



Transposition

Musique et Sciences Sociales

6 | 2016

Lignes d'écoute, écoute en ligne

Carol A. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, 336 p.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/1443>

DOI: 10.4000/transposition.1443

ISSN: 2110-6134

Publisher

CRAL - Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage

Electronic reference

Christina Taylor Gibson, « Carol A. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream* », *Transposition* [Online], 6 | 2016, Online since 20 March 2017, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/1443> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.1443>

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.



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REFERENCES

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- 1 Carol Hess begins her most recent book, *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream*, with a question, “What do we in the United States know about Latin American art music, and how do we know it?” In posing the question and answering it, Hess purposefully links her work to Post-colonial scholars concerned with the artistic and cultural manifestations of power dynamics including Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and, most specifically and directly, Kofi Agawu¹. Apart from a pointed complaint about “the only single-volume textbook on Latin American music in the United States,” (p. 5) Hess is less interested in direct deconstructive analysis, as one often finds in works by the post-structuralist/ post-colonialist authors cited above. Rather, she celebrates an alternate narrative about music and composers found in U.S. music criticism from the late 1920s through the 1960s. The earlier approach, to which she applies Agawu’s term, “sameness embracing,” is oppositional to the emphasis on difference, particularly as seen in the search for national traits endemic of scholarly literature on Latin American music written from the Cold War to the present day, which, she asserts, is both “essentializing,” and “exoticizing.” Hess finds that

when we compare Good Neighbor-era sensibilities in the United States with those of the latter part of the twentieth century, we behold nothing short of an epistemological chasm. In the former period, U.S. critics praised Latin American

music for its cosmopolitan universalism . . . Since the cold war, however, critics and scholars generally became preoccupied with Latin American difference. (p. 4)

- 2 In many respects Hess's thesis resonates as both revolutionary and accurate, for it is true that in many texts the search for distinguishing national characteristics tends to overwhelm genuine engagement with the music of Latin America, obscuring how both composers and audiences perceived the music of their own time. But while her criticism of contemporary scholarship seems logical, the proposed solution implies a gargantuan task while (perhaps) introducing unanticipated baggage and difficulty of its own. First, there is the matter of terminology, for the writers examined in the book had no knowledge of Agawu's sameness; instead they viewed music and culture through their own contemporary lenses. As indicated by the title of the book, Hess understands the quest for sameness and subsequent movement away from it as motivated by transnational politics, the workings of which hum behind critics' favored terms like "sublimation" and "universalism." The reader must then make the logical leap with her that Agawu's sameness is accurately applied to U.S. discourse of seventy-five years earlier—quite a leap when one considers that Agawu's mode of analysis seeks to upend the hidden language of imperialism, and Hess's period of study is one of U.S. power formation in Latin America.
- 3 Second, the period she seeks to cover coincides with the epoch of the great newspaper, when every urbanite or would-be urbanite read and digested at least one (and sometimes two or three) daily newspaper, to speak nothing of the weekly and monthly publications. In other words, the source material is overwhelming. It would be nearly impossible to construct a comprehensive history of Latin American music in the U.S. using concert reviews and related press material. Instead, in order to sharpen her focus and limit the possibilities, Hess selects a series of moments or case studies that she terms "snapshots". After an overview of Pan Americanism as a political movement, the narrative begins with Carlos Chávez's early days in New York and the premiere of his ballet, *H.P.* (1932), then moves to an extended examination of performances and reviews of Hector Villa-Lobos's music in the U.S. from 1939 through the late 1940s, then an unpacking of the press around Alberto Ginastera's *Bomarzo* (1967), and, last, an account of the politics around U.S. composer Frederic Rzewski's 36 Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated." Each of the snapshots is an intriguing and detailed piece of scholarship, often upending inherited narratives about the specific moments and the pieces they feature, but the question remains: are six moments featuring three Latin American composers sufficient to prove sweeping statements about the "epistemological chasm" between then and now?

