

**BUILDING OUR CULTURAL DEFENSES: THE NONINTERVENTIONIST
RHETORIC OF THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF MUSIC CLUBS**

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ABSTRACT

The public writings of the National Federation of Music Clubs and its fourteenth president, Julia Ober, argued for American noninterventionism in the late 1930s and early 1940s. These texts deployed a conceptual and aesthetic framework for musical advocacy and activism in America, in which America's love for and preservation of traditional European classical music became a model for American peace during time of war. They proposed that European music could undergo a process of naturalization analogous to the naturalization of thousands of European émigrés. American musicians and audiences could perform, listen to, and love music originating from Axis countries without thereby supporting the Axis. Cultivating this music would create a safe harbor for the preservation of European culture throughout the war. Musical noninterventionism also promoted national defense through culture: focusing on art and music would help Americans resist foreign warmongering and at the same time create the foundations for a lasting American peace. This political program developed in contrast both to internationalist modernism and isolationist American nationalism, and also in opposition to contemporary "masculine" discourses of composition, aesthetics, and performance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow citizens) the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. But that jealousy to be useful must be impartial; else it becomes the instrument of the very influence to be avoided, instead of a defense against it. Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots, who may resist the intrigues of the favorite, are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people to surrender their interests.

George Washington, 1796*

The future of American foreign relations during the 1930s and early 1940s swung between the two poles of neutrality and internationalism. Many Americans, looking back at the catastrophic results of their victory of World War I, believed that America ought to remain a guarantor of neutrality throughout the world, hewing to George Washington's farewell dictum to eschew foreign alliances. Others, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, wished for America to exert specific influence over European and global politics. Yet concern for the safety of Europe and Asia alone did not bring America into World War II; although the interventionist argument hinged on American security, a third factor drove American internationalism: the desire for American international power. The

* This paragraph comes from a text known as "Washington's Farewell Address," which was not a speech but rather an open letter printed by several American newspapers on September 19, 1796. Quoted from United States Senate, "Washington's Farewell Address To The People Of The United States," Senate Pub. No. 108-21 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), 25–26.

conflict between neutrality and internationalism in these years manifested deep uncertainty over America's identity and over the shape of American nationalism: would it continue to be a peaceable nation, striving to avoid European rivalries and imperialism and the resulting conflict, or would it take up the mantle of European-style global power?¹

The conflict between internationalism and noninterventionism extended beyond the direct concerns of military and foreign affairs and became an important framework within which to articulate social, cultural, and political debates. Noninterventionist-internationalist debates played a particularly acute role in America's musical culture, so directly tied to both England and the European continent, and which was, by the 1930s, populated by recent exiles and émigrés. Modes of composition, performance, and listening, as well as the rhetorical devices of composers, performers, listeners, and writers, became powerful examples of how America might navigate the uneasy waters of international affairs. Music could articulate and argue for a neutral, noninterventionist America devoted to peace and the preservation and continuation of tradition, whether musical or political.

This study explores one facet of musical noninterventionism: the rhetoric of the National Federation of Music Clubs and Julia Fuqua Ober, its president from 1937 to 1941.² Ober and her Federation, comprising thousands of local and state music clubs

¹ David F. Schmitz, *The Triumph of Internationalism: Franklin D. Roosevelt and a World in Crisis, 1933–1941* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007) gives an excellent and concise introduction to this nexus in American history. See especially Chapter 2, “Neutrality Ascendant.”

² Julia Ober appears to have been born in 1899 and died in 1978, according to Social Security records accessed at <http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/indexinfo.aspx?ix=ssdiall> on 30 March 2009. Her maiden name may have been “Julia Williams.” She and her husband, Vincent Hilles Ober, lived in Norfolk, Virginia. Social Security records show that Mr. Ober, also born in 1899, died in 1994 at the age of ninety-five. I have not yet located the papers of either Mr. or Mrs. Ober or other material with which to sketch a more complete biography.

with a predominantly female membership, consistently argued against rising militarism in America, right up through 1941. Over the course of her presidency, Ober and the other Federationists developed a specifically musical argument against American interventionism: just as American musicians and audiences could embrace and support the music of all nations, so should the country treat those nations with neutrality, not violence. Performing, composing, and listening to time-honored “serious” music became a powerful metaphor for American noninterventionism. The works of Wagner, Beethoven, and even Schoenberg underwent a process of naturalization that enabled them to function within America as a new citizen, so to speak, not as a foreigner. America could then, in music as every other walk of life, preserve and defend Europe through peace rather than war, by fostering and supporting European musicians and European music although the Continent itself had forsaken peace. Music and the other arts could be as powerful as Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*.

The musical noninterventionists sought a new world, founded on past artistic success but progressive in scope. Their rejection of iconoclasm did not make them conservatives:

We do not seek a new order according to the standards of those countries which desecrate the freedom of others in the maniacal development of the “new.” We seek an old order of truth and decency, faith and courage, freedom and respectfulness. Each day is our new order in that it gives to us new opportunities to prove the strength we can give to the world. There are those of us who err in looking back to the old days and refusing to admit that progress actually lies ahead. Our services in the past are conditioned upon the strength we gave thereby to the future.³

This careful navigation between tradition and progress, between past and future, and between the Old World and the New, and the belief that synthesizing the two extremes

³ Julia Ober, President’s Page, *Music Clubs Magazine*, May-June 1941, 9.

could produce a more healthy future, typified the lofty goals of the National Federation of Music Clubs. They believed that their choices of repertoire could and should articulate their political ideology of cultural noninterventionism.

This study specifically focuses on American involvement with German music. This echoes the overwhelming political and military tension with Germany as much as it does America's longstanding infatuation with German music. The debate between neutrality and intervention throughout the 1930s revolved around the German question, and the musical argument followed suit.

