

Where does one start when reviewing a reference work of 5,592 pages? I began by looking up “St Louis”, since it’s a city I know well. My first thought was that the coverage was a little cursory. What about the bohemian Landesmans, their nightclub the Crystal Palace, and their Beat musical *The Nervous Set*? But then I realized that cursory was just about right for St Louis. It’s a provincial town in a provincial part of the country, and the Landesmans’ great projects never really came to much. True, the St Louis Symphony is a “world-class” orchestra that can be talked of in the same breath as the Berlin Philharmonic. But no one ever says that the Berlin Philharmonic can be talked of in the same breath as the St Louis Symphony.

Being provincial means living in a place where, when you drop a stone into a pool, the stone makes a “plop” but sinks without a ripple. While the great and good of St Louis plopped stones left and right, the musician who made ripples was Chuck Berry, playing his guitar like ringing a bell. St Louis sent him to prison.

I go into this because St Louis is a microcosm of the United States. Most American music for most of America’s history had local success which the rest of the world ignored. A case in point is Edgar Stillman Kelley. In the 1928 *American Supplement to Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, he seems an important composer, with a full-page picture and an extended discussion of his career, including the information that his music for William Young’s theatre adaptation of *Ben-Hur* (1899) had received about 5,000 performances “in English-speaking countries”. By 1986, though, in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, we are told that “little of his music has survived the test of time”. (Not a very long test – he was still alive in 1944.) In the second edition, this has become “little of his music has continued to be performed”. Of which American mid-century composers can we say that “much of their music has continued to be performed” a generation after their deaths? Roger Sessions? Vincent Persichetti? Walter Piston? Roy Harris? In mid-twentieth-century America these were all big names, and they are still treated as such in the second edition. I would not argue for neglecting them, but I would ask for a little more realism about their reputations. Andrew Porter was a great and influential critic – he deserves his own entry – but his influence was not great enough to make Sessions, who “embodied”, according to Porter, “what is finest in American thought, character, and genius”, a mainstay of the concert repertoire.

It is curious that mid-century modern is now such a sought-after furniture style, while mid-century modern music is rarely heard in appropriately furnished living rooms. But such is the fate of the provincial musician. There is precious little of American high-art music that can pass the British Empire test: that is, music on which the sun never sets. Chuck Berry’s songs pass that test, of course, and what Chuck Berry is to St Louis, all of jazz, blues and popular music are to America. They colonized the world. Frederick Stock (“The few recordings he made do not justify the esteem in which he was held as an interpreter”) no doubt thought his Chicago Symphony Orchestra was hot stuff, but the real heat in the late 1920s was being generated about thirty blocks south of Symphony Center, at 35th and State, where

With the Beatles

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Louis Armstrong was performing at the Dreamland Cafe, at that moment the absolute centre of the musical universe.

The *Dictionary*, to its credit, makes no such distinctions between provincial and central, or between high and popular art. It is resolutely ecumenical. Donal Henahan, talking about the 1986 edition’s inclusion of popular culture, found it too full of items which would prove ephemeral. But high art can prove just as ephemeral (see the composer Kelley above), and where else but in a reference work like this could one go to learn what all the fuss was about? That’s the useful aspect. The pleasurable aspect is paging through a volume and stopping at things you suddenly realize you need to know more about. To look something

first LP”. The Beatles were themselves responsible for the fact that a work like this includes them.

There are a number of subject entries one would not necessarily expect to see. The one on “Sports” begins “Although music and sports are too often considered as discrete entities, connections between the two cultures occur in many significant ways”. For example, “Both music and sports are inherently connected to the body”. The average reader could be forgiven for not continuing past this banality, but, persevering, one comes to: “Particularly in the wake of the Beatles and Bob Dylan, most popular music in contrast stressed hedonistic values of fun and pleasure and increasingly focused on the creation of lyrics and music promoting more passive, cerebral contemplation” – which proves that two halves of one sentence can contradict each other and both be entirely wrong. A better subject entry is the one on the Cold War, pertinent and insightful about that bizarre moment when the FBI might investigate you (covertly) for un-American activities while the CIA was supporting you (covertly) as an exemplar of American culture (as happened to Leonard Bernstein, for one). Missing is a subject entry

Eric Ewazen subtly condescends to him for being stubbornly accessible. The “Popular Music” entry is comprehensive and concise, but a good deal of evidence could be marshalled against its contention that “the cataclysmic events of the 1920s and 30s were largely ignored by North American songwriters”. Unless you believe that “Dancing in the Dark” (1931) was only about dancing in the dark.