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- 5 Before returning to both challenges presented above, we will take a closer look at the snapshots and at the conclusions derived from each. The first chapter after the introduction is the shortest; its snapshot is the only one that does not focus on a performance. Instead its central event is an exchange recorded in the correspondence between Gilbert Chase and Alberto Ginastera about the meaning of the word "American." This exploration then leads to a discussion of the roots of Pan Americanism and provides a basic history of the discourse. It also establishes the common Latin American view of the U.S. as an imperialist actor. Thus in certain contexts, the search for sameness might be a demonstration of power rather than the methodological tool to counter colonialist bias that Agawu envisions. By the same

token, in the material Hess studies, difference, rather than sameness, can be anti-hegemonic. Countries in the Americas had another power source to consider, that of Europe. As Hess writes, “the notion of an American art separate from Europe remains a central although controversial principle [of Pan Americanism].”

- 6 This chapter would seem to provide the best opportunity to elucidate the varied power dynamics within Latin America, as it is the only chapter to deal with the whole region of Latin America vis-à-vis the U.S. But, while Hess does establish the complexity of the situation, she does not explore the distance between, for example, the Mexican perception of U.S. power, which tends to see the country’s influence as omnipresent, and the Argentinean, which tends to vacillate in the importance it accords the U.S. Some of this work occurs in the chapters to come, but much of it remains unarticulated in her text, leaving it unclear when U.S. critics considered national concerns and identity and when they conflated all of Latin America.
- 7 The specific target of the second snapshot is the April 22, 1928, Copland-Sessions concert featuring Chávez’s third piano sonata and three sonatinas. As Leonora Saavedra has observed², and Hess echoes, the press response to this performance focused on Chávez’s primitiveness and Otherness to a greater extent than before. In this way, both the press about the performance and Chávez’s resulting public identity formation in the U.S., differed sharply from that in Mexico, where he cultivated a reputation as a modernist *enfant terrible*. Yet critics also noted, accurately in this case, the imprint of Classical models—and his greatest advocates, particularly Paul Rosenfeld—threaded together both the (neo)Classical and the Primitive/ Mexicanist readings into one totality Hess terms “Ur-classicism”. That is, a classicism that reaches back before European influence to a pure, primitive time. Rosenfeld’s discourse is linked to the fashion for Mexican things and ideas, one that idealizes both the place and the people as redemptive because of their pre-modern and anti-European traits. Although it accounts for the flexibility artists and audiences found under the heading of “primitivism”, Rosenfeld’s ideal completely ignored who Chávez was (a middle-class educated urbanite) and wanted to be (part of the cosmopolitan artistic elite), but Hess’s point is that it privileges sameness to the extent that Rosenfeld saw in Chávez what he wished to see in New World musical life writ large: a counterbalance to European cultural hegemony through reference to a mythic past.
- 8 The very offering up of the idealized Mexican example was a sort of difference-making; the clear implication was that the northeastern cities were, regrettably, distant and removed from the Ur-classical. So Aaron Copland, writing in a similar vein, felt comfortable describing Chávez’s music as “distinctly Mexican” and “absolute music”. Additionally, as Hess admits, Rosenfeld and Copland are two voices among many, and there were several who privileged unmitigated difference. Olin Downes stated that Chávez “used Mexican Indian themes with primitive joy, but without softness or mercy. If he did not scalp, he tomahawked the keyboard . . .”³ Nonetheless inasmuch as sameness analysis is the willful searching for likeness where distance and difference might seem more accessible, her analysis proves that certain modes of criticism during the period offer fertile ground.
- 9 Bolstered by support from the business and social elite as well as Leopold Stokowski’s promotional machine, critics accelerated their reading of Chávez’s music as Pan American during the production of *H.P.*, despite contrary meanings embedded in the

score and artwork. As relayed by Phillip Leidy to the Philadelphia audience, the basic scenario seems to lay the groundwork for Pan Americanism:

The Ballet H.P. symbolizes the relations of the Northern Regions with those of the Tropics, and shows their inter-relationships... The Ballet depicts the fact that the North needs the Tropics, just as the Tropics need the machinery of the North, and attempts to harmonize the result.⁴

10 But, as I have argued elsewhere⁵, Rivera and Chávez may have had other, less-obvious implications in mind for their production. Using Daniel Belnap's analysis of Diego Rivera's sets and costumes for the production, Hess calls Chávez's positioning here "dialectical indigenism"; that is, imagery or musical language that can be both pre-modern and ultra-modern at the same time, and, in both cases, anti-capitalist/northern. There are moments in the score where Rivera and Chávez seem to be working from the same script, but there are other moments where they seem to differ sharply; regardless, it is true that some critics searched ardently for a certain variety of Pan American sameness in the production, albeit one that confirmed Northern power and sophistication, and that their disappointments were not just a result of the numerous performance difficulties, but also due to the muddled messaging.

