

Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

---

Faculty Publications - Music

Music

---

2024

## Music Instruction at the California Labor School, 1942–1957

Phillip Hash

*Illinois State University*, [pmlhash@ilstu.edu](mailto:pmlhash@ilstu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpm>



Part of the [Music Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hash, P. M. (2024). Music Instruction at the California Labor School, 1942–1957. *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15366006241268645>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Music at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Music by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact [ISUReD@ilstu.edu](mailto:ISUReD@ilstu.edu).

# Music Instruction at the California Labor School, 1942–1957

Journal of Historical Research  
in Music Education  
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–25  
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/15366006241268645  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/jhr](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jhr)



Phillip M. Hash<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine music instruction at the California Labor School (CLS), located in San Francisco, California. This institution existed from 1942 to 1957 as a center for adult education affiliated with the Communist Party. Although the curriculum focused on Marxism and labor, the institution also offered classes in general subjects, vocational training, life skills, and the arts to enrich the lives of the immigrants, industrial workers, and people of color that it served. The music program included courses in music fundamentals, appreciation, and songwriting; group and individual instruction in voice, guitar, and piano; and ensembles for singers and instrumentalists. Many people studied music at the CLS for personal growth and enjoyment. Others, however, developed skills useful in promoting the agenda of the Communist Party and the American labor movement. This research focused on music teaching and learning at the CLS in relation to organization, administration, curriculum, ensembles, faculty, and political perspectives. The history of this institution as an agent of social change revealed ethical considerations for music education in modern PK–16 institutions. In addition, the CLS music program aligned with current recommendations for undergraduate study and could serve as an example for curriculum reform today.

## Keywords

twentieth century, music education history, community education, higher education, institutional history, communism, United States

---

<sup>1</sup>Illinois State University, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Phillip M. Hash, Illinois State University, Campus Box 5600, Normal, IL 61790-5660, USA.  
Email: [pmhash@ilstu.edu](mailto:pmhash@ilstu.edu)

## Introduction

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) evolved out of the left wing of the socialist party in 1917 and gained strength from World War I and the Bolshevik revolution. The CPUSA followed the directives of the Communist International (i.e., Comintern) in Moscow and accepted the basic values of the movement including the common ownership of wealth, industry, and property; distribution of goods based on need; empowerment of workers; and single-party government led by *proletariats* (laborers) rather than the *bourgeois* (middle/business) class. Communists supported the principles of equality, freedom, and democracy for all, but felt these were impossible under capitalism and a government controlled by the elite. In the late 1920s, the CPUSA adopted policies that opposed racial discrimination and supported black liberation. They expanded into the Southern United States and made the recruitment and organization of black workers a priority.<sup>1</sup>

Communists believed they could achieve their aims only through social revolution. Short term goals of the CPUSA focused on organizing labor unions and advocating for higher wages and better working conditions.<sup>2</sup> In the long term, they hoped for a revolution that would “overthrow the capitalist system and [establish] a Workers’ and Farmers’ Government.”<sup>3</sup> Failure to attract members into their unions and to gain widespread support for revolution resulted in policies that directed the party to work for change within existing labor organizations and government programs.<sup>4</sup>

The CPUSA sponsored workers’ schools during the 1920s and 1930s to educate recruits on the principles of communism and to train labor organizers and union leaders.<sup>5</sup> During the 1940s, these institutions evolved into a robust network of adult education centers in about a dozen U.S. cities including New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. They had open admissions policies, low tuition, and a desegregated and antiracist, coeducational and antisexist ideology. These schools focused only on student learning and did not administer exams, assign grades, or grant degrees. Faculty consisted of common laborers as well as scholars with PhDs. Students were predominantly women, working people, immigrants, and people of color. Curricula included courses on Marxism, labor organization, and economic history, as well as

---

<sup>1</sup>Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1991), chaps. 1 & 2, passim; Nikolai Buharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism: A Popular Explanation of the Program of the Communist Party of Russia* (n.p., Communist Party of Great Britain, 1922), 69–75, 168–71, 177–80.

