orchestras, which fostered his communal sense of music and how it could

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 213-214.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Hanson, “Spirit of Playfulness Wrote Fun Symphony, Composer Says,” *Ft. Wayne News-Sentinel*, date unknown, Scrapbooks, DGC.

<sup>5</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 79.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Don Gillis, “Autobiographical Material.” DGC, 7.

function as a uniting force in society.<sup>9</sup> The music of Gillis's formative years played a vital role in his everyday life, and the American idioms in which he was immersed (i.e., the fiddle tune, the hymn tune, the march, the spiritual, and jazz) would prove to be influential in his symphonic compositions; the impact of such functional music inspired him to compose works that would be seen by the public not as a "luxury" but rather as a "pleasurable necessity."<sup>10</sup> *Symphony No. 5½* was written to fulfill this purpose. Gillis wanted to span the chasm between the public at large and the concert hall, and this attempt was at loggerheads with the developments of post-World War II American art music.<sup>11</sup>

#### Don Gillis's Traditional Influences

Unlike his band influences, in which he was inundated from birth due to Cameron's "glorious" band history, Gillis's symphonic influences were academic and professional.<sup>12</sup> Three men figured greatly in the young composer's artistic development and helped to shape his conception of "music for the people." The first, chronologically, was conductor Floyd Graham who directed many of Gillis's early works; the conductor's egalitarian regard for all forms of music had a profound effect on the young composer. Gillis was then exposed to the works of Jean Sibelius, which affected Gillis's orchestration and use of folk idioms. Lastly, Arturo Toscanini would inspire the young composer to be confident in his own composition style. The maestro would also implore him to avoid gratuitous erudition in his music, and to communicate a clear message to the audience.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4-9.

<sup>10</sup> Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.



While earning a master's degree in composition at North Texas State Teachers College (now the University of North Texas), Gillis worked with conductor Floyd Graham. Graham's acceptance of both popular and symphonic music impacted the young composer, and he credited the conductor as having won over more converts to symphonic music than any person he had ever known. Graham encouraged his students to enjoy any kind of music they liked best, and was known to champion composers as disparate as Gershwin and Sibelius for their own unique merits. This engendered a spirit of tolerance that looked for "the good that exists in all kinds of music."<sup>13</sup> "No one single contributive force" influenced Gillis's music making more than Graham's performances of the composer's early works, including the conductor's efforts with the preliminary versions of *Symphony No. 5½*.<sup>14</sup>

While doing graduate work during the summer at Louisiana State University, Gillis studied counterpoint with Dr. Helen Gunderson. During their work together, Gunderson commended the works of Jean Sibelius.<sup>15</sup> The Finnish composer had a profound effect on young artist's compositional style, especially in regard to orchestration.<sup>16</sup> Gillis lectured on Sibelius in a music history survey course during his time as a professor at the University of South Carolina.<sup>17</sup> The lecture notes reveal reverence for Sibelius's music and personal idiom, both of which can be glimpsed in *Symphony No. 5½*. Partly due to the use of folk idioms in his music, Sibelius became a "national hero" to the Finnish people. Gillis praised the Finn's "beautiful melodies," and his masterful orchestration. Sibelius was supposedly cognizant of modern trends

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,139-140.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,141.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,133.

<sup>16</sup> Don Gillis, "Personal Writings," DGC, 1.

<sup>17</sup> The remaining discussion of Sibelius in this paragraph is drawn completely from Gillis's lecture notes from the University of South Carolina; see Don Gillis, "Music History Reference," DGC.

and musical developments but remained unaffected by them, as he adhered to his own musical sensibilities. The statement that would have drawn the most criticism from modernists was Gillis's declaration that "the entire world thinks [Sibelius's] music is worth while."

It is true that the public revered Sibelius, but modern music circles did not. In 1940 Virgil Thomson appraised Sibelius's Second Symphony as "vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description," and that "there are no educated professional musicians who love Sibelius."<sup>18</sup> Thomson also reviewed Sibelius's First Symphony, concluding that the melodic material was of "inferior quality," and that the harmonic structure was "corny."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the most influential pedagogue of the twentieth century, Nadia Boulanger, instilled into her students the dictum that Sibelius was, in fact, "hopeless" and not worthy of study.<sup>20</sup> Richard Taruskin offers this insight on Sibelius's twentieth-century reception:

Sibelius, while acknowledged (especially by American critics) as legitimate heir to the romantic symphonic tradition, was widely regarded as the last of a dying breed... His unironized rhetorical eloquence suffered in the general postwar atmosphere of disillusion. Although his later symphonies were decidedly restrained compared with his prewar output, they bore a suspicious taint of bombast.<sup>21</sup>

By emulating Sibelius, the young composer opened himself to the barbs of his peers, but much like his chosen model, Gillis had his own compositional compass, and to him the audience would always be the final arbiter for his the efficacy of his music.

Lastly, after being transferred to New York by NBC, Gillis began to work with the most influential person he had ever met, and who would also figure greatly in the history of *Symphony No. 5½*: Arturo Toscanini. The maestro's impeccable memory and attention to detail left his

---

<sup>18</sup> Virgil Thomson, *The Musical Scene* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1945), 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995), 26.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, vol. 4 of *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147.

assistant in awe.<sup>22</sup> After looking at the manuscript of *Symphony No. 5½*, Toscanini suggested a change to the original ending of the finale: “For fifteen minutes you have written a musical joke and then suddenly you say ‘Look, I am a serious composer.’” Gillis agreed with the maestro’s sentiments and adjusted the ending accordingly.<sup>23</sup> Recounting his own compositional efforts, Toscanini offered the composer an anecdote featuring a young Arturo and Ferruccio Busoni, his teacher. Busoni posited that “you must throw away old harmony, the old idioms, the old music, and invent new sounds.” Toscanini responded by asserting that novelty was not the highest aim, but rather “new ideas”: a composer must have something to say, and he must be able to present it in such a way so the audience can understand what was said and who said it.<sup>24</sup> After working on *Symphony No. 5½*, Toscanini encouraged the young composer by stating: “It is your music, caro. It belongs to you and no one else.”<sup>25</sup> All of Gillis’s symphonic influences are manifested in *Symphony No. 5½*; Floyd Graham’s celebration of popular styles as well as the stalwarts of the symphonic canon; Sibelius’s use of folk idioms, orchestration, and melody; and Toscanini’s belief that novel ideas are fruitless without adequate communicative prowess. Gillis would synthesize elements of American folk idioms and insert them into a symphonic language featuring singable melodies, which would carry his message to the people. And what does Gillis have to say in his music?

My sole purpose seems to have been to write about our country, to capture its melodies for my own and to fulfill a hope that my music may bring joy to the people who hear it.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 82.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>26</sup> Don Gillis, NAEB Radio Broadcasts: *Music of Don Gillis*, Ep. VIII, 1964, DGC, 4.

## State of Research and Literature Review

No study has been devoted to Gillis's symphonic oeuvre, and during the course of my research only one sentence of scholarly writing addressing *Symphony No. 5½* was found. In this singular account, the composition is dismissed before it is even announced: "Producer Don Gillis also composed on the side, and Toscanini presented the world premiere of Gillis's silly *Symphony No. 5½* in 1947."<sup>27</sup> The Don Gillis Collection, housed in the Willis Library of the University of North Texas, contains the majority of materials pertaining to the work. Around the time that he composed *Symphony No. 5½* Gillis began compiling materials for an autobiography.<sup>28</sup> In his unpublished autobiography, "And Then I Wrote," Gillis devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of the composition. He describes the events that shaped his conception of what a "Symphony for Fun" might entail and how it could be "Music for People."<sup>29</sup> He also discusses the critical and public reception of *Symphony No. 5½*, as well as the first rehearsals and performances of the work.<sup>30</sup>

Starting in 1964 the National Educational Radio Network aired a series of programs titled *The Music of Don Gillis*, during which the composer played recordings of his music and provided commentary.<sup>31</sup> Having aired seventeen years after the radio premiere of *Symphony No. 5½* these broadcasts address the reception of the work from a different perspective than the contemporary "And Then I Wrote." In the context of this study, the transcripts from *The Music of Don Gillis* as well as "And Then I Wrote" help to establish 1.) Gillis's motivation for

---

<sup>27</sup> Michael Saffle, ed. *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950* (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 306.

<sup>28</sup> Don Gillis mentions his age (36) on p. 344 of "And Then I Wrote." This would place it around 1948-1949.

<sup>29</sup> Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," 81.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86.

<sup>31</sup> All of the scripts for *The Music of Don Gillis* are in the Don Gillis Collection.

composing *Symphony No. 5½*; 2.) how he executed his intentions through a jazz-inspired symphonic language; and 3.) ways to assess his perception of the critical and public reception of the work.

Various newspaper and magazine articles from across the country germane to *Symphony No. 5½* are preserved in the Don Gillis Collection. Music critics writing for New York publications were considered to be the most influential in the country, and journalists from the *Times*, *Herald Tribune*, *Post*, *Sun*, *World-Telegram*, *PM*, and the *Journal American* reported on the NBC Radio premiere of *Symphony No. 5½*.<sup>32</sup> These articles, as well as those from other publications, demonstrate the public and critical reception of *Symphony No. 5½*.

The scholarly writing discussing Don Gillis is composed of a dissertation by William Fry, which focuses on the composer's biography and the codification of his band music. In order to contextualize Gillis's *Symphony No. 5½*, the output of Morton Gould is examined, as that composer wrote jazz-influenced symphonic works that enjoyed favorable response from the American public of the 1930s and 1940s. Peter Goodman began writing Gould's biography, *Morton Gould: American Salute*, while the composer was still alive and contributing to the project.<sup>33</sup> This text discusses the musical aspects of Gould's *American Symphonette No. 2* as well as its reception.