11 Both the center and the gem of this book is the detailed and extensive account of Villa-Lobos in the U.S., fueled by the snapshot examinations of the 1939 World's Fair and the 1941/42 Walt Disney productions, *Saludos Amigos* and *South of the Border*. We are brought from the composer's exile in France, through his return to Brazil just in time for the rise of the Vargas regime, and on to his engagement with the U.S. public. Along the way there is detailed and revealing analysis of *Choros* No.s 4 and 8 and *Bachianas brasileiras* No.s 2, 4, 5, 7, all works performed in the U.S. between 1939 and 1947. Although she rarely mentions him by name, Hess's detailed reception takes aim at ethnomusicologist Gerard Béhague with particular vigor; he was the author of the textbook on Latin American music alluded to in the introduction, a specialist on the music of Villa-Lobos, and one of the proponents of a nationalist reading of the Brazilian composer's work. Yet, as Béhague and others have observed, many of these works contain elements that might be read as both national and universal⁶. Hess writes

Villa-Lobos sought to elevate folk ("racial") music. Much the way Brazilian architects were expected to achieve the "unmistakably Brazilian and, at the same time universal", Villa-Lobos channeled "racial music" into what is surely the most blatantly universalist opus by any Latin American composer, the *Bachianas brasileiras*. Composed between 1930 and 1945, the exact time frame of the first Vargas regime, the nine-work series drew on Brazilian music to honor Johann Sebastian, whose music was, Villa-Lobos explained, "a kind of universal folkloric source, rich and profound . . . linking all peoples." (p. 98)

12 Other works, like *Choros* No. 8, belong more properly to Villa-Lobos's *sauvage* period in which he used Brazilian-tinged primitivism to appeal to a French audience. As Hess's account elucidates, audiences and critics in the U.S. were justified in seeing Villa-Lobos's music as part national and part universal, or, in certain instances, perhaps even an example of the national sublimated in service of the universal. That is precisely what occurred; despite frequently misunderstanding the origins of the composer's melodies, critics heard the work as by turns "jungle," rural, and cosmopolitan. Their evaluations varied according to the material in the work, but also according to the spirit of the times, becoming increasingly fixated on the universal during the war years, to such an extent that the search for sublimated nationalism could overwhelm attentive hearing of the work in question. The principle voice in this discourse was

Virgil Thomson, then serving as music editor for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Thomson's praise is sparing, but, à propos Hess's argument, groups Villa-Lobos with international modernism rather than Brazilian *sauvagerie*, calling it a "musical likeness of Paris, France" with code words for that stance woven in elsewhere (i.e. "charming", "bright"). The less Francophone Downes also focused on the cosmopolitan features of Villa-Lobos's music, proclaiming the "astonishing relation" of *Bachiana* No. 5 to "the style of solo passages in the cantatas and passions of the Leipzig master" without any mention of the folk music also used in the work (p. 125). Later, when the perception of unity across the hemisphere weakened during the post-war years, Villa-Lobos's "universalism" was disposed of in favor of a hearing of the "popular" and "Hollywood" elements (p. 136). Throughout, despite her dedication to a thesis about the rise and fall of universalism, Hess's readings are nuanced and multi-faceted, showing how dual strains of difference and sameness flow through the U.S. criticism of this era.