<sup>2</sup>Ottanelli, *Communist Party of the United States*, 22.

<sup>3</sup>William Z. Foster, *Toward Soviet America* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 269.

<sup>4</sup>Ottanelli, *Communist Party of the United States*, 49–55, 88.

<sup>5</sup>E. E. Cummins, “Workers’ Education in the United States,” *Social Forces* 14, no. 4 (1936): 597–8; Marvin Gettleman, “The Lost World of United States Labor Education: Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944–1957,” in Robert W. Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Tylor (eds.) *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2004), 205.

classes related to general education, the social and physical sciences, vocational training, special interests, and the arts.<sup>6</sup>

Classes in visual art, theater, dance, and music provided labor school students with recreation and personal edification, as well as a means of activism. A course titled “Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Stage” at the Jefferson School of Social Sciences in New York, for example, explored Shakespeare’s work in relation to his “democratic attitude toward the problems of poverty, women’s rights and racial equality.”<sup>7</sup> The class “Art and Society,” at the California Labor School in San Francisco, featured a series of ten discussions on the role and responsibility of the artist, led by faculty members of the art and social sciences departments. Topics included “What has art done for labor? What has labor done for art? What . . . is the place of art in society?”<sup>8</sup>

Several authors have explored the history of labor schools in general and drama and architecture instruction, specifically.<sup>9</sup> However, I found no studies related to music education at labor schools affiliated with the CPUSA. The purpose of this study was to examine music instruction at the California Labor School in San Francisco, which existed from 1942 to 1957. This research focused on music teaching and learning in relation to organization, administration, curriculum, ensembles, and faculty. I also considered the extent to which music supported the communist and progressive values of the institution. Primary sources included course catalogs, letters, newspaper articles,

---

<sup>6</sup>Andy Hines, “The Communist Community College,” in *On Alternative Institutions: A Cluster of Essays on the Past and Present of Study* (Swarthmore, PA: Aydelotte Foundation, 2022), <https://aydelotte.swarthmore.edu/publications/the-communist-community-college/>; Jonathan Hunt, “Communists and the Classroom: Radicals in U.S. Education, 1930–1960,” *Composition Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015): 25, 29–30.

<sup>7</sup>As cited by Marvin E. Gettleman, “‘No Varsity Teams’: New York’s Jefferson School of Social Science, 1943–1956,” *Science & Society* 66, no. 3 (2002): 351. Quote from Jefferson School course listings, fall 1946.

<sup>8</sup>*California Labor School* (hereafter CLS) [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, Spring 1947), 21.

<sup>9</sup>For example, Burnett, “The Pacific Northwest Labor School;” Gettleman, “‘No Varsity Teams’”; Jess M. Rigelhaupt, “‘Education for Action’: The California Labor School, Radical Unionism, Civil Rights, and Progressive Coalition Building in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1934–1970” (PhD diss., University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2005), ProQuest (1459239472); Mary McAvoy, *Rehearsing Revolutions: The Labor Drama Experiment and Radical Activism in the Early Twentieth Century* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa, 2019); Laura Kathryn Nelson, “Practices of Study: Social Architectures of Insurgent Learning” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2021), ProQuest (2601384020).

and other ephemera, as well as recordings and photographs obtained from collections available through archives at the University of Michigan, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and San Francisco State University. I also utilized secondary sources consisting of journal articles, dissertations, and books to provide historical context and supplement primary materials.