CHAPTER 2

THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF MUSIC CLUBS

Although the NFMC has received relatively little attention in the general musicological literature, both the national- and state-level Federations have maintained tremendous interest in their own history. As a result, they have produced and collected a wealth of detailed documentation of all levels of their work and the activity of American composers and performers. The North Carolina Federation, for instance, prepared in 1947 a detailed history of its own foundation, membership, and activities.⁴ The National Federation commemorated its Diamond Jubilee in 1973 with the general overview of “NFMC’s Seventy-Five Years of Service” in *Music Clubs Magazine*, the organization’s periodical. As the editor’s introduction notes, “because of [the NFMC’s] phenomenal growth, ever-expanding program, and far-reaching influence through these 75 years of existence, it is impossible to include within these pages every noteworthy accomplishment. . .”⁵ As is common in NFMC publications, “Seventy-Five Years of Service” focuses on the club’s organizational history, the development and growth of its committees, subcommittees, programs, departments, and so forth, and on the succession of women who served as its presidents. As with many large organizations, the essence of

⁴ Maxine Fountain, editor, *Enthusiasts All: A Story of the Impact Made by the North Carolina Federation of Music Clubs Upon the State of North Carolina, 1917–1974* (Chapel Hill: privately printed, 1974).

⁵ “In Retrospect: NFMC’s Seventy-Five Years of Service,” *Music Clubs Magazine*, Spring 1973, 9.

the NFMC's mission can be hard to discern within the vast bureaucratic apparatus surrounding it.⁶

The Federation's story began in 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The conductor Theodore Thomas organized the exposition's music programs; his wife, Rose Fay, suggested that they invite Women's Amateur Musical Clubs from throughout the nation to participate in the Congress of Musicians. Forty-two clubs sent delegates; the project was enormously successful, and four years later, at the June 1897 meeting of the Music Teachers National Association, the administration of that body began to form. The state of Illinois issued a charter on February 28, 1898 for the Federation "to bring into communication with one another the various musical clubs of the country that they may compare methods of work, and become mutually helpful. Constitutions of clubs applying for membership must show that they are officered by women only, and that their purpose is universal culture."⁷

Although the Federation amended its Certificate of Incorporation in 1905 to allow men and men's organizations to join the Federation, women have continued to dominate all levels of the Federation's administration, and "universal culture" remains the organization's defining ideology. Mrs. Curtis Webster, the second president of the Federation, instituted a formal emphasis on International Music Relations, and welcomed a Canadian club into the Federation. The Federation quickly branched out into education, sponsoring competitions, publishing study outlines, funding scholarships, and organizing

⁶ *Time* magazine referred to the Federation in 1938 as "inveterate resolvers," much to the annoyance of Julia Ober, then Federation president. Ober herself had been responsible for hiring a "professional parliamentarian" for the Federation, however, which may or may not have had a salutary effect on the organization's resolution/action ratio. "Ladies in Chicago," *Time*, September 19, 1938, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,931739,00.html> (accessed March 13, 2009). See also "In Retrospect," 11.

⁷ "In Retrospect," 9.

a Junior Department. The Federation participated in the foundation of the MacDowell Colony in the late 1910s, and continued to raise funds for the Colony, for Mrs. MacDowell, and for the publication of Edward MacDowell's compositions. By the time of World War I, the Federation had begun increasing its active participation in legislation and politics. As the present study will explore, by the time of Julia Ober's presidency the Federation felt it important to directly address both domestic and foreign policy.

Women Patrons, Women's Clubs, and the NFMCC's Allies

Even after decades of historiographical attention to gender imbalances in the narrative of American history, there remains precious little reminder of the critical role played by women in the development of America's musical culture. Musical histories focus on composition, performance, and professional criticism—fields historically dominated by men. Reclaiming and remembering the women who did succeed in those professional environments has enabled productive critique of the gendered, and frequently sexist, institutions and rhetoric which regularly relegated those women to the margins of history. The institutions themselves, however, have maintained their dominance even in revisionist historiography. The search for the powerful, professional, genius composer—a concept still linked to the gendered world which produced it—continues to dominate American music history. By this measure, America will always fall short of Germany, of Italy, and even France and England, with their vast stables of geniuses.⁸

⁸ Thankfully, several studies of patronage and female patronage in particular have appeared in recent years. The essays in Ralph Locke and Cyrilla Barr, eds, *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists Since 1860*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) provide many case studies and an outline for a general history of female patronage in this country. Carol Oja's work, most prominently in *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

America need not compete with Germany's cultural titans. This simple statement represents the foundation of musical noninterventionism. Noninterventionists rejected European military conflict as a means of resolving problems; they approached the "culture wars" similarly. The hundreds of thousands of women who filled the ranks of the Federation, and the women who served as its leaders, could never be titanic heroes. Yet they sought to serve as cultural leaders.

Within the gendered discourse of the first half of the twentieth century, these "nurturing" roles were indeed seen as distinctly secondary to the "serious work" of business, industry—and composition. Yet women have long played most of the pivotal roles in America's system of musical patronage. The critical activities of funding, organizing, and promoting all aspects of musical activity in this country have been disproportionately undertaken by women. An anonymous writer for *Time* drew the gender lines of American patronage in a 1938 column:

In Europe, symphony orchestras and opera houses are affairs of state. In the U.S., they are supported by private endowments, contributions and subscriptions. Most of the money that goes to support music in the U. S. is made by business and professional men, spent by their wives. The financing and management of most highbrow U.S. music is the hands of women.

The largest music-boosting organization in the world is the National Federation of Music Clubs. Its 400,000 women members range from smalltown Thursday Afternoon Choral clubwomen to sponsors of Metropolitan symphony and opera seasons.⁹

To men goes the task of production, to women the task of spending, of management. The anonymous *Time* columnist avoids commenting negatively or positively on this state of affairs.

2000), provides the closest point of comparison for the present study.

⁹ "Ladies in Chicago," *Time*, September 19, 1938, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,931739,00.html> (accessed March 13, 2009).

Others were not so kind. The pseudonymous commentary section of *Musical America*, “Mephisto’s Musings,” quoted a lengthy diatribe by Sir Thomas Beecham, the new leader of the Seattle Philharmonic, addressed to members of the Los Angeles

Philharmonic Women’s Committee:

I’ve been to a number of meetings in this country. Women seem to be doing most of the talking. It seems to me these committees are mutual admiration societies. What are you really doing for the advancement of culture and art? American architecture is not yet born. You have a little theater and you have not developed an American music. Where are your choral societies? There are 2,000 in England which could be called upon for ‘Messiah,’ ‘Gerontius’ or the ‘Requiem’ on a day’s notice and without score or words.

