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The Pulitzer Prize Winners for Music

Composer Biographies, Premiere
Programs and Jury Reports



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REMARKS ABOUT THE AWARD

The Pulitzer Music Prize is a latecomer within the award system. "Music was one of Joseph Pulitzer's Passions," J. Douglas Bates stated, "he particularly loved the compositions of Beethoven, Wagner and Liszt. The publisher's will bequeathed \$ 500.000 to the New York Philharmonic Society – an amount equal to his bequest for the Pulitzer Prizes. But the man's will did not ask for a prize in music. It called only for a scholarship for a music student." At the beginning of the 1940s, after 22 Music Scholarships had been granted in total, the Music Department of Columbia University started a special initiative: "At the time the will was made few fellowships existed for the aid of talented young composers and the Pulitzer Scholarship has performed a notable service in extending assistance," professor Douglas Moore wrote in a letter addressed to the University's president, dated December 17, 1941.

"However," he went on, "in recent years a number of agencies have been created which make much greater opportunities for young composers. There it the Prix de Rome; there are the Guggenheim fellowships at endowed conservatories such as the Juilliard School and the Curtis Institute. In fact, to face the situation frankly, one must admit that the opportunities somewhat exceed the amount of available talent. On the other hand, there is a great need in this country of improvement in the prestige of the American composer of demonstrated ability. There is still an unfortunate tendency to regard our composers as inferior to our writers and painters. Every year the Pulitzer Prize is a coveted honor, adding to the prestige and reputation of the recipient. Music would profit enormously by similar recognition. It is curious when one reads of the award of the Pulitzer Prize that distinguished creation in music goes unrecognized."

After this pleading of the Columbia Music Faculty that consideration be given to a change in the award of the Pulitzer Scholarships in Music the following suggestions were added: "We believe that the time has come when the usefulness of the fund which Mr. Pulitzer left for music could be increased if the prize were awarded on a basis similar to that of the prize in the novel, poetry, drama, journalism, etc. Machinery for such an award could easily be created at no greater expense than is now incurred by the award of the scholarship. A jury of three musicians of national standing could be designated and the principal performing organizations of the country be requested to send in nominations to this jury for consideration. The judges on the basis of submitted evidence could designate a composer whose achieve-

ments during the year would justify the award. We should greatly appreciate your consideration of this matter and would be glad to supplement these suggestions with any additional information that might be needed."

Finally, after long discussions, the idea was taken up and "in 1943 the Advisory Board on the Pulitzer Prizes made an important decision as to the type of its awards in music, adopting the practice of bestowing its accolade on a distinguished musical composition," as Chalmers Clifton put it. By converting the scholarship to a prize, the Board paved the way for the American composer to find himself beside his colleagues in journalism, fiction, history, poetry and drama in future. The official definition of the newly established Pulitzer Music Prize was, at that point in time, as follows: "For distinguished musical composition by an American in any of the larger forms, including chamber, orchestral, choral, opera, song, dance, or other forms of musical theatre, which has had its first performance in the United States during the year."

Equipped with these guidelines, the first jurors in the music category started their work in April, 1943, and proposed, "that the award for 1942-43 be made to William Schuman for his *Secular Cantata No. 2 – A Free Song*. The decision," the jury report continues, "was unanimous and was arrived at after a careful consideration of compositions... performed or published during the period from April 1st, 1942, to April 1st, 1943. Mr. Schuman's cantata... complies with the requirements both of performance and publication, as established by the rules governing the award." The Advisory Board accepted the proposal of the three jurors and made William H. Schuman the first winner of the Pulitzer Prize in the music category for his *Secular Cantata No. 2*, first performed on March 26, 1942, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Ever since the prize in Musical Composition was created, the Pulitzer Board has taken great care that the juries consist of experts in music. When the first prize was awarded, the entries were judged by only three people, but among them were the composer and critic Chalmers Clifton and the composer Quincy Porter, who was to win the prize a decade later. Through the years, it became usual practice that the juries consisted of both, composers and music critics. Increasingly, former prize-winners were also included. Among the winners are many American top-composers, and four of them earned the award twice: Samuel Barber, Elliott Carter, Gian-Carlo Menotti and Walter Piston. But there were also some outstanding artists in this field which never won a Pulitzer Prize, although their works were considered important and influential. Leonard Bernstein did not earn a Pulitzer Prize,

George Gershwin and Duke Ellington, on the other hand, received special awards only posthumously, many years after they had died.