The writings of Virgil Thomson provide a modernist composer's view of the art music world in New York in the 1940s. American music scholar Nicholas Tawa contends that Thomson was "one of the most read writers on music in the United States."<sup>34</sup> *American Music*

---

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Tawa, *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle: American Musical Life, 1925-1945* (New York : Schirmer Books, 1984), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Peter W. Goodman, *Morton Gould: American Salute* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2000), 12-13; After Gould's death, Goodman was granted full access to Gould's personal library and documents.

<sup>34</sup> Tawa, *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle*, 193.

*Since 1910* provides context for the time proceeding and following *Symphony No. 5½*. Other works consulted in contextualizing mid-twentieth-century American art music include: Nicholas Tawa's *A Most Wondrous Babble: American Art Composers, Their Music, and the American Scene*, and *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle: American Musical Life, 1925-1945*; Richard Crawford's *America's Musical Life: A History*; and Barbara Tischler's *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity*. While none of these texts mention Gillis or his music, they discuss the use of "Americanisms" in the 1930s and '40s, as well as evaluate public and critical reception of "accessible" works like *Symphony No. 5½*.

### Chapter Overview

The disparity between Gillis's compositional ideology and that of his contemporaries is discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 discusses Gillis's emphasis on melody and the way in which he implemented "germ themes," jazz, quotation, and humor into *Symphony No. 5½*. Gillis professed that melody was the shortest distance between audience and composer:<sup>35</sup>

I have often said that the day I hear some youngster in a town like Waxahachie or Grand Falls whistle a tune I have written, then, and only then, will I regard myself as a successful composer. For when music reaches the people, it has achieved its real destination and its composer has joined the ranks of the immortals.<sup>36</sup>

While the melodies of *Symphony No. 5½* did not vouchsafe their composer immortality, they were identifiable and singable, and the audience understood Gillis's use of melody as "an American expressing what they all understood."<sup>37</sup> Themes and textures from other known works are quoted in *Symphony No. 5½* (e.g. "London Bridge is Falling Down" and "Ol' Man River"),

---

<sup>35</sup> Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," 74.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>37</sup> "The Three G's in Orange," *International Musician*, date unknown, Scrapbooks, the Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

some of which were recognized by contemporary audiences, in order to give the public even more points of reference.<sup>38</sup> Melody and quotation were not the only means by which Gillis tried to connect with the listener; he also employed elements of jazz.

When crafting the melodic material for *Symphony No. 5½* the composer utilized what he defined as “germ themes,” which are comprised of “traditional ‘licks’ or ‘short phrases of rhythmic melody,’” which have “spontaneously grown through the creative genius of the improvising jazz performer.”<sup>39</sup> In his estimation, these themes represented a musical language that led to instant communication with the common man, who would have observed them actively or, at least, passively on the radio or in the dance hall. The jazz influence in these “germ themes” is both harmonic and rhythmic. Harmonically, Gillis employs “blue notes,” which are achieved by the lowering or “bending” of the third or seventh scale degree.<sup>40</sup> In regard to rhythm, the composer features syncopation, which is arguably the quintessential rhythmic figure of jazz, and big band swing.

Chapter 4 focuses on the reception of *Symphony No. 5½*. Arturo Toscanini conducted the NBC Radio premiere; because of the maestro’s national popularity millions of listeners were exposed to the jazz-inspired work, and critics from across the country offered a variety of critiques. Many of the New York critics were not complimentary, describing the work as a “nuisance,” “hectic,” and “derivative.”<sup>41</sup> *New York Sun* columnist Irving Kolodin declared that only nepotism could explain why *Symphony No. 5½* was even on the program and that by

---

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. Hague, “Musical Roundup,” *PM* (New York), 23 September 1947.

<sup>39</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 213.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 558.

<sup>41</sup> Robert A. Hague, “Musical Roundup,” *PM* (New York), 23 September 1947; B.H. Haggin, “Music on the Radio,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 September 1947; Noel Straus, *New York Times*, 22 September 1947.

selecting such a frivolous work Toscanini had exhibited a “weakness for being a good friend.”<sup>42</sup> Outside of New York, *Symphony No. 5½* enjoyed a more favorable reception. One aspect that nearly all critics touched upon was the enthusiastic reaction of the studio audience: “[*Symphony No. 5½* was] a mad cap rain of confetti, which raised the audience’s (and the orchestra’s) spirits to carnival pitch.”<sup>43</sup> The contributing factors that led to the work’s eventual decline are also discussed, which include: the perceived insincerity of Americanisms (jazz) and humor, which betray the somber reality of the post-World War II era; and the datedness of the big band swing that Gillis called upon in numerous sections of the symphony.

---

<sup>42</sup> Irving Kolodin, “Toscanini Leads Score By Gillis,” *New York Sun*, 22 September 1947.

<sup>43</sup> Unknown author, date and publication unknown, Scrapbooks, DGC, TX; At least one New York critic was in the studio for the premiere. The other critics would likely have gaged the audience’s response to the work based on applause.



## CHAPTER 2

### WHY A “SYMPHONY FOR FUN”?

In the milieu of American art music at mid-century, *Symphony No. 5½* was an anachronism. Postwar composers had begun to resurrect the tenets of 1920s modernism and forsook the accessibility espoused in the Great Depression and wartime efforts of artists who sought to connect with the average citizen. Gillis strove to create pleasing, tuneful music replete with American folk idioms and popular influences that would engage the listener in clear terms. His modernist peers were producing increasingly edifying works, in which they avoided Americanisms; disregarded aesthetic beauty; and exuded the abstractness inherent to modernism. While fully aware of the inclinations of his contemporaries, Gillis remained firm in his populism: “I believe in writing music for people, not for critics and academic prestige. It’s the people that count.”<sup>44</sup> Jazz, swing in particular, would be Gillis’s preferred tool with which to restore the relationship between the lay listener and the modern composer, as that style of music was omnipresent in popular American musical culture.<sup>45</sup> The popular influences of *Symphony No. 5½* made it approachable to laymen, but subsequent musical styles would eventually dilute the potency of the work as listeners moved on to the popular music more in vogue.

Many of Gillis’s contemporaries did not share his belief that music was for the people, more pointedly, the common man. Reaching the public was no concern of the modernist Edgard Varèse, whose only interest was achieving certain “musical-acoustical phenomena.”<sup>46</sup> Milton Babbitt echoed this sentiment by positing that “there is no reason in the world for one to write for

---

<sup>44</sup> “Fun Music,” *Pathfinder Magazine*, 22 October 1947, author unknown, Scrapbooks, DGC.

<sup>45</sup> In this discussion, “swing” or “big band swing” is defined as a style of jazz that features a distinctive lilting rhythm and is arranged for large dance bands; see Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 641–660.

<sup>46</sup> Gunther Schuller, “Conversation with Varèse,” *Perspectives of New Music* 3, No. 2 (Spring – Summer, 1965): p. 37.

others”; the only audience worth writing for is oneself. Babbitt further dismissed the notion of writing music for the people by stating that “the public [has] its own music, its ubiquitous music: music to eat by, to read by, to dance by, and to be impressed by.”<sup>47</sup> Varèse and Babbitt were not isolated in their opinions. Nicholas Tawa concluded that modern composers sought “cultural authoritarianism” and disregarded “the public’s freedom to think and act...without any reflection about the price that would be paid.”<sup>48</sup> While addressing the 1978 graduates of the Mannes School of Music, Virgil Thomson declared: “Music in any generation is not what the public thinks of it but what the musicians make of it...Musicians, in other words, own music.”<sup>49</sup> Such protestations removed audiences from the artistic process and further isolated the composer. As Donal Henahan remarked, Thomson wished to create art not for art’s sake, but for the artist’s sake.<sup>50</sup> This “narcissistic” trend continued from post-World War II into the 1950s and 1960s; the viewpoint of the composer was paramount and the disenfranchised lay audience lost its connection with modern music.<sup>51</sup> Gillis reflected on these developments:

I often wonder if our composers are aware that they are writing for other people. Sometimes I think they have only the critic, the academy, or some other composer in mind when they begin to write . . . It’s time that a state of communion existed between the writer and his hearers – a sense of awareness that there are people who can be reached – through the heart.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Jeffery G. Hirschfeld, “Milton Babbitt: A Not-So-Sanguine Interview,” *Musical America* (June 1982): 18; quoted in Nicholas Tawa, *A Most Wondrous Babble* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 47; Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?” *High Fidelity* (Feb. 1958): 39.

<sup>48</sup> Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 32; Tawa links the modernist ideologies of the 1920s and the 1950s. The period in between the Great Depression up until the conclusion of World War II saw a departure from cultural authoritarianism or, better put, composers who disregarded the public were not at the forefront of this period in American music.

<sup>49</sup> Donal Henahan, “Can Musicians Really Isolate Themselves From the Public?,” *New York Times*, 2 July, 1978.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Tawa, *A Most Wondrous Babble*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 96.

Appealing to the “heart” of the listener was not a worthwhile goal to many of his peers, as “visceral responses” to music are “seldom significant and always capricious.”<sup>53</sup>

Gillis, likewise, rebuked much of the ethos and many of the compositional practices of mid-century modernism. Serial music was not as “honest” as works like *Symphony No. 5½*, which was rooted in “gut emotion”:

[Gillis’s approach to composition is] far better in my thinking, that [*sic*] the involvement with complicated systems writing which produces sterile...materials that do not define the composer’s personality, only the system...I speak, of course, of the use of dodecaphonic music or twelve tone writing as one prime [*sic*] example...it always seemed to be a device which filled up pages quickly without much personal expression.<sup>54</sup>

In Babbitt’s estimation, serialism did not arbitrarily “[fill] up pages,” but rather it freed the composer to be more “efficient” in his writing; each note would have more artistic autonomy and, therefore, more potency.<sup>55</sup> Thomson countered the subjective sentiment of Gillis’s assertion by arguing that, “Composers should strive not to be personal; objectivity is the nobler aim.”<sup>56</sup> For Gillis, emotional detachment was not an option if he was to compose music that would reach “to the heart of all America.”<sup>57</sup>

Aesthetics proved to be another topic in which Gillis differed with his fellow composers. He chastised modernists for their “utter lack of a beauty concept in [the] creation [of their compositions],” and their contentment to produce “ghastly and ugly stuff that’s labeled music.”<sup>58</sup> Many modernists would have been unaffected by this criticism, for aesthetic beauty was not a symbol of efficacy; “beautiful” or “accessible” music was meretricious and nothing more. When

---

<sup>53</sup> Thomson, *The Musical Scene*, 284.