A few years ago I called for a chorus to sing with that decadent orchestra, the New York Philharmonic. Finally one was sent from Toronto. Where is your Toronto?

Where is your American theater? The greatest thing you have is the English language. Why don’t you use it? Why don’t you utilize the art of Shakespeare, Congreve and Shaw? . . .

You seem to have little evidence of war here and yet you make a great fuss about raising \$100,000 to support the orchestra. That is nothing. Music is not a tangible asset. Anything useless is expensive. You should do more.¹⁰

As Mephisto laconically noted, these comments aroused furious and generally defensive debate, to the evident delight of Sir Thomas. He deliberately deployed familiar gendered stereotypes: since women were the driving force behind American musical organizing, that organization was inherently weak.

The musicologist Laurine Elkins-Marlow, writing to an interdisciplinary women’s studies audience in 1992, described her personal feeling of discovering of “another musical world” as a result of her search for women composers in the 1920s and 1930s. Although she did find composers—some of them, such as Amy Beach, now familiar historical figures—her article focuses not on the male-dominated, “superlative”-oriented

¹⁰ *Musical America*, Mephisto’s Musings, 10 March 1941, 9.

world of composition, but rather “the world of women’s music-making in communities large and small, a tremendous network of performances and musical organizations, threads interwoven across the United States and across national boundaries, lines of communication established and kept vital through the National Federation of Music Clubs, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the National League of American Pen Women, and women’s musical fraternal organizations.”¹¹

The GFWC and NLAPW, both primarily active in non-musical fields, began to emphasize and develop their members’ musical activities throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. The NLAPW began admitting composers to its ranks in around 1910; in the same year, the GFWC established a Committee for Music. The NLAPW organized performances of its members’ compositions throughout the 1920s and 1930s, notably including a Golden Jubilee Music Festival in honor of Amy Beach during the League’s 1934 biennial convention in Washington. This festival included concerts at the Congressional Country Club and the White House and a broadcast from the United States Marine barracks. In keeping with the League’s professional orientation, its activities focused on highlighting the activities of its members. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs, on the other hand, designed its musical activities to benefit the nonprofessional elements of its membership. Its Committee for Music emphasized comprehension, listening, and other features of what would soon be called “appreciation.” Anne Oberndorfer, Music Chairman in the 1920s, augmented her Federation activity with contributions to *Ladies Home Journal* and *Fruit, Garden, and Home*, and a series of radio broadcasts entitled “Hearing America First.” The GFWC

¹¹ Laurine Elkins-Marlow, “‘Music at Every Meeting’: Music in the National League of American Pen Women and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1920–1940,” in *Politics, Gender, and the Arts: Women, the Arts, and Society*, eds. Ronald Dotterer and Susan Bowers (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1992), 185–190.

established musical loan libraries, organized contests and competitions, and created educational programs for children.¹²

The activities of explicitly nonprofessional organizations like the NFMC and the GFWC fall uneasily under the category of “patronage.” Patronage normally refers to a more or less direct form of financial support for economically disadvantaged artists by individual, economically advantaged patrons, or in some cases by governments or organizations. For example, Carol Oja begins her discussion of women patrons and activists in 1920s New York with portraits of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Alma Morgenthau Wertheim, both wealthy, well-born socialites. Describing the former, Oja comments that “the Whitneys and the Vanderbilts had strong awareness of an obligation to distribute their wealth,” prompting Gertrude, a Vanderbilt by birth and a Whitney by marriage, to do just so, supporting the career of Edgard Varèse and sponsoring the International Composers’ Guild from its foundation in 1921.¹³ Wertheim’s patronage activities involved more personal participation, particularly after the launch of the League of Composers, in which she took a direct organizing role. She sat on the board, contributed her personal furniture for the set of an early League opera production, and contributed her own artwork for the cover of the League’s journal, the *League of Composers Review*, all in addition to substantial financial support.¹⁴

Patronage is nominally a one-way activity: the patron contributes to the artist without expectation of return on investment, motivated by a desire to “distribute wealth,” to foster a community, to support a particular favorite, to promote a cause such as avant-

¹² Elkins-Marlow, ““Music at Every Meeting,”” 190.

¹³ Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 204.

¹⁴ Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 205–206.

garde music, and so forth. In the European aristocratic or post-aristocratic world in which patronage thrived, the “return on investment” took the form of respect, deference, loyalty, and so forth. As Oja describes, however, the 1920s modernists gave no such return to their female patrons. Quite the contrary. In 1920, the critic Paul Rosenfeld specifically blamed the prominence of “patronesses” for, as Oja paraphrases, “contaminat[ing] the very art that they nurtured. They made it ‘lightly social’ rather than heavily intellectual.”¹⁵ He was not alone; Oja also documents unambiguously anti-female statements by the critic W. J. Henderson, the artist Miguel Covarrubias, Marc Blitzstein, Nicolas Slonimsky, George Antheil, and numerous unnamed critics. “By now it should be clear,” Oja concludes, “that Antheil and some of his contemporaries were lashing out at the very hands that supported them. Consistently, it was only the male perspective on this gender struggle that gained a forum.”¹⁶

As Oja briefly explores, amateur societies and social musical organizations provided an alternative to the dichotomized composer-patroness world. The National Federation of Music Clubs specifically denied the label “women’s organization:”

Since its early history, made by women, the Federation has often been mistakenly considered a women’s organization. When biennial festival seasons arrive, convention attendants are forcefully reminded of the numerous memberships held by men. With the sincere desire to promote the best interests of musical progress throughout America, the National Federation of Music Clubs has definitely announced itself as an organization of men and women, boys and girls, and withdrawn membership from organizations which classify it as a women’s organization.¹⁷

It was no secret that the Federation President was a woman, the chairmen of most Federation departments were women, the majority of Federation members were women,

¹⁵ Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 222.

¹⁶ Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 226.