Double Winners



Samuel Barber
(1910-1981)



Elliott Carter
(1908-)

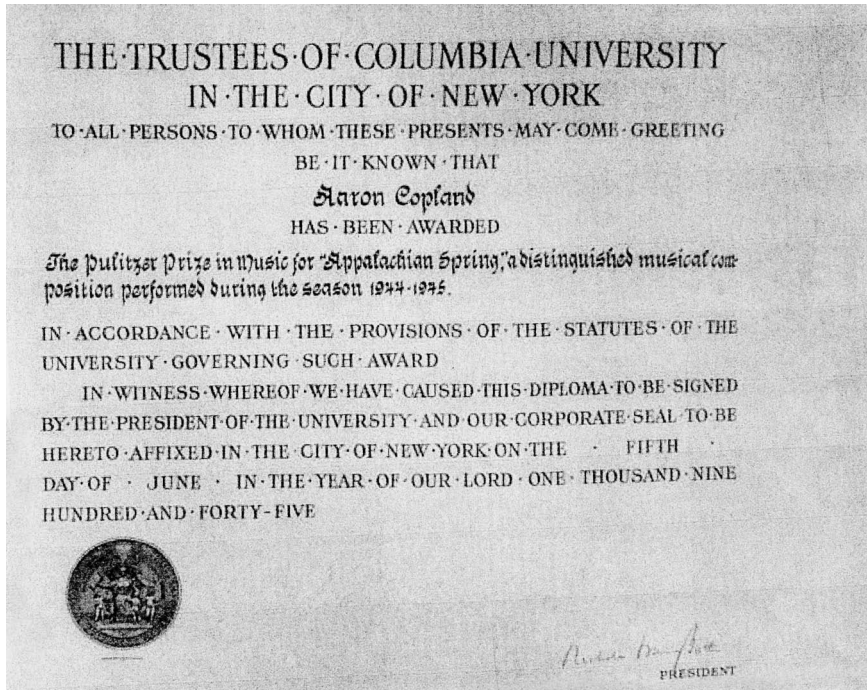


Gian-Carlo Menotti
(1911-2007)

Surveying the history and development of the Pulitzer Prize for music since its establishment in the early forties of the twentieth century, it is marked by a significant level of correspondence between the recommendations of the jury and the decisions of the Board. After all the Board voted down the nominations of the jury much more seldomly than in other categories of the prize. However, there was a certain basic problem confronting everyone participating in the process of the awarding procedure: the interpretation of the guidelines of the prize. John Hohenberg quotes a Boardmember who said, "that a real struggle developed about the Pulitzer Prizes because the definition specified that the award must apply to 'music in its larger forms' as composed by an American." What was meant by "larger forms," J. Douglas Bates asked and added: "The Prize Board could hardly have chosen more offensive words to communicate its message."

Recently the phrase "in larger forms" was eliminated and replaced by another formulation, and so the Plan of Award defines the Pulitzer Prize in Music as follows: "For distinguished musical composition of significant dimension by an American..." Anyway, in the words of Chalmers Clifton, "the works of the composers who are represented" in the list of award winners "constitute a distinguished cross section of American composition. The Pulitzer Prize... has been of great significance in the career of most of those

who... received the awards" in the music category. But there is also a critical note by Bates who stated: The Pulitzer Music Juries "have mostly honored American imitations of European music forms... Jarring is the fact that the most original, enduring and influential music ever created on U.S. soil has African-American roots..." This statement, made in the early 90's, cannot be generalized, since in recent years also several black composers earned the Pulitzer Prize in Music.



Courtesy: Library of Congress

Pulitzer Prize Certificate for Aaron Copland (1900-1990) who earned the award in 1945 for "Appalachian Spring"