<sup>54</sup> Gillis, “Autobiographical Material,” 19-20.

<sup>55</sup> Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?,” 38.

<sup>56</sup> Thomson, *The Musical Scene*, 287. Such emotional detachment was a constant in mid-century modernism.

<sup>57</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 35.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

commenting on modern works, contemporary critics and composers alike would extoll the “sincerity” and “uncompromising” qualities of the piece; lay people would just as likely interpret those same attributes as “discordant” and “unintelligible.”<sup>59</sup> The difference between the two understandings of modern music illuminates the fact that by the time Gillis’s *Symphony No. 5½* was composed, a rift had opened between audience and modern composer; *Symphony No. 5½* was Gillis’s attempt to “bridge the gap” between the two parties.<sup>60</sup> In order to reconcile the common man and the concert hall, he championed two musical elements: melody and, in his estimation, the most American of all musical idioms, jazz.<sup>61</sup>

Gillis’s first jazz performing experience (as well as conducting, composing and arranging) revolved around his high school dance band the Rhythm Kings, though it is likely that earlier in his youth he heard “territory” bands (swing bands) that toured in and out of Kansas City.<sup>62</sup> Due to his experiences in community, professional, dance, and college marching bands, Gillis avowed that “swing” was the ultimate expression of contemporary America: “Jazz is an outgrowth of many types of music and is the most universal of the many expressions of our own American culture in music.”<sup>63</sup> He takes his endorsement of jazz one step further by asserting that “jazz represents a universally accepted music for Americans and more and more American composers are accepting this theory and making use of the materials of jazz as the real folk

---

<sup>59</sup> Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 34-35.

<sup>60</sup> Gillis, “Autobiographical Material,” 19.

<sup>61</sup> The “jazz” that Gillis employs in *Symphony No. 5½* is in the “Big Band” style that was prevalent in the American dance halls of the 1930s and ‘40s. Also, while Gillis makes no attempt to incorporate what could be considered live jazz improvisation into the work, he synthesizes the common “licks” and rhythmic patterns that were often utilized by dance band soloists across the country into his “germ themes”; see Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 213.

<sup>62</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 51. The “Rhythm Kings” were formerly “The Lucky Thirteen”; Cameron, MO, was roughly sixty miles northeast of Kansas City and roughly 25 miles east of St. Joseph, MO. Numerous territory bands toured out of these Midwest jazz centers in the 1920s and ‘30s; see Michael Saffle, ed., *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950*, 137. For our purposes here, “swing jazz” or “swing” will refer to the danceable big band jazz music that was popular in the 1920s and ‘30s.

<sup>63</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 26-27; Gillis, “NAEB Radio Broadcasts” Ep. VIII, 2.

music of our country.”<sup>64</sup> Not all of Gillis’s peers embraced his viewpoint that jazz was the universal American expression, and, moreover, his intent to use Americanisms was at odds with the sensibilities of post-World War II modernism.

In *An American Music*, Barbara Tischler implied that jazz could not be “universally accepted” by Americans, explaining that America’s “absence of a homogeneous population” made its folk traditions fragmented and unable to speak equally to all of her citizens.<sup>65</sup> This contention was reiterated by Tawa who declared a “unified national utterance” to be a near “impossibility.”<sup>66</sup> Aaron Copland, arguably the most iconic of all twentieth-century American composers, despite his previous experience with it, abstained from using jazz in his nationalistic compositions.<sup>67</sup> According to Thomson, Copland featured American “populous themes” and “populous material” in order to appeal to the “nobility” of the American people, and not resort to the “country-club-oriented so-called jazz” of the 1920s.<sup>68</sup> While he consented to the popularity of jazz in American culture, Thomson could not imagine a fruitful union between modern symphonic language and the most defining characteristic of jazz: improvisation. He concluded that once American (and non-American) composers reached the understanding that they could not realize the essential quality of jazz, that is “communal improvisation,” they moved on to other sources.<sup>69</sup> Aaron Copland’s experiments with jazz in the 1920s and ‘30s focused on what Thomson described as the “rhythmic displacements” inherent in the style; Copland was not

---

<sup>64</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 212.

<sup>65</sup> Barbara Tischler, *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>66</sup> Tawa, *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle*, 192.

<sup>67</sup> The term “nationalistic” will refer to music that contains American musical idioms and was written to reach a broad American audience. Copland’s early usage of jazz rhythms (e.i., *Piano Variations* [1930] and *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra* [1924]) were not intended for mass consumption, whereas the folk-inspired *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944) were.

<sup>68</sup> Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 55.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

interested in its popularity or “American” qualities. Not only was Copland indifferent to the popular appeal of jazz, he voiced his intent to write music that “left popular music far behind.”<sup>70</sup> Contrary to Gillis’s belief that jazz was becoming more and more popular among American art music composers, Thomson professed that the usage of jazz and swing in art music was “old-fashioned” as early as 1949.<sup>71</sup> In any case, by utilizing jazz in the late 1940s, Gillis was mining a source that been abandoned by his modernist contemporaries for more than a decade.

Even use of Americanisms, let alone jazz, had become a point of contention by mid-century. Tawa argued that despite audience enthusiasm for Americanisms, any usage of “American” idioms had become passé in high art music by the 1960s.<sup>72</sup> Conventions such as these did not challenge the audience and allowed for “passive listening”; Modernists would not abide this perceived torpidity on behalf of the listener.<sup>73</sup> Pandering to the audience was not the only peril of Americanisms in music; Tischler posits that Gillis’s intent to write an “American” composition like *Symphony No. 5½* was inherently constrictive:

It was modern music that liberated the American composer from the constraints of nationalism by quotation and helped him to express the variety of the American experience rather than continue the fruitless search for cultural identity.<sup>74</sup>

Gillis believed that he was expressing “the variety of the American experience” through the use of jazz idioms and quotations. Richard Crawford reaffirms the contention that jazz was the preeminent American popular music of the 1930s and ‘40s. Crawford maintained that jazz was “the popular music that most Americans were dancing to, singing, and adopting as their own

---

<sup>70</sup> Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (New York: Mentor, 1959), 111; quoted in Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 41; It should be noted that during the time that Copland was utilizing jazz he was not doing so in a “nationalistic” manner. Copland’s application of jazz was a means of achieving novelty – not attempting to induce nationalism.

<sup>71</sup> Virgil Thomson, *Music Left and Right* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), 118.

<sup>72</sup> Tawa, *A Most Wondrous Babble: American Art Composers, Their Music, and the American Scene*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> Tischler, *An American Music*, 183.

vernacular expression.”<sup>75</sup> In *Symphony No. 5½*, Gillis sought to cater to the American public’s love for jazz in order to draw them back to the concert hall. This “Symphony for Fun” would serve as an olive branch between the modern composer and the American public, who had been detached from the artistic process.

---

<sup>75</sup> Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 660.

## CHAPTER 3

### REACHING THE PEOPLE

In the score of *Symphony No. 5½*, Gillis attempted to communicate with the audience by various means. Firstly, he considered himself a “melodist,” and that he wanted his compositions to be melodic.<sup>76</sup> In his estimation, “melody was the one ingredient necessary to reach the people,” and he would not regard himself as a successful composer until he heard a child in some small town whistling one of his melodies in the street.<sup>77</sup> Nowhere in his writings did he recount such an occurrence. Nevertheless, Gillis crafted his melodies to be fetching, easy to recall, and bearing a distinctly American flare so that the audience might remember them fondly. Secondly, he infused jazz into his melodies by means of “germ themes,” which are born out of improvisatory melodic patterns utilized by jazz soloists of the age, and syncopation, as well as various jazz textures and styles. Thirdly, the composer used quotations from popular music as well as orchestral allusions to John Phillip Sousa and to Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*; these references to familiar works provided the audience with another layer of understanding. Lastly, the humor in *Symphony No. 5½* (which is present in the title, formal features, and score) made the work more approachable to those bemused by the “serious” nature of many traditional symphonies, and, by extension, concert halls.

In Gillis’s estimation, Americans loved melodies, and were predisposed to “carry a tune around with them.”<sup>78</sup> He was intent on making the melodies of *Symphony No. 5½* indelible and as accessible to the masses as possible, but the use of melody in mid-twentieth-century American art music was a point of contention, let alone the treatment of accessible ones. Gillis’s melodies

---

<sup>76</sup> Gillis, “Personal Writings,” 1.

<sup>77</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 74, 92.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.



were intended to be tuneful and catchy. Tawa reiterated Gillis's belief that melody, not novelty, was the most efficient vehicle to reach the masses when he posited that "[mid-twentieth century] audiences [did] not care about innovation as much as melody and tonal clarity."<sup>79</sup>

Other American art-music composers were not concerned with such melodic lucidity, and some, like Babbitt, disregarded accessibility altogether, labeling it "theatre" music for the "show biz crowd."<sup>80</sup> The modernist reception of Johannes Brahms gives insight on how accessibility, or even perceived accessibility, was considered an offense worthy of banishment amongst mid-century modernists. Brahms's symphonic output was comprised of "absolute music," music that had no external literary reference or non-musical influence. At face value, modernists might have considered Brahms to be one of their musical forefathers due to his proclivity to "[hide] himself in his music," defying the listener to "come and find him," or that the composer held musical form and compositional discretion in the highest regard.<sup>81</sup> Donal Henahan asserts that as a consequence of his popularity with the public, "Brahms has been made a symbol of all that is conventional, respectable, and safe in commercial music making. In militantly modernist circles, therefore, he can be safely shrugged off."<sup>82</sup> If Brahms's musically insular techniques (e.g. developing variation) were disparaged as "safe" (or accessible) owing to the composer's favorable reputation with the people at large, then it stands to reason that Gillis's *Symphony No. 5½* would have been dismissed by modernists as a banality of the highest order.