¹⁷ Julia Ober, President’s Page, *Music Clubs Magazine*, November-December 1937, 5

and of that, as President Ober noted, the Federation had been founded as a women's organization. By rejecting the label "women's organization," however, the Federation advertised its interest in moving beyond, or at least refuting, explicit gender dichotomies within its own organizational structure. The chairmen of the various Federation departments were called just that, "Chairman," whether they were men or, as were the majority, women. The Federation President was an organizer, an advocate, and a writer; she never placed any emphasis on being a woman. She, alone of the pre-1970s Presidents, is recorded in the Federation's official history with both her maiden and married names.¹⁸

A host of fascinating gender issues surrounds the history of the National Federation of Music Clubs. The history of noninterventionism, and of related movements such as pacifism, also flirts with the question of gender. Sometimes, the analogy between masculine/feminine and war/peace rises all the way to the surface. For instance, Annegret Fauser has shown that, in the aftermath of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870–1871, numerous French writers implicitly and explicitly sought to "masculinize" the image of French national identity and culture, both at home and abroad. As Fauser explains, in late-nineteenth-century France the epistemological strength of the concepts "masculine" and "feminine" was so great as to constitute a "solidified metaphor."¹⁹ As a result, discourses of military strength, of national musical identity, and of gender could freely interact. In America, more than half a century later

¹⁸ See NFMC publication AD-9-1, available at <http://nfmc-music.org/Documents/Administrative%20Division/AD-9-1.pdf>. Ober is listed as "Mrs. Vincent Hilles Ober (Julia Fuqua Ober)." Several presidents, beginning in 1971, held the title "Dr." and therefore use their own names. Only "Virginia F. Allison (Mrs. D. Clifford)," president from 1991 to 1995, is listed in the official history thus.

¹⁹ Annegret Fauser, "Gendering the Nations: the Ideologies of French Discourse on Music (1870–1914)," in *Musical Constructions of Nationalism*, eds. Harry White and Michael Murphy (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 74.

and following a similarly long fight for women's suffrage, the ideological and discursive lines between "masculine" and "feminine" were beginning to blur, a transformation no doubt eagerly embraced by Ober and some, but not all, of the women and men whose interests she represented.

By rejecting the label "women's organization," Federation President Ober denied an entire assembly of identities. She rejected the stereotyped vision of a "ladies' social club" of chattering, ineffectual housewives which Sir Thomas Beecham would use as his strawman several years later. She rejected a misdirection of the Federation's cultural and political goals towards gender rather than music. Although she did not specify what organizations had classified NFMC as a women's group, breaking with them must have involved some degree of political and ideological conflict. But, above all, her rejection represents an important facet of the NFMC's catholicity: the Federation will embrace and welcome both men and women, both boys and girls. Similarly, it would welcome both Berlin-born Americans and Chicago-born Americans, both exiles and "natives," and above all both Wagner and MacDowell.

CHAPTER 3

IDEALISM IN PRACTICE

Every February, *Musical America* gave the Federation's president two pages to express her vision for the coming year. This space became an important venue for President Ober to outline her Federation's platform. These annual columns, in conjunction with several other articles in *Musical America*, as well as the president's bimonthly space in the NFMC journal, *Music Clubs Magazine*, set forth a multifaceted but specific program of noninterventionist musical aesthetics. The articles were written for an audience comprising both specialists and nonspecialists. As a result, and in common with many contemporary works of populist musicography, the NFMC articles contain little specific technical description of musical works or styles. Rather, Ober writes as the leader of a community organization—which is precisely what the NFMC was and is. Like many such organizations, the Federation's program appeared in the form of specific campaigns and missions. These changed from year to year, and in the Federation's case from biennial convention to biennial convention, but they shared a general thrust: the development of America's musical community, and in particular the development of a noninterventionist musical community.

After the outbreak of war in 1939, the international political situation assumed greater and greater prominence within the NFMC writings. Unlike the vast majority of *Musical America's* writers, the Federation leadership did not shy from discussing the war,

and in many cases adopting outspoken political positions. As the very real possibility of American involvement in the war materialized in early 1940, Ober wrote a column entitled “A Singing Nation—America’s Mission,” outlining how the Federation would oppose the transformation of America into a belligerent power:

In a certain sense this war which touches intimately or remotely most of the civilized world has made America the custodian of arts. . . . Simultaneously gathered together in this country, for the first time in our history, are almost a majority of the great leaders in intellectual and cultural fields from all over the world. Here, in the next few years—unless the war is providentially brief—may be expected the flowering of all that is noteworthy in the arts, except for the impassioned literature that comes from the pens of those who experience at first hand the tragedy and disillusion of war. . . .

Our program in the last year has naturally been colored by the turn of events abroad. A year ago we were urging that the universal language, music, be used to interpret peoples of varying racial and national points of view to each other. . . . We still believe in the healing properties of music. We still believe that the man who sings for the sheer joy of singing [is] loath to pick up a weapon, and having done so to turn it against his fellow man.

And so our great mission in this year [1940] and the years to come is to make America a singing nation, in the belief that in that event it will never become a warlike nation.²⁰

These three paragraphs outline the core triad of the NFMC’s political program. The ability of music to unite and heal the peoples of the world through unifying cosmopolitanism; the importance of noninterventionist musical activity and cultural development for the defense of American peace and security: these poles anchor the rhetoric of musical noninterventionism. Looking across the entire period 1937-1941, we see both elements recurring in Ober’s and the Federation’s writings.

²⁰ Julia Ober, “A Singing Nation—America’s Mission,” *Musical America*, 10 February 1940, 21, 264.

Cosmopolitanism: America Harbors Europe's Émigrés

By 1940, German émigrés had been steadily trickling into America for several years. The Nazi rise to power in 1933 was already seven years in the past; since that time, thousands of German musicians—not just composers, but conductors, singers, and orchestral players as well—had come to the United States. Notices of great artists taking out citizenship papers dotted *Musical America's* “Personalities” column: singers, soloists, conductors, composers. Musicians of other nations came to America as well, of course; French, Italian, Central European, and even some English musicians had evacuated the Old World. David Josephson has documented the American domestic debate over the place of new German immigrants within the pages of the *New York Times*.²¹ The rhetoric and debate in that newspaper differs markedly from *Musical America*; the element of xenophobia and anti-immigrantism Josephson describes does not appear in *Musical America*. Rather, the magazine trembled with excitement at the possibility for artistic development the immigrants promised: better performances, better training in universities and conservatories, and above all, prestige for American music.