- 13 Woven into her examination of Villa-Lobos's music and U.S. reception is a thoughtful and detailed investigation of the cultural forces surrounding the composer and his critics. Overtly political forces like Nelson A. Rockefeller's OIAA and Vargas regime aesthetics are described alongside a brief foray into the soft politics of "tourist music" by Aaron Copland (*El Salón Mexico*), George Gershwin (*Cuban Overture*), and Cowell (*Grandma's Rhumba*, etc.). Disney's *Saludos Amigos* and *South of the Border* are presented as endemic of the times, combining commercialism, politics, and culture. In their attention to context; flexible, attentive reading of the source material; and clear writing; Hess's middle chapters serve as exemplars of a complex, culturally-contextualized reception history.
- 14 The following chapter on Ginastera's opera *Bomarzo* takes as its subject the positive reception of the work in Washington, D.C. In so doing, it approaches the same tangle of reception as Esteban Buch's *The Bomarzo Affair. Ópera, pervisión y dictadura*, with a more concentrated look at U.S. motivation to balance Buch's Argentine-focused narrative.⁷ At first glance, the scene both authors describe seems inexplicable—an opera about the sexual difficulties of Pier Francesco Orsini, a 16th-century Italian duke, given a standing ovation in the conservative politically-minded capital of the U.S. And yet, as Hess deftly demonstrates, more than the music itself, Ginastera's upward career trajectory in the U.S., the various high modernist compositional devices which spoke to the fashion for abstraction, and the unstable political situation in Argentina at the time of the premiere (May 19, 1967, a year after Juan Carlos Onganía's coup), persuaded the audience to display an unusual degree of unified appreciation for the work and its composer (and to overlook the salacious subject matter). Critics rallied behind the work with language that signaled a shift in criteria. Now, instead of classicism or universalism, valued attributes included intellectual rigor, abstraction, independence. This was not only a shift from the praise heaped on Villa-Lobos, but also a change in approach toward Ginastera and his music, which had been considered light "rum and coke" music just a decade earlier. The sexual themes in the work were explained away as signs of artistic sublimation; any nationalism could be similarly justified. Like the changes within Villa-Lobos's reception, it was not only the critics that had shifted, but the music as well. Yet in both cases it appears these changes in cultural perspective motivated a reconsideration of both the composer and his entire body of work and, Hess would argue, it was the later critical evaluation that shaded scholarship,

influencing scholars like Malena Kuss to evaluate *Bomarzo* according to its compositional devices rather than its call for shock or spectacle⁸.

- 15 The last “snapshot” is the only one featuring a piece by a U.S. composer. The chapter begins with a concert of *nueva canción* music by the group Quilapayún at Hunter College, but its true focus is Frederic Rzewski’s *36 Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!”* by *Sergio Ortega and Quilapayún* for solo piano (1975). The song at the center of both the concert and Rzewski’s piece operated as a socialist mass song, first in support of the government of Salvador Allende, and later as a protest of the (U.S. supported) coup that unseated him in favor of the right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet. Within Chile, public protest was prohibited, and the *nueva canción* movement suppressed but, somewhat ironically, since the movement was pointedly local and anti-capitalist, it was buoyed and given continued life by supporters outside the country and its specific discourse (p. 175-176). Thus, through Rzewski and other sympathetic hearers, it became part of a new Pan Americanism that was now misaligned with the U.S.’s political aims. Although Nixon and his anti-Communist cohort would have preferred such protestations to be consigned to the circumscribed, idealistic leftism of the college campus, the political activism of the campus was, in that historical moment, spilling onto the city square, disrupting narratives about the beneficence of the U.S.’s world power and control, particularly in Latin America. Thus Rzewski’s piece was performed at the 1976 bicentennial celebration, where it showcased overt leftist political ideals and the high modernism musical techniques (use of the all-combinatorial hexachord, tone clusters, aleatory moments) considered “safe” at the height of the Cold War—among the same techniques that motivated the celebration of *Bomarzo* a decade earlier.
- 16 Some of Hess’s most moving and convincing passages deal with the subject of memory (historical, political, cultural, and musical) in the piece. After pointing us to Rzewski’s allusions to Hanns Eisler’s “Solidarity Song”, comparing the structure to Bach’s “Goldberg” Variations/ Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations/ Brahms’s Handel Variations, and teasing out some of the imbedded moments, she notes