Elliott Carter maintained that high modernists displayed an "unwillingness to admit the possibility of highly purposeful communication" with the audience by making it nearly

---

<sup>79</sup> Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 51.

<sup>80</sup> Joan Peyser, "The Affair Proved Traumatic," *New York Times*, 12 January 1969.

<sup>81</sup> Donal Henahan, "Music View; Progressive or Not, Brahms Still Fascinates," *New York Times*, 1 May 1983.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*; Nadia Boulanger maintained that Brahms's developing variation and overall style was, in a word, "tedious"; see Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 26.

impossible for the lay person to “discriminate, organize, and remember patterns of sound.”<sup>83</sup>

Carter maintained that the non-communicative quality of serial music was a consequence of the isolationism inherent in “academic music,” which began to progress after World War II.<sup>84</sup>

Academic musicians, of course, did not see isolation as a detriment to the composer, but rather a beneficial condition. According to Milton Babbitt, the autonomy and solitude of academia was the modern composer’s “last hope,” and that serialism freed the composer from the “inefficiency” of tonality so that he might be free to make new musical discoveries.<sup>85</sup> Gillis posited that twelve-tone music was “sterile” and did not exhibit the personality of the composer, but only that of the system. For him, such sterility was not visceral enough for an audience to process and respond to: the composer’s personality must put be present in his or her compositions in order to communicate with the lay masses.<sup>86</sup>

Gillis asserted that in order for the people to “whistle” a melody it must fulfill two basic requirements: it has to be pleasing enough for the audience to enjoy and simple enough for them to remember.<sup>87</sup> Gillis structured *Symphony No. 5½* around these kinds of “memorable” melodies. The opening theme from the second movement “Spiritual?” is reflective of his efforts (see Example 1). The first eight measures of the melody outline a pentatonic scale (d-e-f#-a-b); this particular scale, which avoids the fourth and seventh scale degrees, evokes a “folk-like

---

<sup>83</sup> Elliott Carter, “The Milieu of the American Composer.” *Perspectives of New Music* 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1962): 149. Carter admitted that his own music contained very little that a lay listener could process and recall; see Elliott Carter and Benjamin Boretz, “Conversation with Elliott Carter,” *Perspectives of New Music* 8, No. 2, (Spring – Summer, 1970): 16.

<sup>84</sup> Carter, “The Milieu of the American Composer”: 151; see Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 694.

<sup>85</sup> Joan Peyser, “The Affair Proved Traumatic,” *New York Times*, 12 January 1969; see Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?,” 37.

<sup>86</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 74.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

character” that many in the audience would associate with folk idioms.<sup>88</sup> The melody makes no leaps larger than a fifth, is rhythmically uncomplicated, and sustains a straightforward, tuneful line. In regard to form, Gillis organized it as an eight-measure period containing two balanced four-measure phrases; this symmetrical construction would make the melody that much more predictable and unchallenging to process. All of these aspects coalesced to create a theme that would be clear in its structure, vaguely familiar in its harmony, and simple enough for the audience to recall and “whistle” on the street corner.

Ex. 1: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 2, Opening Melody, mm. 9-16.<sup>89</sup>

Slowly  
C.A. Solo

*mf*

While melody is prevalent throughout *Symphony No. 5½*, Gillis also utilizes another musical elements that would also engender a connection with an American audience: jazz. The jazz influence of *Symphony No. 5½* is pronounced in the first eight measures of the first movement, “Perpetual Emotion,” by means of a “germ theme.” (As was mentioned above, “germ themes” were amalgams of the ubiquitous improvisational “licks” and figures that Gillis had heard played by jazz musicians across the country.) The grace note found at the beginning of the first “germ theme” (see Example 2, m. 3 [g<sup>#2</sup>]) functions as a symphonic “blue note” that

<sup>88</sup> Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 668.

<sup>89</sup> Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½* (New York and London: Boosey & Hawkes Inc., 1948), 44.

proceeds to the major third (a<sup>2</sup>) of F major.<sup>90</sup> The defining rhythmic characteristic of the first “germ theme” is syncopation, which begins on the last eighth-note of beat two and carries over to obscure the downbeat of the following measure (mm. 3-4). The first four pitches (a<sup>2</sup>-f<sup>2</sup>-g<sup>2</sup>-f<sup>2</sup>) of this “germ theme” are quoted and imitated by various instruments throughout the movement, which serve as a constant reminder of the jazz influence of the work.

Ex. 2: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 1, all parts (in unison at the octave), mm. 1-8.<sup>91</sup>



In the third movement, “Scherzofrenia,” jazz is utilized to underscore the humor implied by the title of the section. After opening with three measures of delicate patter in the strings (which could be mistaken for a texture taken from a Romantic work), Gillis interjects with a jazz-influenced theme (see Example 3.) The traditional harmony and even rhythm of the opening are juxtaposed with the jazz harmony and syncopation of the interpolated material, evincing a “schizophrenic” quality in the music. Traditional symphonic elements are collocated with jazz-inspired sections throughout the movement.

<sup>90</sup> Another “blue note” is found in m. 6. Typically, “blue notes” are “bent” or slid in to, which cannot be done effectively or accurately by a full complement of orchestral players. This lack of “bending” or sliding does not diminish the jazz influence of Gillis’s “germ theme.”

<sup>91</sup> Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, 1.

Ex. 3: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 3, Opening, mm. 1-4.  
 (Score reduced by author).<sup>92</sup>

**Briskly - in a gay manner** ♩ = 120

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Violin I

Violin II

Ensemble

The composer also uses various “personalities” of jazz. In mm. 37-53 he turns the orchestra into a swing band as they “swing” barred dotted-eighths and sixteenth notes on a blues bass pattern (see Example 4); he follows this by employing a Latin-jazz-influenced texture in mm. 55-75 (see Example 5); and finally Gillis introduces a jazz band fanfare found in the brass during mm. 84-87 (see Example 6). Although he does so in a jocular vein, by incorporating various types of jazz and textures in “Scherzofrenia,” Gillis broadens the appeal of *Symphony No. 5½* to include the proponents of different jazz subgroups, and he reaffirms his willingness to use every means at his disposal to reach the people.

<sup>92</sup> Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, 50.

Ex. 4: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 3, Blues, mm. 36-42.<sup>93</sup>  
 (Score reduced by author.)

Ex. 5: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 3, Latin Jazz, mm. 59-63.  
 (Score reduced by author.)

Ex. 6: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 3, Brass fanfare, mm. 84-89.  
 (Score reduced by author.)

<sup>93</sup> Examples 4, 5, and 6 are taken from: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, 55-57, 60-61, and 65-66, respectively.

Another way Gillis attempted to speak to the audience in *Symphony No. 5½* was through the quotation of popular music, which was introduced at the onset of the first and second movements. Gillis allowed that using popular quotations was one of the “amusing” components of his “Symphony for Fun”; it also provided another point of reference for the public.<sup>94</sup> The opening rhythmic pattern of the horns in “Spiritual?” is an exact replication of the rhythm found at the beginning of the song “Ol’ Man River” from the musical *Show Boat* (which was one of the most popular songs from one of the iconic musicals of America’s “Golden Age” of that medium); the pitches of the melody follow a pattern similar to the original source as well (see Example 7).<sup>95</sup> At this juncture, the horn part is featured as the syncopated fourth note of its line bounces against the even quarters of the ensemble; the horns are also one dynamic level higher than the other instruments. In addition to references of rhythm and melodic contour, the melody also exhibits the exact pentatonic scale (1-2-3-5-6) utilized in “Ol’ Man River.” Gillis emulated the rhythm, line, and pentatonic color of Kern’s iconic song in such a way that the audience would be aware of its usage and reference.

Ex. 7: Don Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, Movement 2, reference to Kern’s “Ol’ Man River,” mm. 1-2.<sup>96</sup>



<sup>94</sup> “Ex Takes Digs at ‘Long-hairs’ in Symphony,” Author, publication, and date unknown. Scrapbooks, DGC. In this source Gillis admits to quoting numerous sources in *Symphony No. 5½*: “Hora Staccato,” “Beer Barrel Polka,” “Ol’ Man River,” “London Bridge Is Falling Down,” and a “strain of [Dvořák’s] *New World Symphony*.” All of these quotations and inferences can be readily found, at least in part, in the score except for “Hora Staccato.” The usage of this piece has proven to be elusive. An element of the “Beer Barrel Polka” might be present in the clarinet part five measures after Rehearsal E in “Conclusion!”

<sup>95</sup> Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 667-669.

<sup>96</sup> Gillis, *Symphony No. 5½*, 44.

Also in “Spiritual?,” Gillis makes reference to Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*, this time by means of orchestration. An English horn plays the initial melody of the second movement of Dvořák’s symphony; the same holds true for *Symphony No. 5½*. While the prior composition evokes a pastoral tone as opposed to the latter’s Negro spiritual influence, the relationship between the English horn solo and ensemble in both works is similar. This similarity was so striking that upon hearing the radio premiere, critics immediately made a connection between the two works.<sup>97</sup> It can be inferred that Gillis chose Dvořák’s *New World Symphony* for reasons beyond aesthetics. Not only was this source eagerly accepted by twentieth-century American symphony conductors and audiences, it was a landmark composition based on American folk idioms.<sup>98</sup> By fusing elements of Dvořák’s orchestration with the folk-like pentatonic scale and rhythm of “Ol’ Man River,” Gillis created a movement that was implicitly familiar on several levels to many in a contemporary audience, and explicitly obvious to others.