Americans were able to embrace both European musicians and European music through the concept of naturalization. In some cases, European artists literally became naturalized American citizens: such artists could be praised at the same time for being German, Polish, Czech, or whatever their country of origin, as well as being Americans. Several editorials in the magazine *Musical America* specifically espouse “naturalized”

²¹ David Josephson, “The Exile of European Music: Documentation of Upheaval and Immigration in the *New York Times*,” in *Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States*, eds. Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 92-152 .

music. In 1940, describing a program of the National Federation of Music Clubs, the editors described naturalization thus:

In building our cultural defenses, the soundest of all bases is a recognition of the universal character of all important music, whereby a species of international trusteeship exists, with what is beautiful and perdurable no more the property of any one people or race than any other. Let us give America its generous due, beyond anything that has been true of our music in the past; but let us hold tight to all that we have inherited from everywhere, since it is our own, and therefore American, in the same sense that our foreign-born citizens are our own, and therefore American. These citizens from abroad are an essential part of our national defense. The music that we have taken over similarly from their native countries and similarly ‘naturalized’—that is, made a part of our American cultural life—has also its place in our cultural defense. This, we are sure, is in agreement with the sound principles underlying the new movement of the federated music clubs.²²

This is a fascinating double statement. At the same moment the editors deny the traditional, European nationalism which would claim, in the context of the editorial, Wagner’s music as belonging to the German “people or race,” they also describe the music as being naturalized, as becoming part of the American nation. They are not simply appropriating “the music that we have taken over,” however, for the music’s naturalized Americanness is quite different than the proprietary Germanness here rejected. This is the end of the editorial, however, and the precise nature of the difference is never described.

An earlier editorial, from 1939, reminded American audiences of several beloved American conductors of European birth:

Americans have been scolded many times for bowing always before imported conductors and failing to give the native son a chance. . . . We pride ourselves on having the best orchestras in the world. Ought we not also to pride ourselves, in many instances, on having recognized and developed the special talents that have done so much to bring our orchestras to their position of primacy?

²² *Musical America*, “Our ‘Cultural Defenses,’” 10 November 1940, 16.

To preface the present with the past, consider the case of Theodore Thomas. It is true that he was born in Germany. But as he came to this country in his tenth year, he was as devoid of European reputation as he would have been if he had first seen the light in Peoria or Santa Fe. America made Thomas, without any help from Europe. In the same way America made Walter Damrosch, who likewise came to this country from Germany as a child. In neither case could it be said that there was any “importing” of a famous name. These were, in fact, “American” conductors from the ground up. But where does being an “American” begin—if in the tenth year, can it not also be in the fifteenth, the twenty-fifth or the thirtieth?

America’s making of conductors did not stop with Thomas and Damrosch. No better example could be pointed to than that of Leopold Stokowski, whose popularity can scarcely be said to have been second to that of any other orchestra leader throughout much of his career. Stokowski was born in England and did not come to this country until he was twenty-three years old. Then it was as an organist, not as a conductor, that he first established himself in his adopted land. America made Stokowski. He was not an “importation.” No one of our orchestras, looking for a conductor of European reputation, brought him over. . . .

Even the great fame of Arturo Toscanini as a symphonic conductor was largely built in this country. He and certain others now leading our major orchestras with conspicuous success were better known abroad as opera than symphony leaders. While it is true that the backers of America’s orchestras have combed Europe for conductors of eminence, it seems equally true that we have bestowed equal favor on those conductors whose reputations have been made principally in the United States.²³

This was a useful way to merge the NFMC’s program for the promotion of American music and its deep-set attachment to the European classics. Responding to a call for the Federation to more directly embrace American national music, Julia Ober defended the Federation’s practice of presenting “American” and “non-American” music together:

You will recall a challenge flung at us in Baltimore by Sigmund Spaeth when he exhorted us to have an all-American festival in 1941, [the year of the next NFMC Biennial] with only American music performed by American artists. We question the good we render our own composers by quarantining them, as it were. Can we have a week of nothing but American music and come away satisfied without hearing Brahms and Beethoven—and remain loyal to our own? Is music American or German or Russian or international? Shall we do what other nations have done and become satisfied nationalists, thereby defeating the purpose of our organization for the past forty-one years: to give the American composer and artist equal positions with those of the rest of the world? We are no less patriotic

²³ *Musical America*, “America, Conductor-Maker,” 10 January 1939, 16.

in listening to the best music of the entire world, and more patriotic when we place our own with it.²⁴

Ober did not idly blast “satisfied nationalists.” That type of nationalism is precisely the opposite of noninterventionist cosmopolitanism. This is why the term “isolationist” is particularly inappropriate in this context. Some American noninterventionists did espouse a form of nationalist isolationism, in which American composers, businesses, industries, trade, and everything else would indeed be cut off and quarantined from their European counterparts. However, this was not a defining characteristic of noninterventionism, and it was certainly not embraced by the NFMC.²⁵

Another *Music Clubs Magazine* missive reinforced both the broad scope of “Americanness” and the Federation’s tactful political footwork:

I recently talked with Dr. Koussevitzky in Boston and listened to his expressed belief in American composers and young artists, of his enthusiastic hopes for Tanglewood and its aid to talented musicians. He said his faith and interest in American music was a part of his belief in progress; that the music of this new America is progress. And then the great musicians stated, ‘I am a Russian, you know.’ ‘No,’ was my reply, ‘you are an American.’ We welcome all peoples who come to us with faith in those things for which America stands. We need the enrichment their talents can give to our cultural life. Therefore, it is humane to urge the actual application of the policy adopted by the Board of Directors in offering collaboration to the National Jewish Refugee Committee and by surveying the needs of the outer districts, those districts removed from the congested cities. An intelligent investigation may discover [a] need for teachers of instruments, other than the piano, orchestra players, voice teachers and coaches in distant hamlets, mining towns, and rural areas which is not answered by our own musicians. This might be life itself to the Refugee and to us.²⁶

²⁴ Julia Ober, President’s Page, *Music Clubs Magazine*, September-October 1939, 3.

