

SINGING SONGS OF SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE: CHILDREN'S MUSIC

AND LEFTIST PEDAGOGY IN 1930s AMERICA

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In their shared goal of communicating left-wing principles to children through music, Marc Blitzstein's *Worker's Kids of the World* (1935), Aaron Copland's *The Second Hurricane* (1937), and Alex North's *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither* (1941) exhibit a fundamental unity of purpose that binds them both to each other and to the extensive leftist pedagogical efforts of their time. By observing the parallel relationship among these three children's works and contemporary youth organizations, summer camps, and children's literature, their cultural objectives and stylistic idiosyncrasies emerge as expressions of a continuously evolving educational tradition. Whereas *Worker's Kids* comes out of the revolutionary Communist aesthetics of the Composers' Collective and the militant activism of The Young Pioneers, *The Second Hurricane* and *Danny Dither* reflect the increasingly accommodating educational efforts of the American Popular Front.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	v
Chapters	
1. INTRODUCTION: TRACING LEFTIST CHILDREN’S CULTURE IN 1930s AMERICA .....	1
2. MARC BLITZSTEIN’S <i>WORKERS’ KIDS OF THE WORLD</i> AND THE COMMUNIST YOUTH MOVEMENT .....	4
3. AARON COPLAND’S <i>THE SECOND HURRICANE</i> AS POPULAR FRONT PEDAGOGICAL TOOL .....	18
4. ALEX NORTH’S <i>THE HITHER AND THITHER OF DANNY DITHER</i> AND PRE-WAR ACCOMODATION.....	45
5. CONCLUSION.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	57

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
1. Order of movements in <i>Worker's Kids of the World</i> .....	5
2. List of movements in the <i>The Second Hurricane</i> according to participants.....	30

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Musical Examples	
1.1	Hanns Eisler, “Forward, We’ve Not Forgotten,” from <i>Workers Song Book No. 2</i> , mm. 1-4 .....9
1.2	Janet Barnes, “God to the Hungry Child,” from <i>Workers Song Book No. 2</i> , mm. 1-6.....10
1.3	Marc Blitzstein, “Entrée” from <i>Workers’ Kids of the World</i> , mm. 1-21 .....11
2.1	Aaron Copland, <i>The Second Hurricane</i> , “Finale,” rehearsal 5-9 .....38
2.2	Aaron Copland, <i>Into the Streets May First</i> , mm. 1-10 .....39
Figures	
2.1	Stage design for premiere performance of <i>The Second Hurricane</i> .....24

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: TRACING LEFTIST CHILDREN'S CULTURE IN 1930s AMERICA

On Christmas Eve 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, the left-wing New York weekly *New Masses* ran a story entitled “Which Books for Our Children?” Desiring to familiarize children with the stark distinctions between the “history book America of plenty and equal opportunity for all” and the “hunger and privation which meet them on every hand,” it offers a list of children’s literature that faithfully communicates these “economic facts of life.”<sup>1</sup> This article illustrates the widespread concern for the political education of children that spawned youth organizations, summer camps, and children’s literature during the 1930s. Although this progressive movement has been the subject of study in recent years, the role of music in it has hitherto remained obscure.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, scholars have documented the leftist politics of children’s music during the 1930s, but have yet to examine the relationship of these works to the leftist youth movement. In this study, I integrate these previously disparate bodies of scholarship, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of these musical works as examples of broader left-wing efforts designed to instill progressive ideals in children.

In order to demonstrate the relationship between the children’s movement of the 1930s left and the children’s music of prominent American composers, I offer contextual readings of three works: Marc Blitzstein’s *Workers’ Kids of the World* (1934), Aaron Copland’s *The Second*

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Simon, “Which Books for Your Children?” *New Masses*, 24 December 1935, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies of the left-wing children’s movement include Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Mickenberg, “The Pedagogy of the Popular Front: ‘Progressive Parenting’ for a New Generation, 1918-1945,” in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kenneth Teitelbaum, *Schooling for “Good Rebels: Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900-1920* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993).

*Hurricane* (1937), and Alex North's *The Hither and Dither of Danny Dither* (1941). Rooted in their composers' mutual affinity for socially engaged musical activity, these three works constitute a coherent tradition of politically oriented music for young people. At the same time, they reflect a relative diversity of origin, conception, and situational context, thereby suggesting variety within this tradition. With respect to genre, for example, Blitzstein describes *Workers' Kids* as a "children's cantata", whereas Copland and North choose two different terms ("play opera" and "play with music", respectively) to describe their dramatic works' alteration of music and spoken text. And though Blitzstein composed both the music and libretto of his cantata, the text and staging of *The Second Hurricane* and *Danny Dither* were the result of artistic collaboration. The reception of the works differs as well; the cantata was never performed in its entirety and exists only in manuscript, whereas the two stage works both enjoyed a considerable performance history before fading into obscurity.

The striking distinctions among *Workers' Kids*, *The Second Hurricane*, and *Danny Dither* point to the diversity of the left-wing children's movement during the 1930s. In her study of leftist children's literature during the mid-twentieth century, Julia Mickenberg proposes a convincing explanation for this variety, identifying the philosophical progression of that tradition as a subset of developments within the broader history of American progressivism. Applying this model to the children's music under study, I reveal the works of Blitzstein, Copland, and North to be reflections of this same historical trend, with Devoting one chapter to each of the three works, I contextualize their cultural objectives and stylistic idiosyncrasies as expressions of a continuously evolving educational tradition.

Chapter 2 presents Blitzstein's *Workers' Kids of the World* as an artifact of the militant Communist youth movement of the early 1930s, making particular reference to the musical



aesthetics of the Composer's Collective and the cultural activities of the Communist youth organization, The Young Pioneers. Proceeding chronologically, Chapter 3 details *The Second Hurricane*'s relationship to the inclusive social vision of the Popular Front. Attending to its multifaceted relationship with Popular Front pedagogy, I study Copland's operetta at length. Using techniques adopted from the leftist types of epic theater and mass song, *The Second Hurricane* is a finely crafted pedagogical tool that teaches leftist morality to parents and children alike. In the fourth chapter, I describe scenes from *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither* as a reflection of a gradual softening of rhetoric within leftist education immediately prior to the Second World War. By considering the relationship of these works to each other and the broader ideals of leftist educational during the period, I reveal their full musical and cultural significance.

## CHAPTER 2

### MARC BLITZSTEIN'S *WORKERS' KIDS OF THE WORLD* AND THE COMMUNIST YOUTH MOVEMENT

Marc Blitzstein's *Workers' Kids of the World* seems initially to be a rather ungainly work. Composed in the winter of 1934-35 but never published, *Workers' Kids* is a cantata for unison children's chorus in eight movements (Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Although limited in musical scope, its textual material consists of a succession of revolutionary tirades that are ambitious indeed, flouting the conception of innocence traditionally associated with young performers. The few scholarly treatments of this minor work emphasize its apparent unsuitability for the performers, citing the cantata's overtly ideological text and dissonant piano accompaniment.<sup>2</sup> This focus is not surprising, since the work is little more than a collection of mass songs, a genre more readily associated with angry picketers than young children. As a political work written for children, however, *Workers' Kids* merits consideration within the framework of contemporary leftist children's culture. Examined the work in this light, I reveal that the militant nature of *Workers' Kids of the World* is not an anomaly, but rather in line with contemporary Communist ideas regarding the societal role and appropriate education of children.

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<sup>1</sup> Though there has been some disagreement regarding the chronology and authorship of the work, both Eric Gordon and Carol Oja recognize it as composed by Blitzstein in winter of 1934-1935. Based on the Composers Collective's minutes at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter SHSW), Oja also cites two potential performances that corroborate this timeline: 1) an April 17, 1935 list in a *Gedenkschrift* given to Hanns Eisler on his arrival to America includes "Listen Teacher"; and 2) the work is mentioned in the Collective's minutes from March 28, 1935 as part of a future concert. See Oja, "Marc Blitzstein and Mass-Song Style," 453-454.

The work exists in two incomplete holographs (Box 87) and one typescript libretto (Box 32) housed at the Blitzstein archive at the SHSW. One version is titled "Children's Cantata" and contains two neatly copied movements: "Entrée" and "My Father's a Tailor." The second version is a rough sketch with numerous additions/corrections to the neatly copied version and contains seven movements dated from July 14 to 25. Based on a comparison between a list of movements in the rough sketch version and the typescript libretto, it seems that the final work contained a total of eight movements as detailed in Table 1.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' and the Mass-Song Style of the 1930s," *The Musical Quarterly* 73/4 (1989): 454-455; Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Music of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 91-92.

Table 1. Order of movements in Marc Blitzstein’s *Workers’ Kids of the World*.

Movement	Title
1	“Entrée/Workers’ Kids of the World”
2	“My Father’s a Tailor”
3	“Don’t Cry Kids”
4	“Speech (Fellow Workers’ Kids)”
5	“Choosing a Leader”
6	“Writing a Letter”
7	“Listen Teacher”
8	“Riddles”

#### Blitzstein and the Composer’s Collective

Like that of numerous other American composers, Blitzstein’s musical output of the 1930s reflects an increased interest in creating music of social relevance, one rooted in leftist politics and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Blitzstein’s relationship with the Composer’s Collective, a group of left-wing composers affiliated with the Workers Music League of the American Communist Party, is evidence of this position. Embracing music as “a weapon in the class struggle,” the Collective’s primary objective was to develop an original body of American songs to serve the revolutionary cause.<sup>4</sup> Blitzstein joined the group in 1934 in response to his own burgeoning sense of social responsibility, and it is this association that anchors the political and musical context of *Workers’ Kids*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the relationship between American art music and the political left in the 1930s, see Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 103-182.

<sup>4</sup> Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism*, 113-116.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Seeger, “On Proletarian Music,” *Modern Music* 11.3 (March-April 1934): 121-124; Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 75-90.

Rooted in the context of the Composer's Collective, Blitzstein's early attempts at mass-song composition reflect the considerable influence of Hanns Eisler.<sup>6</sup> Blitzstein had met the prominent mass-song composer as an expatriate in Germany, as well as one of Eisler's frequent collaborators, the Marxist author Bertolt Brecht, and Eva Goldbleck, a devoted Brecht interpreter who later became Blitzstein's wife.<sup>7</sup> These associations had a significant impact on his own political and aesthetic development, with Blitzstein ultimately identifying Brecht and Eisler as the chief exemplars of an appropriate union between Marxism and artistic expression.<sup>8</sup> The Composers' Collective shared Blitzstein's esteem for Eisler, valuing the latter composer's ability to construct songs that combined harmonically complex accompaniments with simple and distinctive melodic lines appropriate for unaccompanied group singing.<sup>9</sup> The Collective acknowledged Eisler's influence from the outset. Indeed, during extended visits to the United States in the spring and fall of 1935, he attended meetings of the Collective and offered courses in mass-song composition and the relationship of music to social conditions."<sup>10</sup>

Using Eisler as a model, the Collective convened regular workshops for developing a mass-song style that was "national in form, proletarian in content."<sup>11</sup> Chief among their concerns was creating songs that would simultaneously appeal to and refine the musical tastes of the working class. Eisler's songs served as examples since, as Blitzstein explained, "they answer effectively the problem of the mass song idiom, being unconventional in a manner to attract

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<sup>6</sup> Oja, "Blitzstein and Mass-Song Style," 452-55.