Thus *The People United* consistently prods the listener not only to remember past musical events but to digest them in the ongoing present as they filter through time... By strewing our path to the final set with so many musical reminiscences, Rzewski ensures that by the time the listener arrives at set 6, linear forward-moving time will find itself in tension with the past of the work, mirroring the tension between the memory of past events and linear time. (p. 181)
- 17 This observation leads to a more extended examination of the function of memory in the work, and ultimately the conclusion that, “In sum, the minimalist passages of *The People United* declare that memory is fragile. The sixth and final set proclaims that it is also essential” (p. 186).
- 18 If not already clear from the placement within the book and the language used, the brief Epilogue cements our impression that the Rzewski’s exhortations on memory serve here as a metonym that encircles the historiography of Latin American music in the U.S. as well as the specific power dynamics of Chile in the 1970s, even if his piece is part of a larger inclination toward nationalism. Hess ends her book with a plea for a new history pedagogy—one that is not only more inclusive of Latin American music, but that also uses a sameness-embracing “Pan Americanist” lens. She is particularly impatient with the narratives embedded in textbooks on U.S. music history. After noting Craig Russell’s observation that there is a “general lack of intellectual curiosity”

about southwestern mission music and adding her own observations about the persistent “preeminence” of New England fusing tunes, she concludes “But we of the United States can no longer write our musical history from the standpoint of an unproblematic American “we.” There is simply no point in overlooking the presence of one continent in the history of the other.” (p. 193)

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20 If the goal of *Representing the Good Neighbor* was simply to make us re-think inherited narratives about music in the United States, then Hess more than accomplishes her aim here. In fact, each one of her chapters considered alone demonstrates that while individuals carry their histories, politics, prejudices, and stylistic tendencies with them across borders, composers and their works do not exist outside the interpretive frame nor are they immune to cultural influence outside their nation-states. Furthermore, each of the Latin American composers considered participated in the musical life of the U.S. and continues to have his work performed there, and the receptions of these composers and their works have shaped cultural knowledge across borders. It is also true that, to a large extent, Latin American composers have been written out of the history of “American” music as it is taught and learned in the U.S. (a pedagogical oversight that absolutely needs correcting). Yet for that reason there is very little grist for the Post-colonial mill in the texts to which Hess so vehemently objects in the last paragraphs of the book.

21 Rather than histories of music in the U.S., Hess’s aim is pointed toward texts that convey parts of the U.S. reception history of several prominent Latin American composers, as indicated in both the introduction and the first part of the Epilogue. Using a Pan-Americanist lens, she attempts to simultaneously deconstruct existing scholarship while weaving a new over-arching narrative about the rise and fall of “universalism” and “sameness embracing” in the criticism written about Latin American composers. As used here, that lens is neither blind to difference nor to political manipulation. Considering the strength and sweep of her thesis, each case study is remarkably nuanced in its telling of the reception history and the larger cultural forces that shape it, as well as the specific language and its implications. Initial worries about the appropriateness of Agawu’s sameness terminology quiet for much of the book, in part because what the sameness embracing lens shows is not so much an eclipse of difference as the illumination of a simultaneous presence of sameness. Both impulses rise and fall according to the characteristics of the composer and his work, the political forces both at home and in the U.S., and the world-view of the critic.

22 This is not to say that there are no blind spots in Hess’s narrative. In her quest for sameness she relies on a few critics who find themselves inclined in a felicitous direction for a moment in time. These critics are, roughly in order of appearance, Paul Rosenfeld, Olin Downes, Virgil Thomson, Elliot Carter, Gilbert Chase, Irving Lowens, and John Rockwell⁹. Hess tells us that these are “critics of the first rank”, (p. 8) and that is precisely the trouble with using them to trace an over-arching narrative about the reception of Latin American composers in the U.S. Most of the critics have musical training, are culturally knowledgeable, are based in New York, and are gainfully employed either as critics or composers; in other words, they have all the markers of that forbidden category in the U.S. lexicon: class. It is unclear how this vantage point influences their evaluations, but one suspects that familiarity with European cultural and concert norms, for example, could shape a narrative about cosmopolitanism or

universalism. The bias also endangers a frank evaluation of the role of difference in reception; when one examines press material Stokowski prepared for the *H.P.* premiere and the results of it made manifest in smaller papers across the U.S., for example, one realizes that there can be quite a distance between what might be understood or preferred amongst the middle-class of smaller towns versus the elite of New York. I suspect, based on this research (which is admittedly limited) that the narrative of sameness to which the critics emphasized in Hess's text remain dedicated pushes against a larger cultural narrative of difference unexamined in this text. That larger narrative might also explain why studies more concerned with individuals and the shaping of identity see and hear more difference in the same cultural milieu. That is not to say that Hess is obligated to study that larger narrative of difference, or that emphasizing this largely forgotten sameness narrative is somehow invalidated, but that the limitations on the scope of sameness should be explained more carefully in the structure and articulation of her overarching methodology and its expected results.