²⁵ Wall, *Inventing the “American Way,”* gives a good historical overview of the construction in the late 1930s of an American national identity that did not depend on “nationalism.” The relationship between noninterventionism and nationalism in America remains to this day deeply problematic. The most prominent noninterventionist organization by 1941 was the America First Committee, which dissolved immediately following Pearl Harbor. For a partial but fascinating account of the AFC, see Ruth Sarles, *A Story of America First: The Men and Women Who Opposed U.S. Intervention in World War II*, ed. Bill Kauffmann (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), written by an AFC member. See also James Schneider, *Should America Go to War? The Debate over Foreign Policy in Chicago, 1939–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

This carefully constructed statement threads through a dense thicket of political issues. The Music Teachers National Association, a long-standing ally of the NFMC, had long been in open conflict with the Federal Music Project of the Works Project Administration, claiming that its supposedly-charitable activities cost MTNA members their jobs.²⁷

Embracing integrationist cosmopolitanism opened for the Federation a vast range of musics and cultures with which to articulate their ideological goals. Open tolerance of German culture allowed for the preservation of the great German canon of music, but more importantly it allowed Ober and the Federation to embrace music of foreign origins within a specifically and explicitly American ideology. Looked at from the other direction, this attitude also enabled the Federation to protect German culture itself. Since, naturally, many Federation members and others who loved German music also had a certain affinity for German culture more broadly, there needed to be some way to express support for and to preserve German culture itself, as well as the cultures of other embattled nations, friend and foe. Cosmopolitanism filled this gap and gave America a new form of “war work”: stewarding the cultural heritage of Europe, while Europe itself was embroiled in war and unable to preserve its own history.

Anne Gannett, the Federation’s Chairman of Legislation, called in June of 1941 for the Federation’s members to unite for political action to secure government support for music. Gannett invoked the cause of American leadership throughout dark times to convey to her readers the importance of developing America’s musical community.

²⁶ Julia Ober, President’s Page, *Music Clubs Magazine*, November-December 1940, 3.

²⁷ The December, 1938, MTNA meeting, for instance, included a “lively” session in which that organization’s president, Edwin Hughes, as well as New York Singing Teachers Association president Homer Mowe and several others criticized the WPA/FMP for offering free teaching, competing with their members. Charles Seeger and William Mayfarth, assistant directors of the FMP, offered rebuttals. The MTNA issued a resolution opposing any Federal legislation providing “free instruction in music.” “Music Teachers Convene in Washington,” *Musical America* 10 January, 1939, 27. Walter Damrosch and his proposal for a “bureau of fine arts” provided the third corner of this particular debate.

There are those who will read these words [that is, a call for political action] and say instantly, ‘But that is not our field. We are a cultural organization. Let us concentrate on music and other artistic interests while others concern themselves with the struggle between capital and labor, the problems of taxation, the extent and character of our national defense.’

A year and a half ago I might have agreed with them. But that was before barbarian hordes had swept over much of Europe, razing the temples of culture as they marched; before the red banners of the Nazi flew atop the Parthenon and the representatives of one of the oldest civilizations in the world were forced to flee to an island refuge to escape destruction from land, sea and sky.

When the first hob-nailed German boot rang upon the pavements of Vienna, the banners of European culture began an ignominious descent. And the holocaust is widespread. Peoples who are starving have little time for music and art. Poverty and despair and noble creative endeavor do not go hand in hand. And the sheer force of relentless logic tells us that if America is to become the cultural stronghold of the world, we must uphold the fundamental institutions which make the preservation of that culture possible.²⁸

Imagining America as a torch-bearer of the proud European tradition was by no means an NFMC innovation. In 1940, for instance, the Music Director of the National League of American Pen Women, Grace Warner Gulesian, urged that organization’s members, musicians and nonmusicians alike, to redouble their support for music on account of the increasingly dire prospects for music on the European continent. “The widespread suppression of musical activity in Europe because of the holocaust of political tyrannies has laid upon America a new responsibility to hold more firmly to artistic traditions and to develop a greater musical future. Europe has carried the brilliant torch of culture for centuries and has handed it to America to keep burning.”²⁹ This sort of explicitly progressive imagery dovetailed nicely with America’s awakening sense of world prominence.

²⁸ Anne Gannett, “A Plea for Legislation to Uphold American Culture,” *Musical America*, June 1941, 6, 58.

²⁹ Grace Gulesian, “Say It with Music!” *NLAPW Official Bulletin*, December 1940, 21, cited in Elkins-Marlow, “Music at Every Meeting,” 188.

Our Cultural Defenses

The conceptual framework of cosmopolitan custodianship developed into an argument for American noninterventionism. Cosmopolitanism allowed America to welcome both exiled musicians and “exiled” music without undermining American identity in any way. Cultural custodianship gave America a mission and task for the war, a focus for its industrial and artistic energies. The concept of “cultural defenses” comprised these and many other facets of the noninterventionist program. The February 10, 1941 issue of the magazine *Musical America* carried, under the headline “Building America’s Cultural Defenses,” Julia Ober’s confident forecast for the Federation’s noninterventionist activities in 1941. Mrs. Ober herself appears in a photograph to the side of the column, lounging informally and comfortably in an elegant armchair but with a calm smile of confidence and determination. The subtitle explains that the Federation “plans [a] major program to preserve [the] safety of [the] social and artistic heritages of all peoples.” As President Ober herself reminds her readers, “the lives of organizations, as of individuals, cannot remain unaffected by such a crisis as is sweeping over the world.” In early 1941, although it was not yet clear that the United States would inevitably join the war, no American could forget that troops were roaming across North Africa, Nationalists and Communists were fighting in China, France was already under Nazi domination, the United States Congress was considering the Lend-Lease Act that would provide the Allies with weapons and supplies, and Luftwaffe bombers were devastating England. How could culture, music, and even European-born classical music defend America in such a dark hour?