<sup>7</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 201-203.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Blitzstein, "II. Second Generation," *New Masses*, 21 July 1936, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Oja, "Blitzstein and Mass-Song Style," 453.

<sup>10</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 120-21.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Seeger, "On Proletarian Music," *Modern Music* (March-April 1934), 124-125.

workers, not repel them.”<sup>12</sup> Though the work of Collective members varied significantly according to individual compositional styles, their groupthink approach did result in the development of a general stylistic paradigm for mass song. This style, characterized by propulsive rhythms, a declamatory unison vocal line, syllabic text setting, dissonant accompaniment, and prominent bass octaves, was widely adopted by Collective members and thus became the reigning model for mass song in the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their lofty aesthetic goals and the achievement of a relatively consistent compositional paradigm, the musical style of the Collective’s mass-song settings struggled to reflect the society’s proposed union of innovation and accessibility. Ostensibly, the music of the Collective would be judged by the workers themselves, who would “sense the consistency of tune with phrase and feel that at last they are getting hold of a music that is their own.”<sup>14</sup> Frequently, however, this visionary goal was hampered by another of the society’s aesthetic tenets, which saw an inviolable relationship between revolutionary textual sentiment and revolutionary musical language.<sup>15</sup> In keeping with this perceived connection, the majority of the Collective’s mass song settings contained considerable dissonance and musical complexity which, although consistent with their philosophical ideals, proved too difficult for use by actual picketers or strikers. As a result, the Collective’s musical output ultimately failed to reach its intended audience of striking workers, and became largely the purview of formally organized workers’ choruses in concert performances.<sup>16</sup> This mixed reception, along with the advent of folk

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<sup>12</sup> Oja, “Blitzstein and Mass-Song Style,” 453.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 449-453.

<sup>14</sup> Foreword to *Workers Song Book No. 1* (Workers Music League: New York, 1934).

<sup>15</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 116-123; For a detailed contemporary statement of the Collective’s aesthetic philosophy, see Charles Seeger’s 1934 article in *Modern Music*, “On Proletarian Music.” (cited above in note 11)

<sup>16</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 116-123.

song as an acceptable source for revolutionary music, eventually led to the dissolution of the Composers' Collective in 1936.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the history and musical output of the Collective exemplifies the rigorous musical aesthetics of the Communist party in the early and mid-1930s.

*Workers' Kids of the World* and *The Workers Song Book*

Composed during the height of Blitzstein's tenure as an active member of the Collective, *Workers' Kids of the World* is closely aligned with the group's musical and aesthetic ideas regarding mass song composition. Carol Oja has outlined this relationship, situating *Workers' Kids* as an early and unsuccessful effort to achieve the Eislerian model of songs that could be "taken out and sung" by everyday audiences. Contrasting *Workers' Kids* with the works of Eisler and the finely tuned, evocative symbolism of Blitzstein's own agit-prop musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936), Oja highlights the cantata's comparatively awkward text and "grim" musical setting.<sup>18</sup> Although this distinction is certainly noticeable, the songs in Blitzstein's children's cantata do resemble those published by his colleagues in the Collective's two-volume *Workers Song Book* of 1934-5. Notwithstanding its inelegant text, *Workers' Kids* shares the strange musical blend of many such seminal attempts at revolutionary song: accessible and even catchy melodies tempered by a strikingly dissonant accompaniment.<sup>19</sup> Given this similarity between the songs of *Workers' Kids* and those of the *Workers Song Book*, Blitzstein's struggle to produce accessible music of artistic quality seems as much a byproduct of the Collective's aesthetic goals as of his own immaturity as a composer.

A survey of examples from *The Workers Song Book* reveals that the aesthetic views of the Collective generally hindered their attempts at popular appeal. Hanns Eisler's "Forward,

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<sup>17</sup> On the dissolution of the Composer's Collective and the rise of folksong as an Americanist source, see Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 135-53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 453-461.

<sup>19</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 133; Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 91.

We've Not Forgotten," which Oja uses as a point of contrast with Blitzstein's early mass songs, gives a sense of the ideals to which the Collective aspired.<sup>20</sup> Its steady march accompaniment, stirring rhythms, and singable melody simply and directly capture the fervor of the text (Example 1.1). Despite its members' admiration for Eisler, the Collective's embrace of modernist musical language often resulted in significant deviations from his paradigm.<sup>21</sup> Janet Barnes's "God to the Hungry Child," for example, seems more akin to art song than a revolutionary march, and its strident melodic dissonance bears little resemblance to the straightforward musical language of "Forward We've Not Forgotten" (Example 1.2). Elie Siegmeister's three-part round "Onward to Battle" also offers a different musical challenge, using a tonal framework and march style but complicated by frequent alterations of meter.

Ex. 1.1. Hanns Eisler, "Forward, We've Not Forgotten," from *Workers Song Book No. 2*, measures 1-4.

March tempo ♩ = 132  
 ① *f(loud)*

VOICE

1. For-ward, we've not for-got - ten Our strength in the fights we have  
 2. For-ward, we've not for-got - ten Our u - nion in hun - ger and

PIANO

*f(loud)*

won; No  
 pain, No

④

The challenges of combining musical accessibility with modernist complexity were not overlooked by the Collective's membership. Their concern for this issue is reflected in Charles

<sup>20</sup> Oja, "Marc Blitzstein and Mass Song," 453-454.

<sup>21</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 125-133.

Seeger's assessment of Aaron Copland's *Into the Streets May First*. Entered by Copland in a mass-song writing contest celebrating May Day 1934, his piece was acknowledged to be the best submission by unanimous decision.<sup>22</sup> Seeger (as one of the judges), however, raised questions about the work's appropriateness for workers, citing its challenging harmonic progressions and melodic range of over an octave.<sup>23</sup> Despite these misgivings, *Into the Streets* was ultimately published in *Workers Song Book No. 2* in 1935; moreover, it was classified in the index as one of the collection's works most suitable for beginners.<sup>24</sup> This incident reflects the Collective's customary ambivalence regarding questions of musical accessibility. Though they recognized the challenging nature of their mass-song settings, their perceived responsibility to elevate the musical taste of the masses made the group reluctant to adopt more accessible musical idioms.<sup>25</sup>

Ex. 1.2. Janet Barnes, "God to the Hungry Child," from *Workers Song Book No. 2*, measures 1-6.

Slowly and freely  
*mp (not too soft)*  
 VOICE  
 Hun - gry child, I did not make this world for you, You didn't buy an-y  
*mf (not too loud)*  
 PIANO  
*p soft*  
 stock in my rail - road, You did not in-vest in my cor - po - ration.

<sup>22</sup> Ashley Pettis, "Marching With a Song," *New Masses*, 1 May 1934, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 Through 1942* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 225.

<sup>24</sup> Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism*, 133-138.



Although the two *Workers Song Books* include no works by Blitzstein, their musical language is strikingly similar to the mass songs in *Workers' Kids of the World*. The resemblance is evident from the outset in Blitzstein's use of the traditional idioms of mass song: syllabic text setting, declamatory unison vocal lines, and frequent bass octaves. Entitled simply "Entrée," the opening number begins with a twelve-measure interlude that exhibits the Collective's customary dissonant harmonic language and aggressive rhythms (Example 1.3). The unison vocal line that enters in measure 13, however, is rhythmically and melodically straightforward with a narrow range. One can even sense a trace of Eisler's communicative style in measures 16-18, where Blitzstein adjusts the text placement to accentuate the children's dual statement of "Unite!" However one might view the effectiveness of his efforts, this attempt to balance singable melody with a complex musical backdrop undoubtedly portrays Blitzstein's reverence for Eisler, further rendering *Workers' Kids* amenable to the musical values of the Collective.

Ex. 1.3. Marc Blitzstein, "Entrée" from *Workers' Kids of the World*, measures 1-21.

Tempo di Marcia

Wor-kers' kids of the world... wor-kers'

kids of the world... u - nite u - nite Free the world from so - cial pains

Initiated in the “Entrée,” the juxtaposition of musical accessibility and complexity continues throughout the remaining seven movements of *Workers’ Kids*. Although this trend is most often expressed in the mixture of simple melodies with a harmonic language of intense dissonance and frequent modulations, Blitzstein inserts other musical challenges as well. In the second movement, “My Father’s a Tailor,” for example, he follows a relatively placid opening in 6/8 time with a string of melody that switches time signatures seven times in the course of ten measures. Sections such as these ensure that even apart from its harmonically challenging accompaniment, the cantata would present quite a challenge for a chorus of “workers’ kids.” But for Blitzstein, such modern musical idioms were the truest expressions of radical sentiment and therefore “ripe for revolutionary treatment.”<sup>26</sup> The fundamental aesthetic principle behind his musical choices is clear: a mass song, even one written for children, must use musical material that elevates rather than panders to the sensibilities of its audience.

#### *Workers’ Kids of the World* and Communist Views of Childhood

Though Blitzstein’s refusal to adapt the musical content of *Workers’ Kids* to its young performers seems unusual, it is in fact consistent with contemporary Communist views of childhood. By choosing to apply aesthetic principles developed in an adult repertory to a piece written for children, Blitzstein implicitly rejects the idea that children require special accommodation for their limited experience and maturity. Similarly, radical factions of the 1920s and early 1930s, particularly those affiliated with the American Communist Party, minimized traditional societal distinctions between children and adults. Recognizing social class as a more significant demographic than age or nationality, Communists focused their discussions of childhood on the plight of working class children in a capitalist society. As victims of everyday

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<sup>26</sup> Marc Blitzstein, “The Case For Modern Music—Technique and Temper,” *New Masses*, 28 July 1936, 28.

injustices such as child labor, family poverty, and pervasive lack of opportunity, working class children shared the same harsh realities as their parents. Based on this shared experience, Communist thought recognized adults and children alike as proletarians whose shared class identity overwhelmed all other distinctions.<sup>27</sup>

If the challenging musical character of *Workers' Kids* implies a Communist conception of childhood, the revolutionary rhetoric of Blitzstein's libretto makes it explicit. Adhering to the Composers Collective's prescribed blend of revolutionary music and revolutionary ideas, the cantata's text makes little accommodation to its young performers in either syntax or sentiment. The radical character of the lyrics is evident from the outset, where the children's chorus exclaims "Workers' kids of the world, unite! / France, England, and Norway, / USSR, USA.../ All of us are brothers, / We stand firm against all others. / Unite! unite! unite! / For the proletarian fight." When combined with the severe nature of the musical setting, the militant tone and awkward poetic structure of such statements generates an aggressive sense of purpose that seems out of place in a work for children's chorus. As their words indicate, however, these children are proletarians in the Communist mold whose radical experiences require an equally radical means of expression.