## California Labor School

The California Labor School (CLS)—originally named the Tom Mooney Labor School—opened August 3, 1942, in rooms above an automobile dealership on Turk Street in San Francisco.<sup>10</sup> The slogan “Education for Victory” emphasized the school’s mission during World War II (1941–1945) to provide “a comprehensive analysis of social, economic, and political questions as they appear in the light of the present world struggle against the Axis,” including “the history of our country, . . . the American labor movement, . . . and the Negro people.”<sup>11</sup> Although technically independent, the CLS served as “a utilitarian arm” for the CPUSA. Local party leaders made major decisions and courses on Marxism and the Soviet Union were cornerstones of the curriculum.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the institution “belong[ed] to the community, for everyone’s use” and “welcome[ed] capable Communists and non-Communists on its faculty” and “students of every nationality, color, and religion.”<sup>13</sup>

The name of the institution changed to the CLS in 1944. By this time, the school had opened a branch in Oakland and accepted support from numerous trade unions associated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress for Industrial

---

<sup>10</sup>“Finding Aid to the California Labor School Collection, 1942–1957,” California Labor School Collection, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, updated 2013, [https://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf0489n414/entire\\_text/](https://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf0489n414/entire_text/). Mooney (1882–1942) was a self-taught student of communism and a prominent labor leader and activist. He endured false imprisonment for the Preparedness Day Bombing on July 22, 1916. Anti-union city and business officials organized this event in San Francisco to rally support for U.S. participation in World War I. Despite evidence of his innocence, Mooney waited twenty-two years before receiving a full pardon in January 1939. Chris Carlsson, “Tom Mooney: Historical Essay,” FoundFS: The San Francisco Digital History Archive, accessed July 23, 2023, [https://www.foundfs.org/index.php?title=TOM\\_MOONEY](https://www.foundfs.org/index.php?title=TOM_MOONEY). Although Mooney did not have a direct connection to the CLS, the founders admired his courage and chose to name the school in his honor. *Tom Mooney Labor School* (hereafter TMLS) [catalog] (San Francisco: TMLS, fall 1942), 3–4. All TMLS/CLS catalogs and brochures/schedules cited in this study are from the CLS Collection at the Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, available online: <https://digital-collections.library.sfsu.edu/>.

<sup>11</sup>TMLS [catalog], fall 1942, 3.

<sup>12</sup>David Jenkins, “The Union Movement, the California Labor School, and San Francisco Politics” [oral history conducted in 1987 and 1988 by Lisa Rubens] (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993), 147–49, quote on p. 147; TMLS [catalog], fall 1942, 6.

<sup>13</sup>“Labor School Seeking Post-War Unity,” *San Francisco News*, May 16, 1944; *Scholar and School: New Targets for Bigotry* (San Francisco: CLS, n.d.), 9, 16, University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections, <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735061656991>.

Organization (CIO), as well as other labor related bodies and individual citizens.<sup>14</sup> Although students could take whatever classes they wished, administrators recommended plans of study for industrial workers, union workers, white collar workers, social workers, K–12 teachers, writers, artists, and art teachers.<sup>15</sup> Servicemen returning from the war could use their benefits under the G.I. Bill to pay for tuition and living expenses. Teachers in the San Francisco public schools could earn continuing education credit for many courses in the catalog. A full schedule of classes met in the evenings with a limited number during the day to accommodate housewives and workers on the night shift. Saturday arts lessons for children provided day care for parents who worked on the weekend.<sup>16</sup> The standard course fee was \$6.00 (approximately \$104.11 in 2024) in the fall of 1945. However, people could also purchase a \$10.00 (approximately \$173.52 in 2024) monthly membership that allowed access to all classes, special events, and the library.<sup>17</sup>

The CLS was an integral part of the community and served 6,000 students from 1942 to 1944 and up to 15,000 per year by the end of the decade. In addition to the regular curriculum, the school sponsored lectures and forums on various topics, stage performances, art exhibits, and social dances.<sup>18</sup> In 1945, the U.S. State Department designated the CLS as the official host for labor delegations attending the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco.<sup>19</sup> The institution moved into larger facilities on Market Street in 1944, and again in 1947 to Golden Gate Avenue.<sup>20</sup> Additional branch campuses opened in Berklee, Los Angeles, and Palo Alto by 1948.<sup>21</sup>

Arts programs became an important part of the curriculum at the CLS shortly after it began. According to David Jenkins, director of the institution from 1942 to 1949,

... [A]lmost immediately artists and dancers and writers saw this school as a place for their activity as well. They started to flock to the school and not demand, but to say that they had an audience and they wanted to teach, and they wanted space. Art is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, for education as well as for self-expression.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, summer 1944), 5–6; CLS [catalog] (Oakland: CLS, summer 1944), 3. The Oakland campus opened in the fall of 1943.

