

Introduction to Wonders of Geography: A Musical Atlas of America

We are all geographers, from an astronaut gazing down on planet Earth to a baby first opening his eyes to assess his immediate surroundings. Geographers study the physical Earth, its human residents, and the connections between the two. This vast and fascinating subject includes the present, the past, and predictions of future outcomes as well.

We create maps and other devices to understand the spatial aspects of the world. The first places people usually search to obtain geographical information are a textbook, an atlas, and an almanac. These sources of description, maps, and statistical information are necessary for geographic literacy. Yet, some of the best geography is not found in a textbook. The richness of geography that leads to long-term understanding is enhanced by what we receive through our senses, and by our emotional responses to a geographic feature. Certainly, the study of the Grand Canyon would not be complete without the sensory images we experience and absorb into our being.

The Virginia Chamber Orchestra takes you on a journey to five regions of the United States. A region can be anything you want it to be. People create regions to help them interpret, analyze, and make sense of an area on the globe. The five regions on the excursion are at, or near, the four "corners" of the United States—the Northeast, the Southeast, the Northwest and the Southwest, plus the Mississippi. A musical selection focuses on an important place in each of these regions.

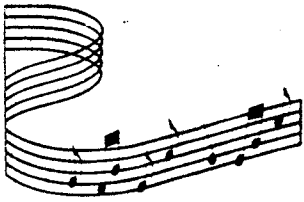
The Southwest

Our journey begins in the Southwest, an area of mountains, plateaus, and deserts. Because it has a desert climate at its lower elevations, agricultural activity relies on irrigation. The Colorado and Rio Grand are important rivers. The 1,450-mile long Colorado flows from the Rocky Mountains in Colorado to Mexico—by way of the Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon National Park, our first musical stopping place, began as an ancient plateau containing a variety of layers of rock. The Colorado River cut through the plateau, working its way down, deepening and broadening its channel and ultimately creating one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The magnificent colors of the rocks are determined by rock types and by the changing angle of the sun as it shines on them.

The canyon consists of desert at its lower elevations with cliffs, hills, and forests nearer the canyon's northern and southern rims, which are connected by a trail.

Ferde Grofé (1892–1972) was inspired to write the *Grand Canyon Suite* after vacationing there, explaining that "the richness of the land and the rugged optimism of the people had fired my imagination." Instrumental colors are important to a composer when creating mental images. (See the section on orchestration, page 12). Grofé spoke about "all the colors I needed to describe my tremendous subject in musical terms."



His "Painted Desert" and "On the Trail" movements both have what geographers call "a sense of place." To describe the mules people ride along the trails, Grofé creates some of the most specific musical images you will hear in this program. The temple blocks imitate the hooves of the mules as they clomp along the trail, and the "hee haw" motif in the clarinet mimics their braying sound; no other interpretation seems possible. By contrast, in "Painted Desert," from the first delicate notes of the harp one pictures a beautiful, spacious area, but each person who hears this movement may think of a different set of words to describe the scene that is its subject. In "On the Trail," the mule motifs are unmistakable—no other interpretation seems possible. "Painted Desert," however, contains musical suggestions, but any specifics are left to the listener's imagination.

The Northwest

Fish and forests are two of the most important resources in the Northwest, which is generally classified as including the states of Washington, Oregon, and northern California. The early airplane industry got its start here because of the rich production of lumber. Agriculture thrives in the Willamette Valley and in the lowlands of Puget Sound. The Columbia River provides irrigation water for the drier eastern interiors.

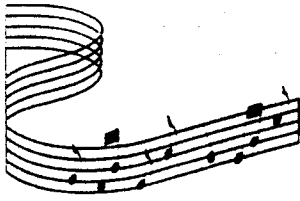
The Coastal Ranges and the Cascade Mountains are the major land features. Mount St. Helens is part of the Cascades, a volcanic mountain range situated on the eastern edge

of the Pacific Ring of Fire. The Ring of Fire is a geologically active area, which encircles the Pacific Ocean.