Ober's column begins with the threat to England, then suffering under of the Blitz. Barely a month after the devastating incendiary attacks of 29 and 30 December, 1940, which devastated London, Ober argued that English cultural pride formed the bulwark of that country's defense, and that America had to develop similar fortitude to survive the war.

No desire to preserve the material England—factories and armament works, shipyards and railways, tractors, harvesters and storehouses for grain—could have inspired the almost super-human courage with which the British have met the hail of fire from the skies. Not even the desire to keep intact those great historical landmarks, many of which perished in the fire in the City of London, could have prompted such an almost holy zeal. What the British people sought and still seek to preserve is that intangible but glorious thing which is the spirit of England; the tradition of freedom for which they have fought, and to which they have won through in the long, bloody centuries of English history. They have endured and suffered to keep free men free; to insure to every Englishman the right to enjoy the culture, the religion, the opportunity for unhampered spiritual growth which were bought at so dear a price by his forefathers. It is a similarly aroused spiritual desire which must be the highest bulwark of our own national defense.

That is why, months ago, our organization sounded the slogan "Build America's cultural defenses." That is why leaders in all the departments of our great organization, with its more than half a million members and its 5,000 or more branches in centers small and large throughout the United States began to shape a program designed to bring about a spiritual awakening in America. For keeping pace with the program for material defense, we felt, should be a program designed to educate Americans to an appreciation of their own priceless heritage, a program which would teach them to evaluate properly the freedom that is theirs before—as tragically happened in so many European countries—it is too late.³⁰

These paragraphs outline the two directions of cultural defenses: first, a national pride, exemplified by the "spirit of England," which is itself worthy of defense; second, the ability of that pride to drive men and women to the great and small heroism necessary to survive the war. In order to construct America's own cultural defenses, the Federation would, through its long-standing education programs, build pride in America's cultural heritage. That "spiritual desire," for the preservation of American cultural values, would

³⁰ Julia Ober, "Building America's Cultural Defenses," *Musical America*, 10 February 1941, 21.

contribute directly to the defense of America in every other regard, by building morale, preserving democracy and public order against totalitarian impulses, and, for noninterventionists, by keeping America out of the war.

The construction of American national pride occupied the minds of many writers throughout the 1930s, particularly after the rise of fascism and the outbreak of war. The NFMC shared a discursive space with dozens of other organizations, large and small, and with thousands of individual writers. The historian Wendy Wall traces the thread of American national identity from 1935 to 1955. She describes, as one of the case studies in her chapter “In Search of Common Ground,” the work of American sociologists and anthropologists in the years before and during World War II to construct a “national character” strikingly similar to the foundation of the NFMC’s “cultural defenses.” The anthropologist Margaret Mead and her husband Gregory Bateson, returning to America in 1939 after years of fieldwork in East Asia, “became convinced that it was time to turn their expertise ‘to the problems of our own society.’ As they sought to do this over the next few years, they helped resurrect the concept that they and other cultural anthropologists had worked for two decades to undermine: the concept of national character.”³¹ This national character needed repair and retro-fitting in many ways: public morale needed to be lifted up out of the Great Depression, strife between religious and ethnic groups needed to be eliminated, and many other conflicts great and small needed resolution. The social engineering undertaken by Mead and other academics was seen as vital war work:

Rather than focusing on the differences between ethnocultural groups in U.S. society, she and her colleagues now focused on what differentiated Americans from Germans and Russians from Japanese. Mead and her colleagues took this

³¹ Wendy Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 87.

step because they believed strongly in the righteousness and efficacy of social engineering. Total war, Mead suggested, tested a nation's national character.³²

As a result, Mead studied and reinforced the assimilation of immigrant groups within America, worked to build a secure national unity that would withstand any internal or external attack.

Julia Ober and the NFMC also strove for American unity. The threat of war gave powerful thrust to the cosmopolitanism that had long been central to the Federation's willingness to embrace foreign-born composers, musicians, and music. In the Great War two short decades previously, the music of Wagner had been suppressed along nationalistic lines: Wagner, a German, was an enemy. Ober and other musical noninterventionists rejected that logic:

Those of my readers whose memory goes back to what we are fatalistically beginning to call "the first World War" will recall the peaks of prejudice which were reached at that time; will remember that the music of certain nations was banned from public performance and that the language and literature of those nations were taboo in our public schools. Heaven forbid that there should be a repetition of that futile, emotional gesture. Those who have breadth of culture and experience know that great art, great literature and great music transcend racial barriers and have a universality that makes all nations one.³³

The logic of musical universality here parallels the program of unified American culture. Notably, however, Ober rejected the "prejudice" against "certain nations." This language addresses the tenets of racial nationalism that spurred Wagner, and spurred the denial of Wagner along racial lines.

Like her colleagues in the social sciences, Ober responded to the totalitarian threat by reaffirming the strength of the United States in both political and cultural spheres:

It would be unfortunate, however, if my readers were to deduce. . . that the Federation is animated by any narrow, nationalistic spirit. At the outset of this

³² Wall, *Inventing the "American Way,"* 90.

³³ Julia Ober, "Building America's Cultural Defenses," *Musical America*, 10 February 1941, 230.

article, when I first referred to the Loyalty Crusade, I said that it had two facets, upon one of which only I would touch at that time. It has a second, and equally important purpose: the welding together of the diverse elements in our population, not by imposing upon them an enforced Americanism, but by making generous acknowledgment of the contribution their various races and nationalities have made to the rich and varied tapestry of American life.

America has often and truly been referred to as a melting pot, but usually the reference has been to the political rather than cultural. However, it remains true that the United States has had a unique opportunity to utilize the gifts of the geniuses of all nations and that a blend of the cultures of many races, the Teutonic, the Anglo-Saxon, the Latin, the Aryan and the Semitic, the Oriental and the Occidental, constitutes the foundation stone of the culture of the New World.³⁴

The melting pot was a powerful metaphor for defense. A melting pot does not homogenize or weaken the components which go into it. Rather, what emerges from the furnace is stronger than what went in. German culture may have been strong, may have boasted a long list of great geniuses, particularly after the annexation of Austria; however, through the conceptual framework of noninterventionist cosmopolitanism, the entire strength of that culture was available to the United States. And the United States, unlike Germany, was not crippled by a racist and nationalistic dictator. Therefore, by combining the strengths of “the Aryan and the Semitic” in a way that Nazi Germany had abandoned, the United States became, in culture as in other fields, the world superpower. Such, at least, was the NFMC’s ambition.