Gillis also cited other works, one of which might not be considered “popular.” The first five notes of “Perpetual Emotion” are a direct quotation of the nursery rhyme “London Bridge Is Falling Down”; this excerpt becomes the head of the movement’s opening theme (Gillis’s “germ theme” [a<sup>2</sup>-f<sup>2</sup>-g<sup>2</sup>-f<sup>2</sup>] at the tail) and is restated throughout (see above, Example 2). Although this melody was likely not being played in dance halls or on the radio, it was an identifiable reference to an American audience. Just as Gillis used various styles of jazz in “Scherzofrenia,” he drew upon disparate sources for quotation. The use of quotations, textures, and colors from dissimilar genres like symphonies, musicals, and nursery rhymes is proof of Gillis’s eclectic attempt to open discourse with a diverse target audience.

---

<sup>97</sup> Louis Biancolli, “Toscanini, in Groove, Sparks a Jam Session,” *New York World-Telegram*, 22 September 1947.

<sup>98</sup> Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 581.



One of the defining characteristics of *Symphony No. 5½*, as well as a great portion of Gillis's entire oeuvre, is the composer's use of humor. Gillis was aware that the humor he injected into his music caused many to dismiss it as frivolous, but he, as always, was more concerned with the people's reaction than with critical reception:

Was it really wrong for me to write humor into my music? Certainly the people liked it when they heard it, and conductors liked to play it, and sometimes even critics said nice things about it. Or did it matter what anybody thought...If I believed in what I was trying to do, that was the real answer to my problem...and if the people okayed my stuff by their applause and interest, then little else mattered.<sup>99</sup>

He, perhaps unknowingly, evoked the classical notion that tragedy was for elite audiences, while comedy was for the masses. He also contended that mid-century Americans were, by and large, a good-humored people and they were not drawn to "all the sadness that gets written into music."<sup>100</sup> Gillis sought to appeal to the "wholesome" American sense of humor and spirit of playfulness: "For music is fun and fun belongs in music, so lets [*sic*] (composers) have at it and see if our product won't meet with more universal appeal as a result."<sup>101</sup> Even before the downbeat of the first movement is heard, the humor in *Symphony No. 5½* manifests itself in the title. Sketches for the piece began after *Symphony No. 5* was completed and preliminary efforts on *Symphony No. 6* had already commenced. Although some concluded that the diminutive length of the work inspired its fractional title, the composer maintained that the "one-half" moniker was apt when considering the jumbled chronology of the opus numbers.<sup>102</sup>

The musical humor in *Symphony No. 5½* appears in the first eight measures of the work. At the onset of "Perpetual Emotion," Gillis gives the entire orchestra the opening theme in

---

<sup>99</sup> Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," 244-245.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>102</sup> Gillis, "NAEB Radio Broadcasts" Ep. I, 3.

unison (at the octave) in a march-like 2/4. This texture is indicative of a Sousa march introduction, which is a reference that would not be lost on a contemporary audience. If the listener was at first uncertain about a “symphony” with a Sousa-esque opening theme, the ascending, stepwise bass line (5-6-7-1) that punctuates the end of the phrase would serve as a punch line to the composer’s musical joke; from this moment on, the movement is a fanfare of jocularly. One of Gillis’s preferred vehicles for humor was muted brass.<sup>103</sup> After the introduction of the movement, the “germ theme” is extracted from the opening (a<sup>2</sup>-f<sup>2</sup>-g<sup>2</sup>-f<sup>2</sup>) and is featured in the strings; following each statement of the “germ theme,” Gillis inserts a “wowed” Harmon mute in the trumpets on beat two of the measure.<sup>104</sup> These abrupt, interposed statements in the brass could perhaps be a musical indicator for the audience as they ask themselves: “Have I heard this before?” The trumpets give them a playful, affirmative answer.

Lastly, even the formal structure of “Perpetual Emotion” furthers the composer’s comedic intent, as he utilizes a compressed sonata form.<sup>105</sup> A primary theme is introduced at the beginning of the “exposition,” there is a modulation, and then a secondary theme appears in order to contrast with the first. When modulating, the tonic does not move to the dominant, but rather ascends chromatically to the supertonic. This method of modulation (ascending and descending chromatic motion), which undoubtedly reflects popular influence, is prevalent throughout the movement. Gillis features the second theme in a quasi-developmental section that modulates in an ascending chromatic sequence until it arrives at the original tonic (F major). At the beginning of the recapitulation, Gillis restates the second theme in the tonic in order to

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>104</sup> As was mentioned above, Gillis maintained that “germ themes” were an outgrowth of the ubiquitous improvisational jazz “licks” heard in contemporary dance halls across the United States, and that Americans would instantly be amused and entertained by them; see Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 213.

<sup>105</sup> In his first attempt to write a symphony, Gillis based the entire structure on Haydn’s *Military Symphony*. Gillis’s work mapped onto Haydn’s at every formal juncture; see Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 70, 183.

reconcile the two melodic ideas. Since Gillis wanted melody to be prevalent in his works, the use of Classical sonata form was a prudent choice, as that form is theme-driven, but why would he use such decidedly “unsymphonic” resources to populate his work and yet resort to the idiomatic formal aspects of the medium? The audience that he wanted to interact with would not have noticed the formal structure or the absence thereof. This was intended for the conductors, performers, and critics of *Symphony No. 5½*; even the initiated were invited to join in on the joke making in this “symphony for fun.”

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PEOPLE RESPOND

The initial critical and public response to *Symphony No. 5½* were divergent, and the comments of contemporary critics illuminate the elements that led to the rapid rise and eventual decline in popularity of this symphony for the people. While the lay audience did respond favorably, numerous reviewers took issue with the “indebtedness” and whimsical nature of the composition, which led some to the conclusion that the work, while stimulating to the average listener, would not stand the test of time.<sup>106</sup> Another composition that helps to contextualize *Symphony No. 5½* is Morton Gould’s *American Symphonette No. 2* (1938). Although Gillis never acknowledged the jazz-influenced *American Symphonette No. 2* in his writings, Gould’s miniature symphony might have served as a prototype for the “Symphony for Fun,” as both pieces feature similar aspects: compressed forms; march and jazz influences; and both were composed with a radio audience in mind. Certain facets of *Symphony No. 5½* might also have contributed to its ultimate decline: the joyfulness emanating from the work railed against postwar disillusionment engendered by the knowledge of the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the Cold War; in addition, Gillis strayed too far from symphonic conventions, causing the piece to exist in the precarious expanse between jazz and western art music traditions. Therefore, it was referential to both, but belonging to neither.

On 21 September 1947 *Symphony No. 5½* became part of the national discussion as Maestro Toscanini conducted its premiere on NBC Radio.<sup>107</sup> Listeners and critics from New

---

<sup>106</sup> John Briggs, “Toscanini Leads New ‘Symphony for Fun,’” *New York Post*, 23 September 1947.

<sup>107</sup> Toscanini was not considered a champion of modern composers. Varèse referred to him as “that enemy of modern music,” and while touring with the New York Symphony Orchestra in the early 50s, Toscanini did not feature a single work by an American composer. The maestro choosing *Symphony No. 5½* over other American compositions bemused many; see Gunther Schuler, “Conversation with Varèse,” 33; Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 102; Kolodin, “Toscanini Leads Score By Gillis.”

York to Los Angeles were exposed to Gillis's "symphony for fun," and their reactions ranged from receptive to dismissive. Most of the critical reception of *Symphony No. 5½* is confined to the few days following the radio premiere, and much of that commentary came from New York critics. Although the work was played hundreds of times over the next few years, it did not remain part of the symphonic repertory, therefore it received little criticism beyond mid-century. While many pundits praised the skillful orchestration displayed in the work, the issue of indebtedness was a common point of contention. Robert Hague (*PM* [New York]) did not display much affinity for the premiere:

More of a nuisance than a novelty, the piece succeeds mainly in making a great deal of noise...He also has a very good memory for the tunes employed by other composers...by the time the last movement was going full blast, I had elected to protect my already quivering eardrums from further damage, and stopped listening.

Hague commented on Gillis's "memory" for others' material. The critic asserted that Gillis was beholden to Jerome Kern, Stephen Foster, George Gershwin, Igor Stravinsky, and, "no doubt, many others."<sup>108</sup> Likewise, *New York Times* critic Noel Straus described the piece as "witty, vigorous, though often derivative."<sup>109</sup> *New York World-Tribune* writer, John Biancolli, kept a "scorecard" of Gillis's compositional debts, which included Morton Gould and Dvořák as well as the aforementioned Gershwin and Stravinsky. Gillis's emulation of Kern's "Ol' Man River" and Dvořák's Largo from the *New World Symphony* in "Spiritual?" has already been addressed, but these other instances of supposed "borrowing" are not readily apparent; all except for Gould, which will be assessed later.

At the time Gillis wrote *Symphony No. 5½*, the direction of American art music was in a period of uncertainty. The use of quotation and Americanisms was tolerated by critics and

---

<sup>108</sup> Robert A. Hague, "Musical Roundup."

<sup>109</sup> Noel Straus, *New York Times*.

celebrated by audiences from the onset of the Great Depression to the end of World War II. This epoch separated two modernist eras of American music: the 1920s and the 1950s. The poverty and war that defined this period induced composers like Aaron Copland to address the inaccessibility of modernism and to seek out a “centrist” musical language that would retain modern sensibilities and still be approachable to the public.<sup>110</sup> Copland wrote his iconic ballets *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), as well as *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942) with this understanding in mind. Unlike the contemporary influence found in *Symphony No. 5½*, Copland’s folk-influenced ballets drew from older sources that would evoke nostalgia for an America that was; by avoiding the visceral effects of popular music and its “urban” connotations, Copland sought to appeal to the rural “nobility” of the American people.<sup>111</sup> Although Copland’s sources were from a bygone era, but his austere orchestration and frank treatment of melody revealed his modern sensibilities. The union between Copland’s sentimental melodic material and his contemporary compositional style created works that engendered a sense timelessness that a jazz-influenced work like *Symphony No. 5½* might never achieve.