While sustaining the forceful musical and ideological character of the opening, the remaining seven movements adopt a topical character, addressing particular issues concerning the working-class children represented in the chorus. In "My Father's a Tailor," for example, the children list the occupations their parents held before they became "out of work." Emphasizing such ironies as milkmen's children who have no milk to drink, the movement highlights the

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<sup>27</sup> Julia Mickenburg, "The Pedagogy of the Popular Front: 'Progressive Parenting' for a New Generation, 1918-1945," in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 232-233; Mishler, *Raising Reds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 15-39.

struggles of working-class children. In the following two movements, however, the young proletarians eschew victimhood in favor of action. “Don’t Cry Kids” presents aggression as the inevitable answer to societal oppression, suggesting “Don’t cry, fight!... / The Board of Education wants to see us cry... / We’re ready when the showdown comes / Not with tears, but with drums!” The following solo number details the rights being fought for (equality, a decent living wage, shorter hours, etc.) and ends with “Three cheers for revolution!” Distinct from each other in subject matter, these three sections collectively reaffirm the chorus members’ dual identity as children and proletarians. Though the experiences described here are rooted in the context of childhood (parents, education, etc.), the prescribed response to these challenges is the decidedly grown-up notion of class warfare.

Movements five and six further define the scope of the conflict proposed in “Don’t Cry Kids.” In “Choosing a Leader,” the children interrogate a potential leader from their ranks, as represented by a solo vocalist. Wary of the corrupting influence of power, they ask: “If we choose you for a leader / will you be a leader or a boss?” and the soloist responds with a promise to lead the children in strikes against the bosses. The next movement, “Writing a Letter,” returns to the international appeal of the opening number:

Dear Comrade: I take my pen in hand,  
To write to you in every foreign land,  
Wherever you may be.  
We must unite, and work in unity!  
We are both poor, we live in misery,  
You and I, and every Workers’ child.  
Our fathers and mothers are oppressed,  
The rulers of one land are like the rest.

Yet again, the shared experience of oppression is cited as the foundation for a unified, international movement of working-class children.

Building on the broader statement of vision found in the first six movements, the final two movements of *Workers' Kids* forcefully critique perceived obstacles to revolutionary change. In the first stanza of "Listen Teacher," for example, the children admonish educational authorities: "Listen, teacher, tell us what is true / and don't make such a mystery of ordinary history... / We ask you, we tell you, we warn you / tell us what is true." And continuing in the second stanza: "Listen Preacher / we'll be no longer mild and meek / nor turn the other cheek / for this cheek and the other cheek / have both been slapped too hard." Then in the closing number, "Riddles," the subject matter turns to world politics as the children ridicule Hitler, the bosses, and the Supreme Court while praising Lenin. Presenting the most harshly worded rhetoric in the cantata, these final movements cement the radical tone of the children's belief system that puts them in fierce opposition with the traditional mores of their society.

The proletarian rhetoric of *Workers' Kids of the World* seems ill suited to its young performers, yet the cantata's worldview resembles that of contemporary examples from Communist children's culture. At the core of this similarity is a view of children as relatively autonomous members of a particular social class. Rejecting the mainstream view of childhood as a time for sheltered development, this culture saw children as agents of social change. Following this reasoning, the mission of progressive children's culture was twofold: first, to show children the true nature of social reality and second, to engage them in active struggle to reshape that reality in the Communist mold.<sup>28</sup>

The activities and philosophy of The Young Pioneers provide further context for the striking correspondence between Blitzstein's cantata and the systems of Communist children's culture. As the flagship of the Communist Party's efforts toward the education and mobilization

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<sup>28</sup> For a more complete overview of Communist ideas of childhood and family in the 1920s and early 1930s, see Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 15-39.

of children, The Young Pioneers embodied the Communist view of childhood. Already a semi-autonomous division of the Communist Party itself, the Pioneers were further separated into individual neighborhood and school branches. Within these local branches, children were encouraged to participate actively in planning both enrichment activities and future activism.<sup>29</sup> One such example of activism involved recruiting new members for a group understood to be in direct opposition to mainstream organizations such as the Boy Scouts. A recruitment leaflet issued in a New York high school describes this conflict and outlines the Young Pioneers as a clear alternative:

The Boy Scouts justify and glorify the bosses' wars. They boast of the fact that the Boy Scouts make the best soldiers and that the Boy Scout did service to the bosses in the last World War....

The Pioneers are against all bosses' wars. We say to the Workers' children: Your real enemies are not the workers of any other country, but the bosses right here at home--the American capitalist class....

The Pioneers are fighting against the rotten conditions in the schools in working class neighborhoods....We're fighting to spread the truth about workers and bosses among the children and to win the Workers' children for the working class.<sup>30</sup>

As in the text of Blitzstein's cantata, children are readily identified as members of a broader working class and shown to recognize that this places them in active opposition to the broader systems of society.

Organizations such as The Young Pioneers made comprehensive attempts to inculcate revolutionary ideas in children. Far from being limited to occasional meetings, The Young Pioneers published children's literature and magazines, ran summer camps, and actively organized children to participate in labor protests. Through these activities, they promulgated a

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<sup>29</sup> Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 42-46.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Hearings before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: 1930), part 3, vol. 1, 23; quoted in Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 45-46.

Communist understanding of children more as present than as future proletarians.<sup>31</sup> As part of widespread efforts aimed at revolutionary education of children and sharing the overt militancy of that movement, the activities of this group illuminate the cultural role of a musical work such as *Workers' Kids of the World*. By using an overtly revolutionary text and the genre of mass song, Blitzstein assigned young performers a musical role equivalent to that of adults in his other works. In choosing to assign typically adult musical and textual material to a children's chorus, he aligned his cantata with prevailing trends in Communist pedagogy that recognized children as autonomous members of the working class. *Workers' Kids of the World* is thus not merely an early example of mass-song composition, but a musical contribution to the broader goals of leftist education in 1930s America.

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<sup>31</sup> Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 41-61.

## CHAPTER 3

### AARON COPLAND'S *THE SECOND HURRICANE* AS POPULAR FRONT PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Written less than three years after *Workers' Kids of the World Unite*, Aaron Copland's youth operetta *The Second Hurricane* also resonates strikingly with contemporary systems of leftist pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> Despite this shared source of inspiration, the two works differ in musical style, dramatic trajectory, and overall message. Whereas the overt proletarian rhetoric and stringent musical modernism of Blitzstein's cantata make few concessions to young performers, *The Second Hurricane*'s popular musical idioms, textural simplicity, and colloquial language suggest a deliberate attempt to cultivate a youthful character. This stylistic divergence derives from a fundamental shift in leftist educational thought during the mid-1930s. Abandoning the overt Communist politics displayed in *Workers' Kids of the World*, the leftist children's movement adopted an educational paradigm consistent with the broader social vision of the American Popular Front.

At the time of *The Second Hurricane*'s premiere in April 1937, cultural efforts to introduce children to progressive ideals had a well-established history. In venues such as Socialist Sunday schools, Communist youth organizations, and ethnically based neighborhood children's clubs, party faithful exposed children to their own distinctive critiques of American capitalism. As seen in the derisive Communist rhetoric of *Workers' Kids*, these pedagogical efforts tended toward insularity and focused on relatively narrow constituencies. This state of affairs continued until the mid-1930s, when the communal sensibility of the American Popular

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<sup>1</sup> Though the subtitle on the score of *The Second Hurricane* describes it as a "play opera," Copland own comments and subsequent studies of the work have introduced a variety of terms to describe the genre of the work. These include: opera, youth opera, children's opera, operetta, and youth operetta. In the remainder of this study, I refer to *The Second Hurricane* as an operetta. Recognizing this term as one choice within a range of possibilities, I recognize "operetta" as an accurate summation of *The Second Hurricane*'s composition of musical numbers interrupted by spoken text and its light musical and dramatic character.



Front overwhelmed competing factions and forged a new sense of unity concerning left-wing children's culture.

The Popular Front was a broad-based coalition of political radicals and cultural progressives that aimed to combat the growing influence of global fascism. By emphasizing commonly held beliefs among communists, socialists, and more conventional progressive traditions, the movement sought to expand the scope and influence of its interactions with mainstream America.<sup>2</sup> This perspective significantly influenced leftist children's culture, disseminating a philosophy that advocated an appeal to all children rather than just those of the working class.<sup>3</sup> Though many of the earlier competing educational institutions remained, they began to emphasize their role as collaborative members in efforts to propagate the Popular Front ideologies of anti-facism, anti-racism, pro-laborism, and democratic Americanism. Discussing this movement, Julia Mickenberg explains that these basic themes were "translated not only into a set of expectations about raising children, but also a willful attempt to shape the future through children."<sup>4</sup> The musical and dramatic content of *The Second Hurricane* resonates with this trend, combining universal appeal with a purposeful and prescriptive agenda that mirrors both the methods and message of Popular Front pedagogy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the American Popular Front, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 63-65.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Mickenburg, "The Pedagogy of the Popular Front: 'Progressive Parenting' for a New Generation, 1918-1945," in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 227.

<sup>5</sup> *The Second Hurricane* has been previously considered as indicative of Popular Front sensibility in Elizabeth Bergman, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland During the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Acknowledging my debt to this study, I seek to add to it by considering *The Second Hurricane*'s relationship to the particular realm of leftist children's culture within the broader context of the Popular Front.

## *The Second Hurricane* and the Henry Street Settlement Music School

Numerous circumstances surrounding the conception and premiere of *The Second Hurricane* point to its alignment with the progressive educational movement. Chief among these is the role of the Henry Street Settlement Music School in commissioning and premiering the work. Founded in 1928, this establishment was developed as part of the settlement's mission to ameliorate the abysmal living conditions in its working class neighborhood. Rooted in the progressive educational ideals of John Dewey, settlement music schools embraced musical education as part of a system that emphasized experiential learning with practical real-life applications. By providing working class children with "uplifting" musical experiences, settlement music schools sought to elevate them above their dire circumstances, thereby equipping them to change their surroundings. Though settlement music schools such as this one sometimes struggled to balance social objectives with high standards of performance, a belief in music's power to transform youth provided a consistent motivation for continuing to subsidize children's musical education.<sup>6</sup>

Though the 1937 premiere of *The Second Hurricane* marked the high point in Copland's relationship with the Henry Street Settlement Music School, it was one of several products of their shared musical and aesthetic ideals. *The Second Hurricane* was the last in a group of children's works written by Copland while he was a board member and teacher at the school. All four compositions have a close relationship to the political backdrop of the Popular Front. The two-part girls' chorus *What Do We Plant?* (1935), also written for the Henry Street Settlement, alludes to the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal organization designed to provide

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<sup>6</sup> For further information regarding the history and philosophical conflicts of the settlement music school movement, see Shannon L. Green, "Art for Life's Sake:" *Music Schools and Activities in U.S. Social Settlements, 1892-1942*, Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998.

direction and support for unemployed youth.<sup>7</sup> *Sunday Afternoon Music* and *The Young Pioneers*, two short piano compositions by Copland, were published as part of a collection of music for young performers by modern American composers edited by Isadore Freed and Lazare Saminsky. Both introduce modern rhythmic and harmonic elements into otherwise uncomplicated piano pieces for youth, recalling earlier attempts to elevate and simultaneously cater to the musical taste of the masses. The chosen title, *The Young Pioneers*, also evokes the Communist youth organization of the same name, demonstrating both familiarity with and allegiance to such institutions.<sup>8</sup> Together, these works exemplify compositional activity tailored to the young and linked to left-wing organizations.