³⁴ Ober, “Building America’s Cultural Defenses,” 230.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The 1941 NFMC Biennial Convention in Los Angeles, California was the last under Julia Ober's leadership. Its slogan was "Loyalty through Music." Ober reminded her members who were about to depart for the convention of the relevance and importance of music and their cultural activity to a world and nation in danger:

The emphasis of this administration has been continuously on strengthening foundations; on deepening loyalties. Repetition of the message I sent to state conventions this spring is not amiss for us who assemble in the twenty-second biennial convention of the National Federation of Music Clubs in the City of Los Angeles: only in proportion to the services we render to a world in need do we justify our right to existence. So shall we gauge ourselves in this present complex state of world chaos. Our belief in culture will be measured by the strength we add to cultural defense. Our loyalty to country and mankind will be proven by the care we give to our daily program. The National Federation of Music Clubs has strengthened the cultural life of a nation since its founders' meeting in 1897. You members in your separate communities are now that Federation. Today *you* will justify its existence. In so far as your faith is placed in the future, in your country, in God and truth, so *is* the Federation.³⁵

She judged the value of the Federation, and implicitly of her own term as President, not by the money given to composers and performers, not even by the quality of the Federation's many programs. Rather, Ober hoped and believed that the NFMC she led played a vital role in the development of American cultural strength. She had worked intently for four years, traveling across the country, speaking to perhaps hundreds of Federation clubs and many of the State Federations, organizing and leading the Federation, writing these and many other articles. The underlying goal for which she

³⁵ Julia Ober, President's Page, *Music Clubs Magazine*, May-June 1941, 9.

fought—keeping America at peace—did not come to pass. A few short months after she left the presidency, Pearl Harbor ended American noninterventionism permanently. But the vitality and courage with which she promoted her belief in the value and moral force of music echo in the pages of *Musical America*, *Music Clubs Magazine*, and the other repositories of her words.

With this study I hope to have lifted one corner of the veil covering the American reception of classical music. Much ink has been spilled for well over a century about the strength, weakness, death, or survival of “serious music” in the United States. This handwringing tends to focus on relative levels of attendance, funding, etc. of large symphonic organizations and venues. But music can be alive in other ways, as well. The musical life the National Federation of Music Clubs attempted to foster did, of course, orbit around performing ensembles and around composers. But writing or reading music was not the end of the story. Rather, the rhetoric of noninterventionism illustrates an even more important form of life which Julia Ober and her cofederationists breathed into American musical life. Music could be a force for social change.

We think that music has a greater mission than merely to create a friendly accord among individuals. We believe it has an influence upon the world as a whole; that peoples whose lives are devoted to the cultivation of music and the arts will have less time to think of the ugly business of war. And so, in these days [mid-1938] of disturbing headlines, indicating that at almost any moment nations may be swept into the chaos of another world conflict, we are urging that the gospel of music be invoked to interpret nations to one another and to make them forget their differences. We feel that such organizations as our own, whose program is primarily cultural and spiritual, have an especial obligation to preserve their poise and sanity when so much of the world seems hovering on the verge of madness. So we are asking that greater stress than ever before shall be laid upon the value of song as a medium for spreading a message of peace and good-will.³⁶

³⁶ Julia Ober, President’s Page, *Music Clubs Magazine*, September-October 1938, 5.

Ober used even more focused language in her 1940 *Musical America* column “A Singing Nation—America’s Mission,” in which she called for America to become “a singing nation, in the belief that in that event it will never become a warlike nation.”³⁷

President Roosevelt himself echoed the noninterventionist call for cultural defense in a 1941 open letter to the Federation printed in *Musical America*. Roosevelt, the leader of American *interventionists*, displayed in this text his political mastery and illustrated the knife-edge between noninterventionism and interventionism by paralleling the Federation rhetoric in most but not all regards. His letter reads, in full:

Please extend to your members my sincere and cordial greetings upon the occasion of your Twenty-Second Biennial Convention in Los Angeles. I hope that your conference will do much to place in clear perspective the importance of music in our national life and the contribution which music can make to our national unity and morale.

Today your organization can help to lend the inspiration of great music to great causes. It can help to inspire a fervor for the spiritual values in our way of life; and thus strengthen democracy against those forces which would subjugate and enthrall mankind. It can help promote tolerance of minority groups in our midst by showing their cultural contributions to our American life.

Because music knows no barriers of language; because it recognizes no impediments to free intercommunications; because it speaks a universal tongue, music can make us all more vividly aware of that common humanity which is ours and which shall one day unite the nations of the world in one great brotherhood.³⁸

The language is similar, but the message is not. Music will not strengthen democracy against the trumpets of war, but rather against the enthralling forces of tyranny. Music will inspire a fervor for spiritual values, for national unity and brotherhood; but that unity and brotherhood was to be universalizing rather than cosmopolitan or noninterventionist. He distinguishes between the cultural contributions of “minority

³⁷ Ober, “A Singing Nation,” 264. See p. 16 for a more extensive quotation.

³⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “A Message from Mr. Roosevelt,” *Musical America*, June 1941, 3.

groups” and “our American life.” The core of Ober’s vision of the effect of music and song is its ability to “interpret nations to one another,” in the 1938 article, or to “interpret peoples of varying racial and national points of view to each other” in 1940.³⁹ Her use of the verb *interpret* is critical: it has a sense of egalitarianism or non-agency, a feeling of mediation among equals. Ober, at her most forceful, speaks of “the value of song as a medium for spreading a message of peace and good-will.” Roosevelt, on the contrary, believes that music reveals an inner essence of “common humanity” which will unite the nations. Unite, not interpret; a brotherhood with “minorities,” not a cosmopolitan aggregate of diverse races and nationalities. Roosevelt’s music is a tool of war. Ober’s is not.

³⁹ Ober, “A Singing Nation,” 264.

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