- 23 In a similar fashion, Hess's description of an "epistemological chasm" between scholarly texts of the last forty years and music criticism of the previous decades seems to be an overstatement. Some circles at some moments looked for aspects of sameness in certain composers' works; in their search for sameness, critics were influenced by overt political movements and cultural shifts. As suggested above, part of the trouble is that, although the cultural context she provides absolutely justifies a hypothesis that sameness governed the Good Neighbor discourse where difference occupied the Post-Cold War period discourse, we hear most about a certain class of *critics* of the Good Neighbor Period and area study musicology *scholars* of the Post-Cold War period, which is not a balanced comparison.
- 24 Similarly, although the same cultural context suggests that there was a rise and decline in the search for sameness roughly following the rise and decline of Good Neighbor diplomacy, it is also clear that the specific identity of a given composer, the aesthetics of his work, and even the exact techniques used in a particular piece justified and encouraged certain readings, as one would expect. Given idiosyncrasies from work to work and composer to composer, Hess's argument about the trajectory of sameness analysis would be much stronger if it included similar results for several composers during a given period of time, rather than snapshots from three composers at different moments, with very little intersection. Certainly several Latin American composers' works were being performed in the 1940s, during the height of the Good Neighbor period, so this flaw does not exist because there is not material to use. For example, we do learn from Hess that in addition to Villa-Lobos, Ginastera's works were considered of the "rum and coke" variety, although she does not examine this period of his work with the same rigor that she affords Ginastera's *Bomarzo* or Villa-Lobos's *Bachiana* No. 5. Similarly, we learn nothing of the receptions of Chávez or Silvestre Revueltas during the period, although both composers had works performed in the U.S. Also absent from the narrative are the cohort of Latin American composers studying in Tanglewood with Aaron Copland or the details of Ginastera's directorship of the Latin American Center for Advanced Music Studies (CLAEM). Even the U.S. composers writing tourist music get very light treatment¹⁰.
- 25 Part of the trouble with using these repertoires is that there is very little existing scholarly material; although perhaps one or two pieces have received attention, the vast majority of the archival and analytical work remains undone. Read carefully, this

text suggests many potential avenues for research, including a more detailed examination of criticism from the period, more study of U.S.-funded performances abroad, a genuine engagement with U.S. composers' interests in Latin America (especially Henry Cowell and Nicolas Slonimsky) during the 1940s and 1950s, and more research on the role of politics in cultural practices in the Americas. One hopes the attention garnered by this book will encourage more people to examine North-South transnationalism, particularly during the mid-20th century.

- 26 All of this stimulating work could have been done with more acknowledgement of Hess's indebtedness to earlier scholars, and, most importantly, a frank evaluation of the limitations of her thesis and argument. Surely the book will also be read by those less versed in the scholarship about Latin American music and the intricacies of music criticism in the U.S. Such readers might thrill to the excitement of a refashioned approach without realizing that much of the story remains untold, and that the details given suggest far more caution and nuance than the thesis itself. Nonetheless, although the argumentative stance is overdrawn, it makes for a compelling and controversial read, and one imagines that it will become standard reading for scholars of the period. Only after arduous work on the basic source material will we be able to accurately judge the width and depth of the "epistemological chasm" to which Hess alludes.

NOTES

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8. KUSS, Malena, "Symbol und Phantasie in Ginasteras *Bomarzo*", in SPANGEMACHER, Friedrich (ed.), *Alberto Ginastera*, Bonn, Boosey & Hawkes, 1984, p. 88-102.
9. My selection and ordering varies from Hess's own because I am at pains here to list only the critics on which Hess relies for the thrust of her argument. Nonetheless even the longer list she provides betrays the same biases discussed above.
10. Hess is working on a book about Aaron Copland's Good Neighbor activity; perhaps some of this material will find its way into that text.

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