Copland's contemporary writings also disclose allegiance to the settlement movement's ideas regarding music as a persuasive and didactic tool. His 1934 review of the *Workers Song Book*, for example, cites mass song as "a powerful weapon in the class struggle" and "a more effective weapon than any in the hands of the novelist, painter or even playwright."<sup>9</sup> Though such an overtly political statement is rare in his writings, Copland frequently argued for music that engaged its audience. Discussing potential audiences for the modern composer, he implored his colleagues: "Why can we not supply [young people] with a music directly related to their technical abilities and on a level with their emotional age? Here we can supply an immediate need and at the same time build future audiences for our music."<sup>10</sup> Explaining his motivation for such musical recruitment, he further added:

The need to communicate one's music to the widest possible audience is no mere opportunism. It comes from the healthy desire in every artist to find his deepest feelings

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1999), 304.

<sup>8</sup> Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 74-75.

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Copland, "Worker's Sing!" *New Masses*, 5 June 1934, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Copland, "The Musical Scene Changes," *Twice a Year* 5 (Fall-Winter 1940), 343.

reflected in his fellow-man. It is not without its political implications also, for it takes its source partly from that same need to reaffirm the democratic ideal that already fills our literature and our stage...It is the composer who must embody ideals in a new communal music.<sup>11</sup>

Such statements confirm Copland's adherence to the ideals of the settlement-school movement through not only his interest in young audiences but also his belief in the ability of music to communicate social messages as meaningfully as other art forms.

*The Second Hurricane* followed the Henry Street School's American premiere of two other didactic children's works for the stage: Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Der Jasager* and Paul Hindemith's *Wir bauen eine Stadt*. As representatives of the German types of *Gebrauchsmusik* and *Lehrstücke*, these two works resemble *The Second Hurricane* in their conscious appeal to youthful audiences and straightforward attempt to convey an extra-musical message.<sup>12</sup> Copland, however, sought to distance his children's opera from these earlier models by describing his work as "*Gebrauchsmusik* with a difference." Explaining this distinction in a set of program notes, he wrote: "Most music 'written for use' generally attempts no more than that, while this music was written as a labor of love and something more ambitious as to musical quality than an ordinary 'Gebrauchsmusik' opera would be."<sup>13</sup> Although it is certainly possible to recognize a self-conscious seriousness in *The Second Hurricane*, Copland's attempt to distinguish between his children's opera and its German models in fact underlines the similarity between the two. As suggested by their successive premieres at the Henry Street Settlement Music School, these three works share a general aesthetic purpose consistent with the venue in which they were performed.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 75-76.

<sup>13</sup> Aaron Copland, autograph notes on *The Second Hurricane*, Copland Collection at the Library of Congress; quoted in Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 76.

## The Prescriptive Morality of *The Second Hurricane*

Firmly established within a specific tradition of socially conscious and pedagogically oriented music for children, *The Second Hurricane* presents a prescriptive message of left-wing social awakening. Written by the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, the libretto centers on six high school students recruited to assist with flood relief efforts in the rural American Midwest after a hurricane. In the course of their efforts, their plane's engine trouble leaves the children stranded on a hill in the midst of rising floodwaters. Abandoned and alone, the children begin to fight and eventually split up, leaving the safety of high ground. Soon after, an even larger second hurricane passes through, further increasing the danger. After surviving this terrifying experience, the children feel remorse about their quarrels, overlook their differences, and band together to make the best of a still perilous situation. While awaiting their eventual rescue, the students undergo a powerful bonding experience that awakens them to the values of equality, freedom, and community.

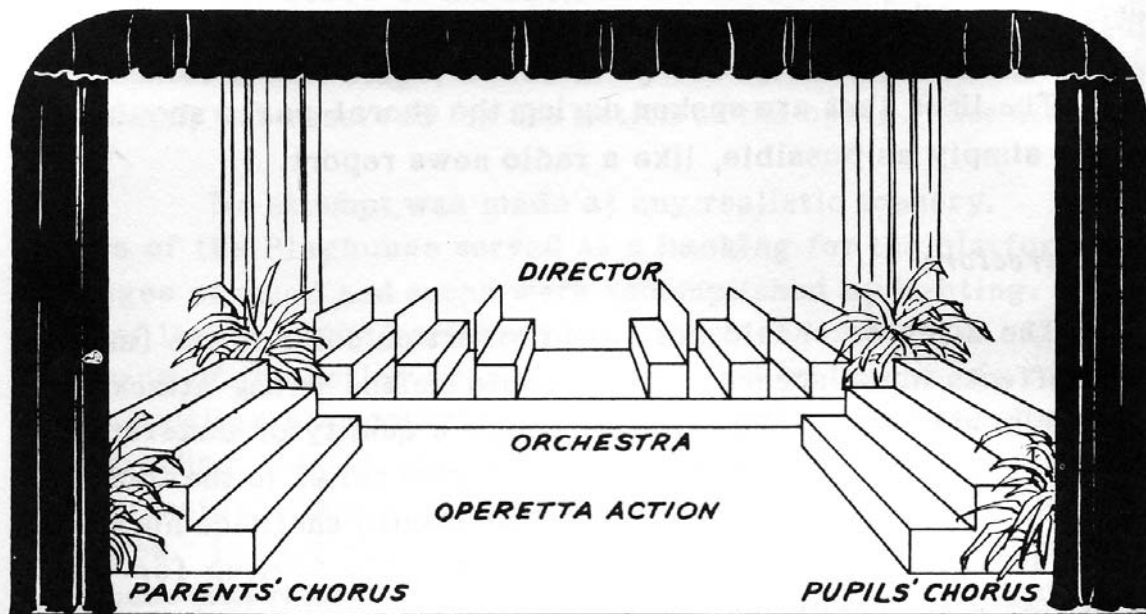
In his 1936 article "A Good Libretto," Denby discussed the difficulty of developing dramatic action in a sung format, ultimately suggesting that "it is quite possible to tell the story of an opera without subterfuge, if you will interrupt the music for awhile and let some words be spoken."<sup>14</sup> Citing Mozart's singspiel operas as an example, he chose precisely this method in *The Second Hurricane*, alternating musical numbers with significant portions of spoken dialogue. Another clear influence is Brecht's concept of epic theater, in which drama's primary purpose is to invite audience reflection regarding onstage events. The previously mentioned school opera *Der Jasager*, a collaborative effort between Brecht and Kurt Weill, exemplifies this approach in its opening and closing choruses that trumpet the opera's moral of *Einverständnis* (informed

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<sup>14</sup> Edwin Denby, "A Good Libretto," *Modern Music* 13.3 (1936), 20.

consent). Following this model, Denby uses three choruses (one of parents, two of children) in *The Second Hurricane* to offer commentary on the dramatic action.<sup>15</sup> By using the choruses to frame and interpret the protagonists' actions, Denby creates a Brechtian epic-theater “contrast between the informative part of the show and the theatric effect.”<sup>16</sup> Through their commentary on the dramatic events, the choruses model the reflection expected from the audience, thereby inviting the spectators to consider *The Second Hurricane* as not merely an inspiring story but rather an outright call to social awakening.

Fig. 2.1. Stage design for premiere performance of *The Second Hurricane*, reprinted in vocal score; (Boosey & Hawkes, 1957).



### Familial Relationships in *The Second Hurricane*

Through the creative use of dramatic forces, Copland and Denby carefully underscore the theme of parent/child relationships, a prominent focus of leftist educational efforts. The original New York production used a simple stage design with the orchestra on a rear platform and two

<sup>15</sup> Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Denby, “A Good Libretto”: 21.

sets of bleachers on the right and left of the stage, framing an open area in the center to accommodate the action (Figure 2.1). The right bleachers contain the parents' chorus, played by students wearing coats and hats to distinguish them from their peers. Facing them from the bleachers on the left of the stage was the pupils' chorus.<sup>17</sup> This arrangement, in which the two choirs surround and overlook the onstage events, illustrates their role as external but vigilant observers of the adolescent protagonists.

Supported by their age-specific identities and their arrangement onstage, the contrasts among the three main groups of participants in the operetta provide numerous opportunities to characterize the gap between parent and child. Strictly enforced separation between the young protagonists and the parents' chorus underscores the autonomy of the main characters and the coming-of-age theme implicit in the plot. Nevertheless, the words of the parents' chorus are clearly not so much those of a group of obtuse observers as of anxious parents frustrated by their inability to influence the events onstage. Although similarly concerned, the pupils' chorus consistently interrupts these admonitions, challenging the parents with their own youthful perspective. As two groups interact from opposing ranks of bleachers and the protagonists are chided from above, their age-based perspectives are vividly juxtaposed. Through this use of space, Copland and his collaborators maintain the autonomy of the main characters' experience while simultaneously establishing overtones of generational and familial strife.

With the parent/child dichotomy firmly established through the staging and cast, Copland wastes no time in elaborating that theme. After a few measures of sprightly instrumental

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<sup>17</sup> The production notes from the original New York performance actually outline the use of two choruses of young people; one of "high school pupils" and one of "grammar school pupils." However, the grammar school pupils only participate in a short section of No. 2 "We Don't Know, We Don't Know" and the last 36 bars of the finale. It seems that the principal purpose of the grammar school chorus is to provide an antiphonal setting between the two children's choirs in No. 2. Consequently, this group of performers plays no independent role in the questions addressed by this study. Hereafter, the mention of a chorus of children, students, pupils, etc., will refer exclusively to the chorus of high school pupils.

introduction, the students' chorus opens the choral overture by asking in a choppy duple meter: "Have you ever had an adventure?" Elaborating on this question with increasing musical intensity, the students continue with the further questions "Have you ever been a hero? / Well how would you like be [a hero]?" Responding to these inquiries and the pupils' unison fortissimo declaration that they think such ideas are "wonderful," the adult chorus retorts: "We're your parents / We've had a lot of things happen / And we didn't get to be heroes. / There's nothing wonderful about it." Solidifying the point, the parents further suggest: "You do your schoolwork / And be a hero that way." Throughout their reply, the parents' declamation is marked by abrupt rests and irregular textual rhythms, giving their comments a sense of disaffected cynicism that contrasts sharply with the students' exuberance and defines a clear sense of distance between young and old.

As the first act continues, the distinctions in perspective formulated in the opening number are further emphasized through spoken dialogue. When a desperate pilot comes to the high school recruiting students to assist with flood relief, the students are eager to volunteer, whereas the school principal expresses reluctance similar to that of the grown-ups' chorus. His first inclination is to ignore the call for help, because what is really needed for such dangerous tasks are "grown men and women." In support of his reluctance to assist in a crisis, the principal appeals to institutional authority, continually framing his statements with the line "of course, speaking as an educator." The students, however, undermine any semblance of actual authority with their indignant interjections. Consequently, the principal's eventual decision to allow the trip seems like a forgone conclusion and gives the sense that, much like the parents in the chorus, he is impotent to influence the protagonists in any meaningful way.