Once World War II had ended, composers began to distance themselves from quotation and Americanisms and “originality at all hazards” became the precedent.<sup>112</sup> Because of the uncompromising ethos of postwar modernism, even Copland began to forsake his “popular” works and modify his style to espouse the serialism indicative of the prevailing internationalism taking hold in American compositional circles.<sup>113</sup> For modernists, especially serialists,

---

<sup>110</sup> Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 96-99.

<sup>111</sup> Thomson, *American Music Since 1910*, 55.

<sup>112</sup> Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 110.

<sup>113</sup> Tawa, *A Most Wondrous Babble*, 7.

“accessible came to stand for meretricious,” and their ideology was so persuasive that “any suspicion of public acceptance was enough to bring banishment to a composer.”<sup>114</sup> Elements of this burgeoning shift to modernism in postwar American art music can be seen in the negative critical response to Gillis’s use of quotation and emulation.

Gillis’s pervasive use of humor and playfulness in *Symphony No. 5½* led some critics to dismiss the work as not “serious.” Upon reading the whimsical title, *New York Post* critic John Briggs dismissed the composition as “admittedly a piece of fluff.” As to the quality of the writing, he described it as a “harmless confection designed to furnish twenty minutes amusement.”<sup>115</sup> *New York Herald-Tribune* writer Bill Haggin characterizes Gillis’s attempt at humor as exhibiting “excessive cleverness...acceptable and diverting,” but excessive nonetheless.<sup>116</sup> The “good humor” of the “fragile score...was hardly enough for twenty minutes of intense performance,” according to *New York Sun* pundit Irving Kolodin.<sup>117</sup> The critics measured *Symphony No. 5½* by modern symphonic standards, and not by Gillis’s metric of clarity in communication with the masses. One account of the premiere mentioned that a group of Europeans, some of whom were composers, stood up and left during the performance, seemingly in protest.<sup>118</sup> Gillis was aware of his modernist contemporaries’ convictions, but he - like Sibelius - remained unaffected by their unfavorable reception of his sentimental music. As to assessing the value of a composition, he declared that music should not be delineated along the

---

<sup>114</sup> Donal Henahan, “Music View; On Being An ‘Accessible Composer,’” *New York Times*, 7 June 1981.

<sup>115</sup> Briggs, “Toscanini Leads New ‘Symphony for Fun.’”

<sup>116</sup> Haggin, “Music on the Radio.”

<sup>117</sup> Kolodin, “Toscanini Leads Score By Gillis.”

<sup>118</sup> Miles Kastendieck, “Satire Offered By Toscanini,” *New York Journal American*, 22 September 1947; No other account corroborates this occurrence.

lines of “serious” and “humorous,” which elevates the former at the expense of the latter.<sup>119</sup>

Even if a composition was not intended to be a magnum opus, such labeling betrays the amount of effort and craftsmanship required by a “non-serious” composition like *Symphony No. 5½*. An anonymous article clipping from the Gillis archive captures the misunderstanding between the composer and his detractors:

Had Gillis not sub-titled this short, tongue-in-cheek work “Symphony for Fun,” it is probable that it would have been dismissed as just another pleasant pastiche by a radio-conscious composer. . . Instead it has been taken with unwonted seriousness by many commentators, who seem to feel that it makes much ado about nothing, and resent it for that reason. It does just that, but why it should be resented is a mystery. The concert hall should never ring down an iron curtain on humor.<sup>120</sup>

What this quote fails to mention is why the composer employed humor in the first place: to reach the lay public, and not to impress critics or modern-thinking listeners.<sup>121</sup>

Gillis professed that humor was part of his personal idiom, and that his “source materials and influences” were “rooted in gut emotion, of the basic culture, of the people more than having achieved any pinnacle of intellectualism.” Moreover, any departure from what was essentially “Gillis” would make his music more like that of his peers, which according to Gillis’s friend Thor Johnson (conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra) would be a “dishonest” musical representation: “The composer has to be himself before he can really write. . . Honesty of purpose will excuse a lot of inadequacies. But mere ingenuity can never take the place of sincerity and integrity in composition.”<sup>122</sup> Gillis avoided modernist techniques not because he lacked the skill

---

<sup>119</sup> Don Gillis, “Gillis on Gillis.” 1973-1977, DGC, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Author unknown, “Symphony for Fun,” publication, date unknown, Scrapbooks, DGC.

<sup>121</sup> Although many of the critics’ deductions about the work were misplaced, the writers were required to comment on a piece that was a stylistic outlier that was juxtaposed with compositions by Beethoven, Smetana, and Kabalevsky. Toscanini’s decision to premiere *Symphony No. 5½* exceeded even Gillis’s expectations, and he was surely not so naïve to think that such a work would escape staunch criticism on platform of that magnitude.

<sup>122</sup> Gillis, “Autobiographical Material,” 20; Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 138-139.



or knowledge to do so, but rather because they did not reflect his personal idiom.<sup>123</sup> As he stated: “I learned to wear [modernists’] intellectual clothing, but I always had on a pair of overalls underneath.”<sup>124</sup> If he were to reach the people with his music, it could not be “sanitary” or detached, whether by a twelve-tone system or any other means: he had to be honest - he had to be “Gillis.”

One group that did not begrudge Gillis for his use of “accessible” material and humor was the party that he revered most: the audience. Nearly every review of *Symphony No. 5½* commented on the positive response from the people. Whether at the premiere or elsewhere, the people responded to his “splurge of symphony mirth.”<sup>125</sup> One commentator described a performance of the work as a “mad cap rain of confetti, which raised the audience (and the orchestra’s) spirits to carnival pitch.”<sup>126</sup> While covering a performance of *Symphony No. 5½* for the *Claremont Courier*, Henry Eams determined that the “audience definitely relished Don Gillis’s *Symphony No. 5½*,” and they “gave an almost unanimous decision in favor of the laughing lad from Texas.”<sup>127</sup> After a 1954 concert in Charleston, one critic proclaimed that Gillis was “eminently successful in carrying out his sole objective – to evoke mirth in an unabashed manner.”<sup>128</sup> After including *Symphony No. 5½* on his radio program, Ian Smith (a radio producer in Detroit) wrote the composer to commend him on his “excellent little symphony,” which enjoyed a favorable reaction from the audience via the radio and in the

---

<sup>123</sup> Gillis, “Autobiographical Material,” 22.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Biancolli, “Toscanini, in Groove, Sparks a Jam Session.”

<sup>126</sup> Author unknown, “Symphony for Fun.”

<sup>127</sup> Henry Purmort Eames, “Orchestra, Pianist in Broadcast of Familiar Music Highly Praised,” *Claremont Courier* (Cal.), date unknown, Scrapbooks, DGC.

<sup>128</sup> Ennis, “Gillis’s *Symphony No. 5½* Fun-Packed Jam Session.”

studio.<sup>129</sup> An article from *International Musician* aligns Gillis with Gershwin and Morton Gould as well as illustrates the effect of *Symphony No. 5½* on its intended audience:

The most vigorous applause went to Don Gillis, that...member of the three G's – the others are Gershwin and Gould – who are causing American rhythms and melody to flourish in symphony halls...5½ made them laugh...it gets across. When the composer stood for a bow, it was another one of their own they applauded – an American expressing what they all understand.<sup>130</sup>

Despite the fact that the work remained a common selection for “pop” concerts through the 1960s, *Symphony No. 5½* did not remain a viable option for traditional symphonic programs.<sup>131</sup> Morton Gould's *American Symphonette No. 2* (1938) anticipated the receptive arc of *Symphony No. 5½*, as it enjoyed a period of initial popularity before it declined into obscurity. An examination of both works will illuminate in part the factors that attributed to their similar receptions.

#### Morton Gould's *American Symphonette No. 2*

As stated above, critics linked *Symphony No. 5½* to the output of Morton Gould. Bill Haggin wrote that Gillis's “symphony for fun” was a “more robust, rowdy, and hectic version of the Morton Gould-type product.”<sup>132</sup> Gould and Gillis share comparable biographies. Both were radiomen by trade, and both were excluded by modernist circles in New York; Gillis by choice, and Gould as a consequence of his insecurity about his minimal musical training, which drew the ire of Euro-centric academics.<sup>133</sup> Due to his position as composer and arranger for WOR New

---

<sup>129</sup> Ian M. Smith, Detroit, to Don Gillis, New York, TLS, the Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

<sup>130</sup> Unknown author, “The Three G's in Orange.” *International Musician*, date unknown, Scrapbooks, DGC.

<sup>131</sup> Boosey & Hawkes Inc, “Two Anniversaries,” *Newsletter*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Spring 1967).

<sup>132</sup> Haggin, “Music on the Radio.”

<sup>133</sup> Goodman, *Morton Gould: American Salute*, 75.