Mount St. Helens erupted on May 18, 1980, blowing away more than 1,000 feet of the mountain and killing 34 people. It was heard more than 135 miles away and had a force 500 times as powerful as the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. The volcano had been inactive since 1857, and humans had coexisted in peaceful harmony with the dormant volcano.

Alan Hovhaness, who wrote *Mount St. Helens Symphony*, actually lived in the area and experienced the eruption. The symphony's last movement, "Volcano," depicts the eruption with heavy percussion and solo trombone. In actuality, the eruption consisted of magma rising to the surface, blowing steam, ash, rocks, and debris into the air. Huge stands of trees were reduced to toothpicks.

The peaceful beginning of the "Volcano" movement is described by the composer as a "dawn-like hymn." It typifies the feelings of many people living in an area of natural hazards. The volcano's relative inactivity, in terms of human life span, produced a false sense of security and a feeling of harmony with nature. Although there were geological foretellings of imminent disaster, residents were literally blasted into the reality of nature's dynamism. In his music, Hovhaness captured both the feeling of harmony with nature and the unexpected, raw violence.



The Mississippi Region

The Mississippi River is the most important geographical feature of the Midwest, a broad expanse of land located in the interior of the United States. Prominent features include the Central and Great Plains, and the southern states near its mouth. The Mississippi drains half of the United States, and the Missouri, Illinois, Arkansas, Red, and Tennessee Rivers are its major tributaries. It has the third largest drainage area of all the world's rivers.

It begins as a rather narrow river at its upper elevations, becomes larger when joined by the Missouri, and meets the Ohio at Cairo, Illinois, where it doubles in volume. It continues to broaden and slow down as it approaches the Gulf Coastal Plain. Its muddiness is the result of erosion of dirt, particularly from the northern areas near its source. That mud is finally emptied into the Gulf of Mexico, forming a deposit called a delta. New Orleans is the major city on that delta. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers often has to dredge out channels in the delta to allow oceangoing ships to navigate the river.

The Mississippi River flows 2,348 miles from its source in Minnesota to its mouth. It transports agricultural and industrial products as well as raw materials on its barges. It carries approximately 40 percent of all the freight that is transported on inland waterways.

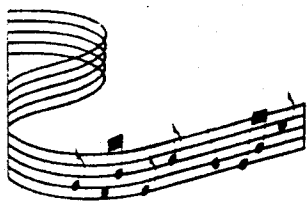
"Father of the Waters" is the first movement of Ferde Grofé's *Mississippi Suite*. In only a few moments of music an image of the river is conveyed by a broad French horn solo, over

an underlying suggestion of water in motion (another example of inspiration from physical geography). Then a lively Indian dance shifts the focus to the human activity along that river's banks (the inspiration of cultural geography). Although time does not permit including movements II, III, and IV in the Field Trip performance, cultural geography continues to be their focus.

It was the Ojibway of northern Minnesota, near the river's source, who gave it the name "Messipi," so it is fitting that the Indian dance is heard in the first movement. The entire *Mississippi Suite* not only transports the listener back in time, when the Indians were the earliest settlers, but also reminds the listener of the river's flow from north to south, since its final movement, "Mardi Gras," pays a musical visit to New Orleans. Along the way, the second movement is a high spirited and humorous character sketch of Huckleberry Finn, the subject of Mark Twain's novel, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." The "adventures" refer to Huck's long raft trip on the Mississippi and the variety of people he meets along the way. This is followed by "Old Creole Days," probably referring to early French settlers, particularly in Louisiana, and their descendants.

The Southeast

The Southeast region generally comprises the area of the United States sweeping from Virginia, along the Atlantic Coast to east Texas on the Gulf of Mexico. Historically we know it as the former Confederate States of



America. Once a major cotton-producing region, the Southeast region now produces soybeans and other agricultural products, and the cotton-producing areas have moved farther west. The Southeast produces most of the fresh fruits and vegetables consumed in the United States as well as peanuts, rice and sugar cane. The quickly renewable pine forests support a large timber industry, and oil and petrochemical plants are found along the Gulf Coast.