The oppositional relationship between adults and children continues in the following number, “We Don’t Know, We Don’t Know.” There, the grown-ups’ chorus laments the children’s decision to volunteer for flood relief. Accompanied only by a dirge-like plodding bass line, they repeatedly intone the names of the six principal characters and the line “We don’t know whether they ought to go.” The parents’ concern is based on their assessment that “a flood is not like your home town,” and the children are “just too green and too young” to participate in the mission. As before, their concerns go unheard, indicated by the sudden musical contrast of an upbeat, jazz-inflected interlude for the main characters. Already pursuing their humanitarian mission, the children echo the sentiments of “adventure” suggested in the opening musical number. Yet while they seem excited, their feelings are expressed in hopelessly naïve statements such as “We’ll see the famous flood, we’ll be right in it! / We’ll go swimming in it.” Though the parents can think of nothing but the danger involved, the children seem concerned primarily with their ride in “a real plane” and the hope that “The folks at home will see us, our pictures in the papers.” Yet again, music and text emphasize the generation gap.

Now working within this established paradigm, the remainder of the first act persists in using the protagonists’ actions as a forum for redressing the gulf between children and adults. Soon after their plane makes an emergency landing, the children are deprived of their last two connections to the external adult world when the pilot leaves to seek help and they neglect to save their emergency radio from the rising flood waters. Faced with a situation that thwarts their previous expectations of carefree adventure, the group quickly dissolves into bickering. These quarrels divide the group along the lines of their inherent diversity (boys vs. girls, brains vs. brawn, etc.), undermining their ability to work together. Falling into disarray, the children lack

the collective wisdom required to cope with the situation and eventually decide to split up and leave the relative safety of high ground.

In response to the protagonists' lack of judgment, the grown-ups' chorus immediately commences an indictment in a lilting compound meter. Seeing the children's actions as proof that their earlier concerns were well founded, the parents declare: "How childish they are... / We knew they were young but we thought they were brave... / But look how they acted in the last scene: / Quarrelsome, petty, greedy, and mean. / Is that what they do when they're left alone?" Directing their condemnation to the pupils' chorus across stage, they inquire: "Can't we trust them at all, can't we trust they'll behave? / ...Oh, children, dear, say it isn't true. / In a case like that it's not what you'd do." This direct confrontation between choruses marks a return to the techniques of the overture, but now in the context of a dispute regarding the protagonists' actions. Through this strategy, "How Childish They Are" sustains the focus on generational tension by providing the parents' chorus with an active outlet for their frustration.

Directly following the pointed question of the grown-ups' chorus, the pupils offer a blunt retort in contrasting musical style. The opening of the reply marks the sharpest generational exchange in the entire work. This is evident in the score directions for the vocal line, which suggest that the section should sound "hard boiled" with a fortissimo dynamic and a sforzando on the opening note. In a confrontational manner, the pupils' chorus snaps: "What's the matter? / What have they done that's so awful? / ...What's the matter with how they act?" Then the children adopt what seems to be a parody of the parents' chorus' earlier lilt, punctuating their allegations "You're always complaining how kids behave? / But what have they done to prove they're not brave?" with slurred octave leaps on the syllable "oo." Finally, in a style akin to their opening retort, the pupils offer a young person's explanation for the protagonist's failures: "They

went out ready to do a good job of it, helping and everything, / And instead they were left marooned in a dump with nothing to do, hungry and cold and with a lot of kids they didn't care about anyway. / We're willing to bet you wouldn't have acted a bit better.”

On several levels, “How Childish They Are” serves as a turning point for the operetta’s treatment of parent/child relationships. The choruses were hitherto a pervasive musical presence but now fade into the background. This alteration affects not only the quantity of the choruses’ input, but also the nature of their participation. In later numbers such as the act-one finale, “Like a Giant Bomb,” and “Two Willow Hill” from the second act, they abandon their previous tendency to react to plot events and adopt a narrative role. Their disengagement from their earlier practice of emotional commentary deemphasizes the dramatic significance of the choruses and amplifies the importance of the main characters.

The theatrical impact of the choruses’ declining role is rendered all the more pointed by their cathartic outbursts in “How Childish They Are.” The bald confrontation between the pupils’ and grownups’ choruses that opens this movement is the climax of *The Second Hurricane*’s theme of generational conflict. Significantly, this moment is also a prominent example of epic-theater techniques in that it uses external characters to reflect on the plot. By openly reflecting on the divisions among the central characters, the choruses pinpoint the primary importance of this event. The ultimate effect of the choruses’ confrontation, then, is to focus attention on the children’s actions and invite the audience to connect with their experience.

Following their apparent invitation to engage with onstage events, the choruses undertake a final desperate attempt to warn the protagonists about the impending second hurricane. But even in the midst of their advice to “save the radio” and “stick together,” the two choirs acknowledge their helplessness to alter the inevitable. Singing in a fortissimo unison, they

lament, “If someone could only tell them what to do.” A few measures later, a similar sentiment of “No one can tell them!” is marked by a suddenly slower tempo and move to eight-part harmony. With the climactic confrontation earlier in the number, these frantic outbursts represent the climax of the choruses’ vicarious involvement with the plot.

Table 2. Movements of the *The Second Hurricane* with their participants.

	Title	Grownups’ Chorus	Pupils’ Chorus	Principals	Jefferson Brown
Act 1	“Choral Overture”	X	X		
	“We Don’t Know, We Don’t Know”	X	X	X	
	“What’s Happened, Where Are They”	X			
	“Gyp’s Song”			X	
	“How Childish They Are”	X	X		
	“Like a Giant Bomb”	X	X		
Act 2	“Fat’s Song”			X	
	“Two Willow Hill”	X			
	“Sextet”			X	
	“Jeff’s Song”			X	X
	“Queenie’s Song”			X	
	“The Capture of the Burgoyne”			X	
	“Finale”	X	X	X	X

Having reached the height of their role in accentuating generational conflict and dramatic autonomy, the choruses recede into the background. As seen in Table 2, the choirs’ overbearing presence during the first act leads to their virtual absence during the second, where they are mostly silent until the finale. Without their constant interpretation, the principals take the lead, offering their first sustained musical contribution in the piece. Significantly, these four consecutive numbers come at the crux of the children’s social awakening, and it is only after the children have reconciled their new worldview that the grown-ups’ chorus reenters to help celebrate their discoveries. Thus, the ebb and flow of parent/child interaction within the work provides both the structural and dramatic context for the operetta’s communitarian morals.

### *The Second Hurricane* and Popular Front Pedagogy

By representing parents as mere commentators on the transformative experience of their children, *The Second Hurricane* espouses a core tenet of Popular Front pedagogy, that is, that independent experience is the best way to introduce children to a left-wing perspective. This leftist educational paradigm is implicit in the complex presentation of parent/child relationships within the operetta. Though the initial idealism of the protagonists and their supporters in the pupils' chorus compares favorably to the tentative pessimism of the adult characters, the children's naiveté and petty quarreling reveal an unmistakable need for either guidance or experience. As the main characters' strict separation from the adult world suggests (and the input of the pupils' chorus explicitly states), the solution to the children's immaturity is not found in parental influence. The real change in the young people's character, rather, occurs as a result of their independent encounter with the perils of the hurricane. In the end, then, the parents' overprotection and attempts to assert authority emerge as potential obstacles to the children's unencumbered development. It is experience that matures them.

The educational model depicted in *The Second Hurricane* is grounded in a Popular Front conception of parent/child relationships. While earlier leftist factions distrusted the nuclear family model and its association with capitalist ideals, the Popular Front focused left-wing principles on private family life as part of a larger effort to expand its cultural influence.<sup>18</sup> Beginning in the mid-1930s, Communist magazines such as *Working Woman* and *Fraternal Outlook* as well as the more traditional *Parents* magazine published frequent articles advising parents on methods of parenting and education.<sup>19</sup> Rooted in the progressive educational theory of the 1920s and early 1930s, such articles advocated a non-authoritarian style of parenting that

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<sup>18</sup> Mickenberg, "Pedagogy of the Popular Front," 228.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-236

encouraged children to think and learn for themselves. In keeping with the Popular Front's larger concern about the dangers of global fascism, the movement distinguished between an unencumbered educational experience resulting in social awakening and an authoritarian one resulting in mindless indoctrination.<sup>20</sup> A November 1938 article in *Parents* magazine summarized this distinction, asking parents: "Are you a DICTATOR? You stand on guard against dictatorship in politics, but what about management of your own home? Are you training little goose-steppers there?"<sup>21</sup> Prevalent throughout the years preceding the Second World War, sentiments such as these reveal the value that Popular Front culture placed upon a pedagogical system based in autonomous experience.

Grounded in the independent, experiential model of progressive education, the events of the second act confront the protagonists with the keystones of the Popular Front platform. The most overt example appears in their encounter with a young black boy, Jefferson Brown, whose name and use of dialect mark him as a typecast.<sup>22</sup> Despite their shared predicament (Jefferson too has been separated from his parents and stands imperiled by the storm), the six children are alternately cruel, pitiful, and dismissive of Jefferson. After committing these traditional trespasses of race relations, the children accept Jefferson as part of their group, finally realizing the value of community. The alignment of these two insights mirrors the ideals of the Popular Front, in which the reparation of racial injustice was inextricably bound to more class-centered efforts at social justice.

In addition to their struggle with racial prejudice, the six protagonists must also confront the inherent disunity among the group's various members. The fundamental cause of their

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>21</sup> James Lee Ellenwood, "Are You A Dictator?" *Parents*, August 1934, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Crist. *Music for the Common Man*, 82-83.

frequent disagreements seems to be centered in the fundamental differences of gender, personality, and perspective. Lowrie, a brainy kid with a penchant for amateur radio operation, is bullied and dismissed by his more dominant peers, the class president Butch and muscular Fat. The female protagonists Gwen and Queenie, while less overtly hostile than their male counterparts, openly resent and criticize Butch's efforts to designate himself as the group's leader. With their collective racist behavior toward Jefferson Brown, these conflicts constitute not merely an assortment of personal differences but a significant moral challenge for the group to overcome. Consequently, the children's triumph over their quarrels and embrace of communitarian morality represent the utopian vision of a fractious society united by left wing ideals.

A final connection between the experience of *The Second Hurricane's* protagonists and the ideals of the Popular Front appears in the children's performance of the American folk song "The Capture of Burgoyne." Newly reconciled but still in considerable danger, the children seek solace in unified performance of a song they learned in school. Borrowed with little adaptation from a Brown University publication titled *Series of Old American Songs*, "Burgoyne" describes the military defeat of the haughty and tyrannical British General Burgoyne as a precursor to previously unknown heights of national freedom and virtue.<sup>23</sup> The placement and content of this Revolutionary War text invite comparison between the historical narrative and onstage events. Spontaneously emerging from the crucible of the students' precarious situation, the song with its message of societal bliss achieved through physical trials resonates with the children's

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<sup>23</sup> Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 85-86; This marks the first of Copland's frequent uses of Anglo-American folk song in his works. He would later use folk songs from this same publication, drawn from the Harris Collection of American Music and Literature at Brown University, as part of his *Lincoln Portrait* and his two collections of *Old American Songs*.

immediate experience. Now enlightened, the children readily adapt their previous knowledge of American history into the framework of progressivism.