York's "Music Today," Gould's music was constantly on the airwaves; this publicity afforded Gould "the greatest influence across genres of any American composer."<sup>134</sup> Like Gillis, Gould was considered by many to be an orchestrator and arranger *par excellence*, but his original, jazz-influenced compositions were often times dismissed as "easy listening."<sup>135</sup> Unlike Gillis, Gould was sensitive to this criticism and his impetuous nature led him to call his modernist antagonists "fifth culturists."<sup>136</sup> *American Symphonette No. 2* was Gould's attempt to reconcile the favorable qualities of American folk idioms, namely jazz, and European musical structure. In the program notes from the premiere of the work, Gould states:

It appeals to laymen and professionals alike...[It] has appealed to musicians and more developed audiences as something light – but consistent in its idiom. This is entertainment – but American in feeling and conception. It utilizes the elements of swing in the classical form and structure, because the composer feels that the better elements of our popular music and the conciseness of the classical forms have a clarity and compatibility in common.<sup>137</sup>

Much of this program note could have been used for *Symphony No. 5½*. A common jazz influence is not the only similarity these two compositions share: the first movements of both works are in a truncated sonata form; both works feature a unison declamation of the opening melody reminiscent of an intro to a Sousa march; and finally, the Largo second movements of each piece ("Spiritual?" and "Pavanne") were often played independently, and enjoyed a continued popularity even after interest in the original work waned.<sup>138</sup>

Gould's biographer Peter Goodman professed that *American Symphonette No. 2* is "a genuine masterpiece, virtually *sui generis*. It is no wonder that this score became wildly popular,

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 121; a reference to Franco's "Fifth Column" during the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>138</sup> "Spiritual?" became popular as a band arrangement, while "Pavanne" was Gould's single most popular original composition; Ibid., 116.

taken over by dance bands and arranged for all sorts of combinations. It deserved its place in the concert hall, not condescension and sniping.” He described the first movement as “quick, bright, rhythmic, and infectious,” and filled with Gould’s “musical jokes” that were often “witty and endearing.” In his final assessment of the work, Goodman declares that “the overall effect is remarkable: absolutely uncompromised, urban, mid-1930s America draped convincingly on a European framework. It starts fast, says everything it means to say, and stops. This is an American original.”<sup>139</sup> The only aspect of this statement that could not arguably be applied to *Symphony No. 5½* is the timeframe. *American Symphonette No. 2* exhibited popular influence, was enjoyed by the public, and eventually was neglected in the concert hall. Although he was writing about a different Gould piece that displayed jazz elements, Samuel Laciari concluded that classical music and jazz “will not mix despite the cleverness of the composer’s orchestration...Mr. Gould has simply fallen between two fires.”<sup>140</sup> The distance between *American Symphonette No. 2* (as well as *Symphony No. 5½*) and the symphonic tradition is reflected by the immediate admiration and ensuing disregard of the public: by straying so far from the mores of modern symphonic writing and by utilizing popular influences so pervasively, Gould and Gillis insulated their works from entering the permanent repertory. Jazz helped to make their works accessible to the public, but popular music is beholden to the mercurial tastes of the masses. In his “symphonette” Gould evoked the jazz of 1938 just as Gillis did of 1947, but the styles of jazz they employed became crystallized in the scores. Subsequent developments in jazz would go on to date the popular elements in the two compositions, stripping their potency for future audiences.

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Samuel Laciari, *Evening Ledger* (Philadelphia), 8 January 1936; quoted in Goodman, *Morton Gould: American Salute*, 98.

This fall from relevancy is illuminated by the fact that critics associated *Symphony No. 5½* with Gould's output, but they did not mention its indebtedness to *American Symphonette No. 2* in particular. Either the critics had forgotten Gould's often-played symphonette, thereby confirming how dated and nugatory the work was by 1947, or they disregarded its individual existence altogether and dismissed it as just another "Morton Gould-type product"; neither reception boded well for *Symphony No. 5½*. Focusing on an omission such as this might seem arbitrary, but if *American Symphonette No. 2* was not brought to mind in the hearing of *Symphony No. 5½* when the two works share conspicuous similarities, then, within the interim between the pieces, the former composition, whether due to ignorance or apathy, had lost its significance, and the latter composition could then be expected to endure the same fate as its prototype. It should be noted, that while Gillis may have been indebted to Gould, he never mentioned him in any writings. It is naïve to conclude that Gillis was not aware of Gould or his symphonette, but Gillis fails to address the composer or his output.<sup>141</sup>

#### The Decline in Popularity of *Symphony No. 5½*

The *joie de vivre* and humor featured throughout *Symphony No. 5½* might also have been contributing factors in its decline from prominence. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, Gillis saw America and American society in a positive light, and maintained that "Americans, by and large, are in [an] eternal quest of happiness...and maybe if we begin to give them a little happy music they'll begin to fill up our concert halls." Other postwar composers and artists did not assent to such an ebullient view of the mid-century United States or its citizens. The jazz idioms he utilized were inherently "happy," which disregarded the postwar realities of the Holocaust, the

---

<sup>141</sup> An explanation for this is not readily apparent. Perhaps Gillis wanted to distance himself from Gould due the latter's supposed Marxist sympathies, which all but destroyed Gould's radio career; see Goodman, *Morton Gould: American Salute*, 192-193.

atomic bomb, and the Cold War. Elliott Carter concluded that the “cheerfulness of Americana” was illusory and that composers who utilized it could only communicate with mid-century American audiences on a superficial level.<sup>142</sup>

Finally, *Symphony No. 5½* fell too far outside of the symphonic tradition to become part of the permanent repertory, and this was evident before the piece was premiered. While rehearsing the work privately, Toscanini was not evoking the rhythmic jazziness of a melody from “Scherzofrenia.” Gillis instructed the conductor how to perform the rhythm as a dance band would. This same section of music proved difficult for the ensemble as they failed to “get into the jazz groove” that the style required. Toscanini informed the group that *Symphony No. 5½* was “not Beethoven” or “Rossini,” but that it was “American.”<sup>143</sup> This moment underscores the disparity between Gillis’s composition and the whole of the symphonic tradition. As was discussed above, he did not confine his jazz influence to the melodies of the work; jazz was prevalent in every aspect of the first, third, and fourth movements of the symphony. He turned the orchestra into various jazz ensembles via orchestration as well as musical content. As a consequence of the very elements that communicated so clearly with the audience (i.e. blue notes, syncopation, march idioms, swung blues bass lines, dance band textures, “germ themes,” etc.) *Symphony No. 5½* did not attain the essence of a contemporary “symphonic” work. Gillis, in effect, reversed the common trend of orchestral music being transcribed for concert band, and wrote a band piece that happened to be arranged for orchestra.<sup>144</sup> This led *New York Times* critic

---

<sup>142</sup> Martin Boykan, “Elliott Carter and the Postwar Composers,” *Perspectives of New Music* 2, No. 2 (Spring – Summer, 1964): 126.

<sup>143</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 83.

<sup>144</sup> When Mills Music signed Gillis he was asked to arrange orchestral music for band. He decided to arrange his own works, and, eventually, write original compositions that featured the band for its own unique capabilities; see Gillis, “Gillis on Gillis,” 9.

Noel Straus to the conclusion that *Symphony No. 5½* was “not really symphonic in character.”<sup>145</sup> If other tastemakers held this to be true, then Gillis’s “Symphony for fun” would be seen as no more than a popular orchestral oddity that neither reflected the symphonic tradition nor added to it.

On 22 October 1949, Milton Katims conducted the NBC Symphony Orchestra premier of Gillis’s *Symphony No. 8*, “A Dance Symphony.” *Symphony No. 8* was comprised of four movements: “Juke Box Jive,” “Deep Blues,” “Waltz (of sorts),” and “Lowdown, Hoedown.” Each movement evoked a different style of dance, and Gillis used much of the same compositional techniques utilized in *Symphony No. 5½* (i.e. identifiable melodies, folk idioms [jazz and a square dance], quotation, and humor). Although the work was publicized as the heir to the still popular *Symphony No. 5½* and received favorable reviews, *Symphony No. 8*, much to the composer’s surprise, did not dance into the hearts of the lay audience like its predecessor. Upon hearing the premier, Maestro Toscanini declared the piece to be the “big brother” of *Symphony No. 5½*, as it was grander in forces and length, but even with this endorsement it did not approach the impact of the “Symphony for Fun.”<sup>146</sup> By the time *Symphony No. 5½* was composed, the use of folk idioms was in precipitous decline, and the use of jazz was already considered “old-fashioned.” Even with the momentum of *Symphony No. 5½* bolstering its visibility, *Symphony No. 8* could not resist the tide of progress that would lead American art music away from Americanisms and towards more abstract modes of expression. In effect, *Symphony No. 8* was dated before it was premiered.

---

<sup>145</sup> Noel Straus, *New York Times*.

<sup>146</sup> Don Gillis, *Music by Don Gillis*. the Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX, 3.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

At a time when emotional restraint, objectivity, and decorum were paramount, Gillis incorporated melody, jazz, quotation, and humor in his *Symphony No. 5½* in order to reach the disenfranchised American public. By many accounts, he was successful in communicating with contemporary audiences, but the very influences that contributed to the inceptive success of the work furthered its decline. In *Symphony No. 5½*, the American public could hear elements of everyday music and were drawn to its popular appeal. They likely did not expect to receive this from a symphonic work, but soon after they consumed Gillis's modish jazz rhythms and colorful harmonies and laughed at his musical wit they pursued more up-to-date means of entertainment; his symphony was left to conductors and music directors who dismissed it as a trite anomaly. *Symphony No. 5½* was "music for the people" in concept and execution, but this broad appeal to mid-century audiences gradually became myopic as postwar American music and culture progressed.

Later in life, Gillis would separate his oeuvre into three compositional "phases." During phases one and two (approx. 1935-1954), he dedicated himself to symphonic composition.<sup>147</sup> Until the beginning of his third compositional phase (1955-1978), he took a dim view of bands, as he was suffering from a self-diagnosed band-versus-orchestra "inferiority complex"; this "ailment" did not subside until the end of his tenure at NBC. In 1954 the Toscanini era ended when the maestro retired as conductor of the NBC Symphony Orchestra. The ensemble was dissolved and Gillis decided to leave the station. Not long before his time with Toscanini came to a close, Gillis learned of the maestro's love of bands, which was fostered during his

---

<sup>147</sup> Don Gillis, "Notes on My Music," 1966-1967, DGC.



experiences with the medium during World War I; this knowledge helped Gillis to reconcile himself with the formative medium of his youth: the band.<sup>148</sup> Gillis was hired as the composer-in-residence for the Interlochen Music Camp in 1957, and from this time to the end of his life he began writing almost exclusively for the concert band, leaving an indelible mark on that medium's compositional history. Gillis observed that most of the band repertory was merely symphonic music that had been rescored. Gillis contended that his output was "not a remake of the orchestra, it *was* band," and "not the old band sound of the Sousa March, but something different in acoustical achievement"; he had created a "new sound."<sup>149</sup> In time, Gillis professed that the band was his favorite American instrument, as well as the backbone of American music culture.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, modern composers would benefit greatly if they acknowledged and embraced the people's love for bands:

They should...join the masses whose musical tastes include a love for bands as opposed to some pumped up pseudo-intellectualism that drives people to the Arts for fear they won't be considered couth if they do not gather in groups to *not* understand what...is going on in opera and symphony anyway.<sup>151</sup>

These sentiments are heard in *Symphony No. 5½*. Although Gillis subdued his love for band music at the time, his admiration for the medium and disdain for needless erudition reared its head in the marches, fanfares, and swing band sections of the work. The band-like qualities of *Symphony No. 5½* might have drawn the opus too far from the symphonic tradition to become part of the repertory, but they also were shrewd choice on the part of the composer, as band concerts were more popular and better attended than art music concerts at mid-century.<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> The discussion of Gillis's view on band music, its place in his oeuvre, as well as Toscanini's band influences are found in the same source; see Gillis, "Gillis on Gillis," 21.