The Black Belt of Alabama and Georgia takes its name from the rich, black soil fed by decaying limestone underneath. Many of the wealthiest southern plantations of the Civil War days lay in the Black Belt. Culturally, the Black Belt includes South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

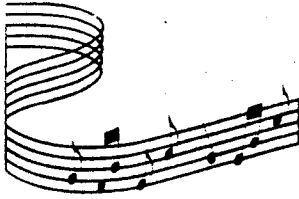
The large concentration of African American people in this area, and the jazz and blues music that was such an important part of their cultural life, inspired William Grant Still's suite, *From the Black Belt*. Still described "Li'l Scamp," meaning little rascal, by composing what could be called a musical prank. Since it is only eight measures long, the sudden ending takes the first-time listener by surprise. "Brown Girl," by contrast, is a serene and lovely musical portrait. The composer's notes for "Clap Yo' Han's" tell us that "adults join in a children's dancing game." He tells us that the movements in this suite were written "frankly to amuse and please those who listen to them," but he also worked in larger, more "serious" forms.

William Grant Still (1895–1978) was a man of many "firsts." He was the first African American composer to have a symphony performed by an American orchestra, the first African American to conduct a major symphony orchestra, and the first African American to have an opera performed by a major opera company. Still traveled to a number of different areas and worked in many styles of music. He went to Memphis, Tennessee, to associate with W. C. Handy, who specialized in jazz and blues. Those influences are heard in *From the Black Belt*.

The Northeast

Our final destination is the Northeast region, containing states from Maine to Washington, D.C. It has been the beneficiary of many natural resources that have directly influenced its early industrialization and urbanization. New York City's and Baltimore's natural harbors have made them leading shipping and banking centers. A megalopolis, meaning a string of connected urban areas, stretches from Boston to Washington, D.C. today. It is the most densely populated of all the regions.

The Appalachian Mountains provided coal for the early steel industry and water power for the early mills along the fall line of the Piedmont Plateau. They form a divide between the rivers flowing into the Atlantic and those emptying into the Gulf of Mexico.



Stretching some 1,500 miles from Canada to Alabama, the Appalachian Mountains provide a study in contrasts. They are rich in natural resources, but also contain some of the poorest people in the world, who live in a region loosely defined as Appalachia (generally understood to include some areas of Kentucky, Tennessee, western Virginia, and West Virginia).

Aaron Copland (1900–1990), one of this century's most outstanding composers, wrote *Appalachian Spring* as a ballet for Martha Graham, a famous choreographer. The setting for the ballet is a farming community in the northeast. In this composition, Copland quoted "Simple Gifts," a hymn from the Shaker sect. It provides a glimpse of life in a small religious community. A splinter group of the Quakers, the Shakers were at first called "shaking Quakers" because of their body-shaking ecstasy that occurred during worship. The Shakers strive to be morally perfect. Their communities embrace the concept of equality and obedience to one another.

Today, only two communities in Maine and Massachusetts survive. However, the Shakers made important contributions to American life. They invented the circular saw and washing machine and were the first to package commercial seed. Authentic examples of simple and functionally styled Shaker furniture are collectors items today.

Copland's work is well suited to the basic architectural and life-style themes of the Shakers—symmetry, order, simplicity, and function. Although Copland was not directly associated with the Shakers, "Simple Gifts"

was an appropriate hymn to include in one of his works because simplicity was such an important goal in his musical composition. He wanted his music to be appreciated by a wide audience and to communicate so clearly that people could understand it without having to hear it over and over again. "I felt that it was worth the effort," he once said, "to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest terms." In another example of cultural geography influencing the composer, Copland's writing has the flavor of folk music and is closely related to Appalachian fiddle tunes.

Wonders of Geography: A Musical Atlas of America now awaits you. When you experience the music, listen to the studio guests, and see the images and maps, you will deepen your understanding of the ways that geography influences composers. Those composers, in turn, influence the listeners' appreciation of geography. Their music makes a lasting contribution to the cultural geography of their regions and to the rich cultural heritage of all Americans.