In associating the rhetoric of patriotic Americanism with left-wing principles, Copland's quotation of "The Capture of Burgoyne" evokes American nationalism as redefined by the Popular Front.<sup>24</sup> As part of their attempts to adapt their left-wing worldview for broader consumption, leftists during the later 1930s stressed the commonalities between the founding ideals of the United States and those of the political left. Such connections were used as a double-edged sword, simultaneously exemplifying desirable virtues and demonizing the shortcomings of American capitalism.<sup>25</sup> In a June 1936 article in *New Masses*, Rockwell Kent summarized this mode of thought. Closing a lengthy response to allegations of un-Americanism, Kent quotes the Declaration of Independence at length before offering the following interpretation:

In these paragraphs the Declaration of American Independence is the considered statement of the Fathers of Our Country that Governments are instituted to secure Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, and the solemn adjuration that it is the right and duty of Americans to throw off Governments that don't. Here is the test of America epitomized; the Declaration is our flag. Then let the test of True Americanism be--not ancestry, not race nor creed, not loyalty to 'Democracy' nor the Constitution, the Supreme Court, nor to any established institution of order—but unswerving adherence to the letter of the Declaration. That is enough.<sup>26</sup>

Such statements, prevalent from the mid-1930s onward, exemplify the Popular Front's use of American nationalist sentiment to further its own agenda.

The left-wing pedagogical system also viewed American history as a valuable tool for introducing revolutionary ideas. Writing for *New Masses* in December 1935, Jean Simon suggested "there is an immense [American] revolutionary tradition to draw upon" when

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>25</sup> Zuck, *History of Musical Americanism*, 104-110.

<sup>26</sup> Rockwell Kent, "What is 'An American,'" *New Masses* 23 June 1936, 20-21.



developing literature suitable to all children. For Simon, this involved not just accounts of the founding fathers, but also John Brown, Daniel Boone, and countless working-class individuals.<sup>27</sup> The realization of this vision appears in children's books such as Marion Cuthbert's 1936 *We Sing America*, which mixed stories of outstanding African-American achievements with descriptions of present-day racial injustice.<sup>28</sup> Like the plot of *The Second Hurricane*, such examples combine frank depictions of social ills with inspiring revolutionary rhetoric, thereby encouraging the acceptance of progressive ideals.

#### The Finale of *The Second Hurricane* as Social Awakening

Supporting its comprehensive presentation of the methods and content of a Popular Front education, *The Second Hurricane*'s final musical number sharpens the operetta's dramatic outcome into a prescriptive statement of leftist morality. As the movement begins, the two choruses break their extended silence to offer a concluding report on the main characters. After being thwarted from their original goal of providing flood relief by the second hurricane, the six high-school students are rescued and allowed to complete their mission. Concluding their commentary in unison declamation, the choruses further identify the finale as a summative postlude, stating that "in the course of time, they [the six principals] drifted apart again."

After the choruses conclude their explanation, the six principal characters reenter and give a more personal reflection that casts light on the lasting effects of their experience. Accompanied by a series of bouncy eighth-note chords sounded on each beat of the brisk allegro, the children explain that "The newspapers made a story out of it like a lot of others, [but] that's not what we think of now it's all over. We got an idea of what life could be like with everybody pulling together, if each wasn't trying to get ahead of all the rest." Elaborating further, they

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Simon, "Which Books for Your Children," *New Masses* 24 December 1935, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 94.

suggest that “it’s like when you feel you belong together with a sort of love, making you feel easy.” Seemingly summing up this line of sentiment, the six students collectively promise that “We’ll remember that feeling even if we six drift apart, a happy easy feeling like real freedom.”

Just as the specific experiences of the protagonists closely correspond with a leftist pedagogical model, so do their challenges result in the prescribed outcome of Popular Front pedagogy. Beginning as self-centered and naïve adolescents, the children’s independent experience in the real world transforms them into practiced and lifelong adherents to a communitarian morality. And though their initial hopes of being recognized in the newspapers are realized, the principals ultimately disdain such recognition as typical media bluster. Albeit intensely personal, these realizations result in an entirely refashioned social consciousness. After having confronted the inherent problems of their society, the children now define themselves according to the countercultural values of Popular Front progressivism.

As the finale continues, it becomes evident that the protagonists’ social awakening has influence well beyond their personal attitudes. Immediately after their expression of the joys found in utopian community, the children run off stage and return with Jefferson Brown. Then, in the operetta’s most overtly ideological expression, Jeff and the six students join in song with the parents’ and pupils’ choruses to proclaim in chant-like unison: “That’s the idea of freedom, it’s feeling equality, it’s all men feeling free and equal; it’s that they feel they’re joined together, not some enemies of everybody near them, but all feeling a real connection.” Here one sees the full impact of the children’s experience as the choruses, noticeably absent throughout the protagonists’ transformation, participate in an affirmation of communitarian values. The only point in the operetta at which all the participants sing, this closing section offers no sign of the

preceding conflicts of race, age, and gender. In the end, therefore, the tumultuous experience of the hurricane resituates not only the children's values, but also those of their parents and peers.

The collective ideological statement in the closing section of *The Second Hurricane's* finale embodies the critical significance that leftist thought in the Popular Front era placed on the education of children. Adopting the ideas of 1920s cultural progressives, Popular Front discourse on parenting proposed that socially enlightened children were a key catalyst for cultural revolution. Due to their innate hopefulness and sincerity, children were seen as an invaluable corrective to the oppressive systems of modern American adulthood.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, parents who avoided overbearing influence and allowed children to develop independently would not only ensure socially conscious children but also participate in a dramatic refashioning of society at large.<sup>30</sup> The progressive educational tradition of the Henry Street Settlement School also followed this paradigm, as evidenced by John Dewey's contention that "a chief end of education is to see the defects in the existing social arrangements and to take an active part in bettering them."<sup>31</sup> In marking the protagonists' newfound social consciousness with a communal ideological expression, *The Second Hurricane* participates in a Popular Front tradition that identified progressive parenting and education as a precursor to broad-based social change.

The dramatic effect of the finale's expression of social morals is bolstered by the section's distinctive and referential musical setting. As the text shifts from the realm of personal sentiment into a collective statement of communitarian vision, a previously brisk allegro broadens into a march tempo and the accent in the accompaniment rhythm shifts from beat four to beat one (Example 2.1). In addition to the propulsive effect achieved through the incessant

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<sup>29</sup> Mickenberg, "Pedagogy of the Popular Front," 229-230.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

quarter note rhythm, the setting also uses harmonic and dynamic means to build intensity.

Terraced dynamics increase from mezzo-forte to fortissimo over fourteen measures, the block chords in the accompaniment rising chromatically every four measures. This brief section seems to draw its inspiration from the rigorous didactic message of the text, reveling in the idea of freedom through total equality.

Ex. 2.1. Aaron Copland, *The Second Hurricane*, “Finale,” rehearsal 5-9, (Boosey and Hawkes, 1957).

107

get a-head of all the rest. — What it's like when you feel you be-  
long togeth-er With a sort of love, mak-ing you feel eas-y.—  
We'll re-mem-ber that  
feel-ing e-ven if we six drift a-part A hap-py, eas-y  
feel-ing,— Like free-dom,— like free-dom, like real free-dom.

2003

108 BOTH CHORUSES (unison) [The six students run off and return with *fff*, who sings the final chorus with them.]  
② A little broader (♩ = 175)  
That's the i-dea of free-dom, it's feel-ing e-qual-i-ty; It's  
all men feel-ing free and e-qual; It's that they feel they're joined togeth-er,  
Not some en-e-mies of ev-ry-bod-y near them,— But  
SOP. & ALTO (unison) *ff*  
all feel-ing a real con-nect-ion. Feel-ing good that way,  
TEN. & BASS  
all feel-ing a real con-nect-ion. Feel-ing good that

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Through these characteristics and their distinction from the surrounding musical context, this section of the finale emphatically invokes mass-song style. As previously noted, Copland had experimented with this genre in his submission to a mass-song contest sponsored by the Composers' Collective for May Day 1934. In his setting of a poem by Alfred Hayes, “Into the

Streets May First,” Copland uses a style that we have seen repeatedly in the analysis of the mass-song genre: syllabic text setting, rigidly homophonic texture, unison vocal line, and propulsive rhythms. As demonstrated by a comparison of Examples 2.1 and 2.2, *Into the Streets* and the section from *The Second Hurricane*’s finale share those characteristics, as well as a general proclivity toward chromatic shifts of melody and harmony. By invoking this style for *The Second Hurricane*’s climactic statement of leftist morality, Copland makes a musical allusion that intensifies the impact of the text.

Ex. 2.2. Aaron Copland, *Into the Streets May First*, measures 1-10, (published in *New Masses*, May 1, 1934).

The image shows a page of a musical score titled "INTO THE STREETS MAY FIRST". The lyrics are: "In - to the streets May first In - to the roar - - ing Square", "Shake the mid - town tou - ers Crash the down - town air", and "Come with a stern of ban - ners Come with an earth - quake tread". The score is written for voice and piano. The music is in a simple, rhythmic style with a homophonic texture. The lyrics are written in a bold, sans-serif font. The score is published in *New Masses*, May 1, 1934.

Underlined by its musical setting in mass-song style, the rousing statements of the finale galvanize the more subtle ideological elements of the operetta and solidify the work’s identity as a leftist pedagogical and recruiting tool. Using the bald musical and textual language of the mass-song genre like that found in Blitzstein’s *Workers’ Kids of the World*, Copland and Denby invoke an established tradition of revolutionary musical expression. The sharpening effect of this

reference is amplified by the epic-theater character of the finale. The protagonists, formerly established as the object of critique by the frequent choral interludes, become commentators themselves, thereby intensifying the audience's sense that a moral message is being presented. In the spirit of Popular Front pedagogy, the finale clearly institutes *The Second Hurricane*'s plot as not just an inspiring story, but a depiction of an educational process with profound political and cultural implications.

### *The Second Hurricane* as Pedagogical Tool

Although *The Second Hurricane* uses the traditional leftist techniques of mass-song and epic-theater to hone its message, its dramatic elements mark it as a Popular Front pedagogical tool with multi-faceted appeal. Typical of left-wing recruitment efforts in the later 1930s, *The Second Hurricane* avoids revolutionary rhetoric in favor of more inclusive language. Unlike the children in *Workers' Kids of the World* who readily identify themselves as members of the working class, the protagonists of *The Second Hurricane* are vaguely identified as high school students from "no definite locality" other than somewhere in the "southern Middle West."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the entire narrative is framed within the context of familial relationships, which left-wing factions prior to the mid 1930s had essentially dismissed as a corrupted capitalist invention.<sup>33</sup> The general character of the operetta's dialogue is similarly accommodating, with the characters comfortably expressing themselves in a decidedly American colloquial language. By adapting *The Second Hurricane*'s left-wing message to everyday American life, Copland and Denby identify with the educational philosophy of the Popular Front and expand the potential impact of the operetta's communitarian moral message.