As authoritative and informative as the entries are, it would be nice to see more humanizing, or at least particularizing, detail. To mention Edgar Stillman Kelley one last time: why drop the mention of the 5,000 performances of his *Ben-Hur*? An entry on Adorno’s relationship to American music should at least mention his Tom Sawyer singspiel: *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe* (genre: excruciating). We learn about the eight National Endowment for the Arts grants that the composer William Thomas McKinley received, but not that he was an accomplished knuckleball pitcher (a knuckleball being akin, in effect, to cricket’s googly), once invited to throw to the Boston Red Sox during batting practice. Charles Ives was an excellent high-school pitcher, but never got to throw to big-league batters (Ives’s attachment to baseball does figure in his entry). We get a generic comment about the film composer Bernard Herrmann’s irascibility, but not specifics, like his dismissing André Previn as “that jazz boy”. On the other hand, the Billie Holiday entry, by Donald Clarke, is a model of brief biography. “*Lady Sings the Blues* (1956) was as gloomy and doom-laden as possible because it was written to sell to the movies, while her ghost-writer, William Dufty, described her as the funniest woman he had ever known.” The biographical entry on Fred Astaire (who needs little help being memorable) notes that “when seen playing [the piano] on screen he is always also heard on the soundtrack”.

One slim volume on American music was published in 1920 and revised in 1928; there were four huge volumes in 1986; and the second edition gives us eight equally large volumes. This rate of progress would project sixteen volumes in the very near future, which surely is not going to happen, not in the world of physical books, anyway. The expansion may, however, already be taking shape within the online source Wikipedia. A Grove Music Online subscription costs £215 (US \$295) a year. The cost of these eight volumes is £1,160 (US \$1,595). Wikipedia is free, although it comes without Grove’s solid reliability as a scholarly source. Of course, one could depend on one’s local library to buy the books and pay the subscription fee. But even then, it’s not all smooth navigating. To get to the multimedia features of Grove Music Online (namely film and recordings), you have to access another site. I spent ten minutes trying to chase a video through this online maze, fifteen if you count a consultation with a helpful librarian. Most students are going to let their phones take them to Wikipedia and YouTube, which found the video I was searching for in 0.26 seconds. True, I then had to watch four seconds of an ad for probiotics, but that seemed a small price to pay.

All of which leads me to believe that this marvellous combination of editing and erudition, so splendidly produced and such a pleasure to use, may be one of the last of its kind: beautiful, but a dinosaur.



Bonnie Whiting Smith taking part in a performance of John Luther Adams’s *Inuksuit* at Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2011

up, I had to make a note of it first; otherwise, after being distracted by four or five other entries, I tended to forget what I’d started out looking for.

Not that the dictionary is without flaws. For me the most glaring lacuna is in the “Beatles” entry, which discusses how American music influenced them, but not how they influenced America. The Beatles were the fulcrum on which an entire musical culture shifted. In fact, thanks to Philip Larkin (who, as a perceptive jazz critic, merits but does not receive an entry), we know the exact moment it happened, the *annus mirabilis* of 1963, “Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban / And the Beatles’

for “Drugs”, which could cover the heroin epidemic that ravaged the jazz world in the 1940s and 50s, with consequences including debilitation, prison and death. In fact, a whole sub-entry could be devoted to “Overdose, Death By”. And another to “Hallucinogenics, Music Ruined By”. But that’s being judgemental, which this book resolutely is not. It would also be good to see subject entries on related movements in art and literature, such as “Pop Art” and “Beat Poetry”, but this is already an immense work, and you have to draw a line somewhere.

Residual judgemental elements do surface from time to time. The entry on the composer