<sup>149</sup> Gillis, "Autobiographical Material," 6.

<sup>150</sup> Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," 403.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>152</sup> Tawa, *American Composers and Their Public*, 101.

At the time he penned *Symphony No. 5½* Gillis maintained that jazz was gaining respect from music circles and that more symphonic composers would utilize it in the future.<sup>153</sup> This did not come to pass. The only other noteworthy attempt to combine symphonic language and jazz was Gunther Schuller's "Third Stream." Schuller explained that the term "third stream" reflected the nature of the music, as it was not "classical" or jazz, but a method (or "stream") "that draws on the techniques of both."<sup>154</sup> Schuller's realization of this union was more progressive than Gillis's efforts in *Symphony No. 5½*, and the former composer also incorporated improvisation into his "third stream" works. Within a few years, "third stream" music was "running into the ground," and its popularity diminished.<sup>155</sup>

In conclusion, the fact that *Symphony No. 5½* was not universally revered or that it did not enter the permanent repertory did not affect Gillis as it might another mid-twentieth-century American art composer.<sup>156</sup> One of the legacies that modernists retained from Romanticism was the concept of the "masterpiece."<sup>157</sup> Unlike nineteenth-century composers, Gillis's contemporaries sought to craft "atomic events" that defied any and all musical traditions;<sup>158</sup> not only were these composers avoiding the shadow of Beethoven and Brahms, they were determined to avoid compositional associations with other modernists.<sup>159</sup> In order to maintain their isolation and autonomy, composers felt compelled to flout the present as much as the past,

---

<sup>153</sup> Gillis, "And Then I Wrote," 27.

<sup>154</sup> John S. Wilson, "Music: A Third Stream of Sound." *New York Times*, 17 May 1960; Schuller's "Third Stream" efforts drew from the "Bebop" jazz style of the 1950s as opposed to the earlier big band influence of Gillis.

<sup>155</sup> Howard Klein, "Third-Stream Music Played at Carnegie," *New York Times*, 30 January 1965.

<sup>156</sup> It should be noted that the vast majority compositions by notable modernists like Babbitt and Varèse as well as prevalent avant-garde composers like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen have not held a permanent place in the repertory despite favorable reviews from like-minded critics.

<sup>157</sup> Thomson, "The Musical Scene," 227.

<sup>158</sup> Babbitt, "Who Cares If You Listen?," 38.

<sup>159</sup> Tawa, "American Composers and Their Public," 80.

and as a result the only plane available to them was the future. Boulez labeled this idea as “la fuite en avant” (escape to the future).<sup>160</sup> Modernist Ralph Shapey echoed this sentiment when he posited that a great work “transcends the immediate moment into a world of infinity.”<sup>161</sup> In *Symphony No. 5½*, Gillis resisted the tenets of modernism by embracing the work of previous composers; incorporating elements of nostalgic American folk music; and utilizing contemporary jazz idioms. He was not focused on posterity or “trying to live in another world” as much as he was concerned with “nowness.”<sup>162</sup> As a result, Gillis’s music held a distinctive position along the continuum of music performed during mid-century American symphonic concerts: all pre-modern compositions were considered the “past,” and modern works “escaped to the future”; *Symphony No. 5½* was the music of the present, and the masses reacted to it in due fashion. Unfortunately for Gillis, the audience did not procure him immortality, as the “now” represented in the work all too quickly became “then.” While *Symphony No. 5½* did not bridge the chasm between the common man and the concert hall or take a place abreast of Beethoven’s Ninth, it did fulfill its *raison d’être* - reaching the laymen who heard it.

---

<sup>160</sup> Tawa, “A Most Wondrous Babel,” 11.

<sup>161</sup> John Rockwell, “Ralph Shapey at 60 – He Denied Neglect,” *New York Times*, 10 May 1981.

<sup>162</sup> Gillis, “And Then I Wrote,” 262-263, 245.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

#### Published

Biancolli, Louis. "Toscanini, in Groove, Sparks a Jam Session." *New York World-Telegram*, 22 September 1947.

Briggs, John. "Toscanini Leads New 'Symphony for Fun.'" *New York Post*, 23 September 1947.

Eames, Henry Purmort. "Orchestra, Pianist in Broadcast of Familiar Music Highly Praised." *Claremont Courier* (Cal.), date unknown. Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

Ennis, Baynard F. "Gillis's Symphony No. 5 ½ Fun-Packed Jam Session." *Charleston Daily Gazette*, 29 November 1954.

"Ex Takes Digs at 'Long-hairs' in Symphony." Author, publication, and date unknown. Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

"Fun Music." *Pathfinder Magazine*, 22 October 1947, author unknown. Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

Gillis, Don. *Symphony No. 5 ½: A Symphony for Fun*. London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1948.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Symphony No. 8: A Dance Symphony*. New York: Mills Music Inc., 1949.

Gould, Morton. *American Symphonette No. 2*. New York: Mills Music Inc., 1963.

Haggin, B.H. "Music on the Radio." *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 September 1947.

Hague, Robert A. "Musical Roundup." *PM* (New York), 23 September 1947.

Hanson, Walter. "Spirit of Playfulness Wrote Fun Symphony, Composer Says." *Ft. Wayne News-Sentinel*, date unknown. Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

Kastendieck, Miles. "Satire Offered By Toscanini." *New York Journal American*, 22 September 1947.

Kolodin, Irving. "Toscanini Leads Score By Gillis." *New York Sun*, 22 September 1947.

Smith, Ian M., Detroit, to Don Gillis, New York, TLS, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

“Music Review.” Straus, Noel. *New York Times*, 22 September 1947.

“Symphony for Fun.” Author, publication, date unknown, Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

“The Three G’s in Orange.” *International Musician*, date unknown, Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

“Toscanini to Conduct Gillis’ Symphony No. 5 ½.” Author, publication, date unknown, Scrapbooks, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

Unpublished:

Gillis, Don. “Notes on My Music.” 1966-1967, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Gillis on Gillis.” 1973-1977, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “And Then I Wrote.” ca. 1948, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Autobiographical Material.” The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “NAEB Radio Broadcasts: Music of Don Gillis.” 1964-1967, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Music History Reference.” The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Personal Writings.” The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Music by Don Gillis.” The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

Smith, Ian M., Detroit, to Don Gillis, New York, TLS, The Don Gillis Collection, University of North Texas Library, Denton, TX.

#### Secondary Sources

Babbitt, Milton. “Who Cares if You Listen?” *High Fidelity* (Feb. 1958): 36-41.

- Boosey & Hawkes Inc. "Two Anniversaries." *Newsletter*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Spring 1967).
- Boykan, Martin. "Elliott Carter and the Postwar Composers." *Perspectives of New Music* 2, No. 2 (Spring – Summer, 1964): 125-128.
- Carter, Elliott. "The Milieu of the American Composer." *Perspectives of New Music* 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1962): 149-151.
- Carter, Elliot and Benjamin Boretz. "Conversation with Elliott Carter." *Perspectives of New Music* 8, No. 2, (Spring – Summer, 1970): 1-22.
- Crawford, Richard. *America's Musical Life: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Henahan, Donal. "Can Musicians Really Isolate Themselves From the Public?" *New York Times*, 2 July, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Music View; On Being An 'Accessible Composer.'" *New York Times*, 7 June 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Music View; Progressive or Not, Brahms Still Fascinates." *New York Times*, 1 May 1983.
- Hirschfeld, Jeffery G. "Milton Babbitt: A Not-So-Sanguine Interview." *Musical America* (June 1982): 18; quoted in Tawa, Nicholas. *A Most Wondrous Babble: American Art Composers, Their Music, and the American Scene*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Klein, Howard. "Third-Stream Music Played at Carnegie." *New York Times*, 30 January 1965.
- Goodman, Peter W. *Morton Gould: American Salute*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2000.
- Peyster, Joan. "The Affair Proved Traumatic." *New York Times*, 12 January 1969.
- Rockwell, John. "Ralph Shapey at 60 – He Denied Neglect." *New York Times*, 10 May 1981.
- Saffle, Michael, ed. *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950*. New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000.
- Schuller, Gunther. "Conversation with Varèse." *Perspectives of New Music* 3, No. 2 (Spring – Summer, 1965): 32-37.
- Taruskin, Richard. *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, vo. 4 of *The Oxford History of Western Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Tawa, Nicholas. *A Most Wondrous Babble: American Art Composers, Their Music, and the American Scene*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *American Composers and Their Public*. Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle: American Musical Life, 1925- 1945*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1984.
- Thomson, Virgil. "A Drenching of Music, but a Drought of Critics." *New York Times*, 27 October 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Looking Forward." *The Musical Quarterly* 31, No. 2 (April 1945): 157-162.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Music Left and Right*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Musical Scene*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1945.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The State of Music*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1939.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *American Music Since 1910*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- Tischler, Barbara. *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Wilson, John S. "Music: A Third Stream of Sound." *New York Times*, 17 May 1960.