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<sup>32</sup> Notes from the Original Program, published in Aaron Copland, *The Second Hurricane*, (Boosey and Hawkes: New York, 1957).

<sup>33</sup> Harold Mishler, *Raising Reds* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1999), 15-23.

The generic backdrop and familial context of *The Second Hurricane* expand the applicability of its message to a wide variety of constituencies. Because they have no fixed class or geographic identity, the parent/child relationships can easily be interpreted as archetypes of modern family life. The choral commentary on events in the plot encourages this by inviting the audience to reflect on the onstage action. Moreover, Copland's intended the work to become part of a new repertory for school performance.<sup>34</sup> This expands the likelihood of audience reflection, as the typical dynamic of a school performance consists of parents watching their own children onstage. It thus becomes easy to imagine *The Second Hurricane* as a recommendation for a specific social paradigm: if parents would only lighten up and give their children room to develop, they could become a catalyst for rebirth into a bright communitarian future.

*The Second Hurricane* offers a similar appeal to its young performers. Children unfamiliar with left-wing principles would encounter the promise and process of Popular Front ideals by vicariously experiencing the protagonists' enlightenment. Those who already shared the operetta's communitarian perspective would have an opportunity for public celebration of those ideas. The operetta's plot, moreover, offers more specific lessons in its critique of racism and social conflict. Finally, the protagonists' performance of "The Capture of the Burgoyne" introduces children to the Popular Front's newly unified conception of Americanism and left-wing principles. In these ways, *The Second Hurricane* becomes not just a model, but rather a tool of Popular Front pedagogy.

One example of *The Second Hurricane*'s potential as a pedagogical tool is seen in the resonance of its narrative with the experience of its initial cast. As students of the Henry Street Settlement Music School, they may well have seen a parallel between the protagonists

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<sup>34</sup> Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 77.

experience and their own exposure to left-wing summer camps. Like left-wing children's literature and youth organizations, leftist summer camps had a well-established history throughout the early twentieth century, especially among the urban immigrant communities served by settlement houses.<sup>35</sup> They continued to be prevalent during the Popular Front era, providing the venue for the kind of experiential learning that progressives saw as the gateway to social awareness. Since children spent most of their time under the corrupting influence of capitalist culture, radical summer camps offered an opportunity for "putting into practice the visionary aspects of Communist culture."<sup>36</sup>

Though the children in *The Second Hurricane* leave home to participate in flood relief rather than to attend summer camp, the plot of the operetta emphasizes many of the primary themes of summer camp life. Much like the protagonists' physical efforts toward flood relief, campers would often participate in physical labor or activism, on the basis that "there could be no better way to teach children the dignity of labor...than to make work one of the basic camp activities."<sup>37</sup> Camp-life also emphasized the improvement of race relations, with some camps making a careful effort to maintain an integrated populace. By deliberately integrating black and white students, these camps sought to eliminate racial prejudice through direct confrontation.<sup>38</sup> In *The Second Hurricane*, the children's encounter with Jefferson Brown follows a similar trajectory, as their initial stereotypes are ultimately overcome through interaction and friendship with the young black boy.

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<sup>35</sup> Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 83-85.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 94-99.



Perhaps the broadest connection between leftist children's camps and *The Second Hurricane* is their shared pedagogical philosophy that children will best develop socialist ideals through independent experience. In the operetta, the protagonists only begin to change their selfish outlook after they are physically and dramatically separated from their everyday lives and parental influence. Then in the finale, the children describe this experience as the basis of a comprehensive and lifelong transformation. Like other Popular Front pedagogical efforts, radical summer camps were founded on this principle of using unique experience to inspire a lifetime of social change.<sup>39</sup> Summarizing the powerful experience of left-wing summer camps, Harold Mishler states: "Summer was a time during which children could leave the world of capitalism to live in a community that reflected the values of the radical movement. The experience touched many of them profoundly and gave them a vision they could carry with them throughout their lives."<sup>40</sup> For the numerous participants of left-wing summer camps, then, the story of *The Second Hurricane* would undoubtedly have seemed a confirmation of their highest ideals.

Our understanding of *The Second Hurricane* is greatly enriched when considering the operetta in light of the Popular Front pedagogical system. Just as its musical language and textual delivery are tailored to young performers, so are the educational methods it depicts especially designed to inspire leftist political values in youth. Using the traditional left-wing artistic idioms of mass song and epic theater, Copland and Denby fashioned a pedagogical tool that balances broad cultural appeal with persuasive communitarian rhetoric. For both the young performers of the operetta and their parents in the audience, the morals of *The Second Hurricane* would have taken on a prescriptive tone, encouraging them to consider (or reconsider) a social awakening of their own. Given this didactic purpose, its performance contexts, and its musical references, it is

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 98-99, 107-108.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 108.

appropriate to list this work as a musical counterpart within a much larger pedagogical system designed to introduce left-wing ideals to the diverse audiences of the Popular Front era.

## CHAPTER 4

### ALEX NORTH'S *THE HITHER AND THITHER OF DANNY DITHER* AND PRE-WAR ACCOMMODATION

Like *Workers' Kids of the World* and *The Second Hurricane*, Alex North's musical play *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither* rests firmly within the context of the progressive children's movement. As the substantive distinctions between Blitzstein's children's cantata and Copland's youth operetta suggest, ongoing adaptations of left-wing pedagogical theory led to a considerable variety of practical applications. Composed in 1941, four years after *The Second Hurricane*, *Danny Dither* also demonstrates this ongoing evolution of left-wing pedagogy. Though North's musical play addresses many of the same themes as *Workers' Kids* and shares the social ethics of *The Second Hurricane*, it assiduously avoids the militant rhetoric and didactic morality of those earlier works. Instead, *Danny Dither* couches its cultural critique within an innocuous plot, using good-natured satire and catchy tunes to reveal inherent inconsistencies in the fabric of modern American life. This uniquely low-impact version of left-wing pedagogy is again no mere happenstance but rather reflects the increasingly muted rhetoric of American leftist education in the years preceding the Second World War.

#### *Danny Dither* and the Pre-War Popular Front

As a musical work that packages left-leaning social satire for broad cultural appeal, *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither* is an ideological offspring of the Popular Front. Officially initiated by a 1935 re-articulation of cultural policy by Communist International, the Popular Front came to designate a broad-based social movement of cultural liberals and political radicals united in opposition to global fascism. As part of their attempt to expand this constituency, previously sectarian leftists within the Popular Front recast their ideological views within the context of American nationalism, proposing left-wing politics as a natural outgrowth of native

revolutionary tradition.<sup>1</sup> Though the Popular Front's core tenets of anti-fascism and democratic Americanism were only two within a much longer list, global politics in the later 1930s amplified their relative importance. In light of the dramatic expansion of Nazi Germany and the increasing military threat to both the United States and the still revered Soviet Union, the Popular Front movement gradually softened its anti-capitalist rhetoric, saving its harshest criticism for troubles abroad.<sup>2</sup>

Although both *The Second Hurricane* and *Danny Dither* stem from the social consciousness of the Popular Front, the four years separating the works resulted in two distinct approaches to conveying political messages for children. Copland's operetta, for all the everyday appeal of its family-centered plot, seems incapable of escaping the ideological rigor of its message. The use of epic theater techniques and choral commentary holds the audience at a reflective distance throughout, defying them to miss the obvious moral message of the finale. In contrast, *Danny Dither* immerses observers in the plot, leaving them to construct for themselves the full meaning of the musical's satirical commentary. Though both works make deliberate efforts to achieve a facile communication of left-wing ideas, *The Second Hurricane* is overtly didactic in a way that *Danny Dither* avoids. Given the chronological overlap between these works and the gradual softening of Popular Front rhetoric, it is evident that their divergent pedagogical methods reflect the gradual progression of leftist educational models.

Like those of Blitzstein and Copland, Alex North's early life and career were rooted in a tradition of socially conscious musical and political activity. Though approximately ten years

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left*, (New York: Oxford, 2006), 89.

<sup>2</sup> Micheal Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Verso, 1996).

their junior, North too was associated with the Composers' Collective of New York.<sup>3</sup> Born into a working-class Russian-Jewish family in New York, North applied and was accepted for a position in Russia as a telegraphist in 1933. During his time in Russia, he spent two years (1933-35) as a student in the Moscow Conservatory, becoming the only American member of the Union of Soviet Composers.<sup>4</sup> Upon his return from Russia in late 1935, North readily reassimilated into the New York-based community of left-leaning intellectuals that formed the core of the Popular Front's artistic contributors. There he cultivated a talent for composing collaborative stage works, particular those involving dance, and worked frequently with such prominent figures as Martha Graham and Agnes De Mille.<sup>5</sup>

By the time he produced *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither* in 1941, Alex North had a prolific output and had developed a prominent reputation as a composer within the circles of the Popular Front. In concert with the spirit of that time and place, most of his oeuvre was steeped in the political consciousness of the radical left, and many of his 1930s performances took place under the auspices of such decidedly political institutions as local labor unions and the Federal Theater Project.<sup>6</sup> It was also during this time that he laid the foundation of his characteristic musical personality, marked by pervasive lyricism, a comfortable fusion of classic and popular idioms, and an uncanny ability to match visual and auditory media. Each of these elements is on display in the sprightly dance numbers of *Danny Dither*. Collectively they prefigure the basis of North's considerable success as a Hollywood film composer in the following decades.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Sanya Shoilevska Henderson, *Alex North: Film Composer* (New York: McFarland, 2003), 14-17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-28.

Composed to a play and lyrics by Jeremy Gury, *Danny Dither* is a two-act “play with music” intended for “children, or adults, or for the young at heart...wherever they may be.”<sup>8</sup> As in Copland’s *Second Hurricane*, the plot is driven by extended sections of spoken text. To this framework, North adds a diverse collection of vocal music, dance numbers, and instrumental interludes. The result is an evocative and multi-faceted musical of considerable charm and flexibility. This whimsical nature finds expression in a very loose conception of the musical work, as described in an opening director’s note:

“Danny Dither” was planned and written to be an extremely flexible musical play. The author fully believes that the director using it should...make it suit his or her needs. It can be elaborate or very simple...fantastic or realistic...satirical or sentimental—depending on where the director chooses to place the emphasis.<sup>9</sup>

Going further, the note suggests that a director might use dancers or not, cut the length by up to half, and cast performers of any level of experience.

On the surface, these detailed directions of what the director might do seem pointless, as such liberties would be possible even without the author’s permission. Considering the political context, however, these comments underscore the aforementioned contrast with *The Second Hurricane*. Though the note to the director acknowledges the play’s potential as a satirical statement, it expresses no urgency that this political message be emphasized. To be sure, the play is too pervasively satirical to lose much of its edge, but the author seems content to allow that strand of meaning to fall into the background. In a carefully structured didactic piece such as *The Second Hurricane*, such an omission would be unthinkable, since its casting, plot, and staging all combine to prepare the moral affirmation of the finale. Again, the stark distinction between the aesthetic values of these two works reflects the chronological divide between two divergent

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<sup>8</sup> Alex North and Jeremy Gury, *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither*, (New York: Edward B. Marks, 1946), 1.

<sup>9</sup> North and Gury, *Danny Dither*, 4.

visions of leftist education. Written during the buildup to a worldwide showdown with fascism, *Danny Dither* is more concerned with providing a workshop for social reflection than an aggressive critique of American culture.

### *Danny Dither's Critique of Urban Life*

However loosely one might choose to interpret *Danny Dither*, the play is rife with allusions to the social understanding of the Popular Front. Set during “a summer day sometime in the near future,” the musical play details the adventures of a young angel, Danny Dither, who has been sent back to Earth in mortal form. Acting on behalf of the Faith, Hope, and Charity Department, Danny’s mission is to convene an informal report on the existence or absence of those virtues in the modern world. Though the mortal version of Danny has no recollection of the broader purpose behind his survey, the stakes are high. Mr. Judkins, a heavenly foreman of some kind, has hired the efficiency expert Mr. Lucas (a.k.a. Lucifer) to streamline operations, and the Faith, Hope and Charity Department is to be expunged. As a relatively clueless Danny tries to collect enough evidence to save the department, Mr. Lucas attempts to discredit and distract him. In the course of his one day on Earth, Danny encounters a group of situations intended to introduce him to the harsh realities of city life: tenement houses, slum children, abusive police, an immigration official, etc. Although Danny returns to heaven with enough information to save the three virtues, the core of the story concerns his earthbound experience and its satirical commentary on the reality of working-class life in the city.

Following the typical pattern of left-wing pedagogical works, the political element of *Danny Dither* emerges early and often. Immediately after Danny’s arrival on Earth, he is swept up in the frantic spectacle of an extended dance number depicting “the maelstrom of city life.” The lengthiest musical number in the play, this “City Ballet” sets the mood for Danny’s entire

experience. Going beyond traditional tropes of urban hustle and bustle, the director's notes for the number suggest that "it should be highly stylized and fantastic. A kind of grotesquerie of the big city, a nightmare."<sup>10</sup> As the ballet unfolds against the manic, brittle backdrop of North's musical setting, we receive a palpable sense of the gulf between Danny's heavenly home and his new metropolitan surroundings. Though they seem a given in the ethereal world Danny comes from, virtues such as faith, hope, and charity are much harder to come by in the unforgiving environment of the big city.

As Danny continues his search for evidence of virtue in modern society, he undergoes a variety of other experiences that highlight the problems of urban life. Penniless and confused, Danny is befriended by a group of "city brats." Despite their relative cheeriness, it is evident that these children are also victims of an oppressive city environment. In "Song of the City Brats," they express a wistful dissatisfaction with their lives in the tenement district, singing "Far away the birds forget the city, / But we kids can't fly and that's a pity." Though they hope to someday "wake and see the day [with] no buildings in the way," their only hope is to "cross your fingers and hope it won't be long" until their blissful dreams of a rural existence becomes a reality.

Danny's ongoing experience fleshes out the vague sense of disaffection with city life expressed in "Song of the City Brats" by depicting the unjust system in which the children are forced to live. Attempting to prevent Danny from completing his mission, Mr. Lucas uses numerous ploys to place him in conflict with the authorities. In short sequence, Danny is framed for robbery, tricked into wearing a sign reading "Down with Everything," and detained as an undocumented immigrant. Given his ignorance of societal conventions and association with

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<sup>10</sup> Gury and North, *Danny Dither*, 29.



street urchins, the police are all too ready to believe the worst of the transplanted angel. Danny remains a clueless victim within a system he does not understand, and is only saved from arrest by the quick action of his working class friends. Through all this, Danny's naïve innocence and dedication to his mission develop a sharp dramatic irony; sent to Earth to prove the existence of faith, hope, and charity, Danny becomes the victim of a corrupt system that knows nothing of those virtues.

As I have suggested above, one of the most distinctive features of the political element in *Danny Dither* is its understated presentation. Though the play depicts numerous social problems and their causes, the proposed solutions to these difficulties seem to minimize their significance. One example is seen in "Song of the Underdogs," sung by Daisy, one of Danny's working-class friends. Singing about the plight of the underdog, Daisy muses: "The Lord must love the underdog, / he made so many of 'em, / He must have made 'em all just so that he could love 'em, / He made the world with little folks and big shots like to bite 'em." After this fanciful description of class struggle, she proposes an equally whimsical solution: "Try some smilin' and see / How right things can be / It's wrong to be cryin, / keep tryin' a brand new way." The song then ends with a refrain for trio over the text: "It's no time for weepers."

A brief comparison of "Song of the Underdogs" with songs from the two previously discussed works reveals the extent of the difference between their respective adaptations of left-wing principles for young people. *Workers' Kids of the World* contains a remarkably similar song titled "Don't Cry Kids." Though the children of that chorus are also saddened by the reality of social inequality, their response is the militant activism of The Young Pioneers: Don't cry, fight!... / The Board of Education wants to see us cry... / We're ready when the showdown comes / Not with tears, but with drums!" The protagonists of *The Second Hurricane* face no

overt class struggle, but when confronted with the perils of a rising flood, they respond with the communal singing of an American folk song that describes victory over tyranny in the Revolutionary War era. Though a less aggressive response than that of the “workers’ kids,” their reaction is inherently communal and grounded in their shared cultural history.

“Song of the Underdogs,” however, poses a very different solution. Initially, Daisy’s redress of class relationships has the caustic ring of sarcasm: “The Lord must love the underdog, he made so many of em.” The tone quickly changes, however, and the final recommendation is to maintain a cheery optimism in spite of poverty and injustice. In place of the indignant aggression of *Workers’ Kids* and the communal affirmation of *The Second Hurricane*, *Danny Dither* asserts a kind of can do individualism that accepts social problems as a natural part of some vaguely discernible greater plan. Each of the three perspectives could be argued on its respective merits and realism, but the progression among the three is undeniable. Though these are merely three examples, their respective placement within the chronology of the Popular Front makes them useful signposts for observing the evolving sensibilities of the leftist children’s movement.

As with *Workers’ Kids* and *The Second Hurricane*, contemporary expressions of left-wing children’s education corroborate *Danny Dither*’s position within that broader system. One surprisingly precise parallel within children’s literature is Harry Granick’s *Run, Run! An Adventure in New York* (1941). Published in the same year as *Danny Dither*, *An Adventure in New York* tells the story of two ten-year old Midwesterners who win a trip to New York City in a contest sponsored by the Fruity Cereal Company. Though scheduled to tour the city and company headquarters with the other contest winners, the two children fail to connect with their tour group and embark on an unscheduled journey into the city. During their excursion, they are

introduced to a side of New York that calls into question their previous presuppositions about the city. The details of the story are outlined in a review from *New Masses*:

They run into a bootblack. An artist. A Chinese family in Chinatown. The captain of a fishing boat. A Negro family in Harlem.... The ten-year-old children discover parts of New York many well-informed persons don't know exist—like the Aquarium where immigrants were once held for investigation as they now are at Ellis Island. The youngsters were guests in fire traps and discovered what sub-standard tenement buildings look like... They sleep wherever they find themselves at the end of a strenuous day evading the detectives frantically searching for them.<sup>11</sup>

When the two children finally rejoin their scheduled tour on the following day, their experience of the “real” New York leaves them newly skeptical about the motives of their corporate hosts.<sup>12</sup>

There are many obvious similarities between *Danny Dither* and *Adventure in New York*. Like the children in the book, Danny unexpectedly encounters the underbelly of an urban metropolis. Furthermore, both stories depict diverse working class populations and their corresponding struggles with entrenched institutional authorities through the whimsical perspective of childhood. More importantly, however, *Danny Dither* and *Adventure in New York* each take steps to moderate their political message. Though these two stories represent views of urban life that would have been rare in mainstream expressions for children, they deliberately avoid ideological language and expression. Rather than propose aggressive action against the ills of capitalist society, *Danny Dither* and *Adventure in New York* present examples of societal injustice and leave children to consider their own appropriate response.

In much the same way as *Workers' Kids of the World* and *The Second Hurricane*, *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither* exemplifies the contemporary ideals of the leftist children's movement at the time of its composition. Composed just before the country's entry into the Second World War, Gury and North's musical play eschews the pointed social critique and

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<sup>11</sup> Marion Armstrong, “Child's Saga,” *New Masses*, 10 February 1942, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 85-88.

detailed moral prescriptions of its predecessors. Though it continues in the Popular Front tradition of relevant social critique, its analyses are embedded in an unassuming plot and mitigated by understatement. By considering the cautious manner in which *Danny Dither* unfolds its left-wing ideals, we achieve a greater understanding of its timely relationship to the pre-war sensibilities of the Popular Front.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Scholarship on the contemporary expressions of the left-wing children's movement can add much to the present conception of politically oriented children's music in 1930s America. Traditionally, music scholars have viewed *Worker's Kids*, *The Second Hurricane*, and *Danny Dither* as minor and even marginal works within their composers' larger oeuvres. As a result, existing scholarly discussions of these pieces occur exclusively within projects focused on particular composers. Although the peculiar character of these political children's works does indeed shed light on the perspective of their composers, such studies neglect to consider the position of left-wing children's music within an established tradition of political expression for young people. In their shared goal of communicating a core set of left-wing principles to children through music, *Worker's Kids*, *The Second Hurricane*, and *Danny Dither* demonstrate a fundamental unity of purpose that binds them both to each other and to the extensive leftist pedagogical efforts of their time. By recognizing an interrelationship between these two cultural phenomena, we can rightly interpret the cultural objectives and stylistic idiosyncrasies of these three children's works as expressions of a continuously evolving educational tradition.

In identifying the connections between politically oriented children's music and the broader left-wing children's movement, I provide an interpretative framework with application to a wide variety of American children's music. Although this study addresses only three examples, the tradition of socially conscious children's music expands well beyond the 1930s and these particular composers. The series which contained Copland's two youth piano pieces (*Sunday Afternoon Music* and *The Young Pioneers*), for example, continued into the 1950s under the direction of another associate of the Composers' Collective, Isadore Freed. Published in the

decade following the Second World War, Ruth Crawford Seeger's folk song collections for children also resemble earlier efforts to shape the lives of young people through music. Such expressions continued well into the late twentieth century, as evidenced by Pete Seeger's appropriation of folk song as both political protest tool and children's entertainment. These examples, among others, have long awaited a model that appropriately considers their identity as manifestations of a progressive educational consciousness. By chronicling the cultural progression of *Worker's Kids*, *The Second Hurricane*, and *Danny Dither*, I have taken the first steps toward achieving a fuller understanding of the relationships between left-wing politics, composers, and children in twentieth century America.

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