<sup>15</sup>CLS, “Plans of Study” [unpublished documents], CLS Records, box 1, University of Michigan Library, Special Collections Research Center (hereafter UofMLSCRC).

<sup>16</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, summer 1945), 5–6. Gettleman, “No Varsity Teams,” 339, note 4.

<sup>17</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, fall 1945), 5–6; “U.S. Inflation Calculator,” accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

<sup>18</sup>CLS [catalog], summer 1944, 3; Jenkins, “The Union Movement,” 147, 161; Chris Carlsson, “California Labor School: Historical Essay,” FoundFS: The San Francisco Digital History Archive, accessed July 23, 2023, [https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=California\\_Labor\\_School](https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=California_Labor_School).

<sup>19</sup>*Scholar and School*, 1.

<sup>20</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, summer 1947), cover; Carlsson, “California Labor School,” online.

<sup>21</sup>CLS [Oakland campus catalog] (Oakland: CLS, winter 1944), 1; Committee on Un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, *100 Things You Should Know about Communism and Education*, vol. 3 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 14.

<sup>22</sup>Jenkins, “The Union Movement,” 147.

An arts advisory council consisting of professionals in the community supported a faculty of prominent writers and artists. Mimi Kagan (1918–1999), for example, led the dance program from 1945 to 1949.<sup>23</sup> She was a Russia-born American modern dancer and choreographer whose avant-garde dance troupe was considered “a thoroughly communized group” and listed by the Federal government as a subversive organization in 1957.<sup>24</sup> Other renowned instructors included Anton Refregier (muralist), Margaret De Patta (jewelry design), and Lou Gottlieb (music).<sup>25</sup> Maya Angelou (1928–2014), a famous African American writer, poet, and civil rights activist, studied theater and dance on a scholarship to the CLS shortly after World War II.<sup>26</sup>

Growing suspicion of Communism and the Soviet Union following the second World War created numerous challenges for the CLS. In July 1947, the school lost accreditation by the California State Board of Education and voluntarily declined tuition reimbursement from the G.I. Bill, possibly to avoid further scrutiny. In April 1948, the U.S. Attorney General added the CLS to the list of subversive organizations due to its left-leaning curriculum and affiliation with the CPUSA.<sup>27</sup> From this point forward, the school experienced constant investigations by the Subversive Activities Control Board in the Department of Justice and other government agencies. In 1951, the school relocated to smaller facilities on Divisadero Street in response to declining enrollment, financial donations, and union support.<sup>28</sup> The focus of the institution shifted away from labor education and it became a center for resistance to political repression during McCarthyism and the Cold War era. In spring 1957, the IRS seized the CLS for alleged tax evasion resulting in closure of the institution.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, winter 1945), 20; CLS [brochure/schedule], fall 1949, n.p.

<sup>24</sup>*Guide to Subversive Organizations and Publications* (Washington DC: Committee on Un-American Activities, 1957), 126.

<sup>25</sup>Jennifer Shaifer, “Metal Rising: The Forming of the Metal Arts Guild, San Francisco (1929–1964)” (master’s thesis, Corcoran College of Art + Design, 2011), 31, Proquest (923278583); CLS [brochure/schedule] (San Francisco: CLS, spring 1950), 1.

<sup>26</sup>Marcia Ann Gillespie, Rosa Johnson Butler, Richard A. Long, *Maya Angelou: A Glorious Celebration* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2008), 29, 36. The U.S. Army rejected Angelou for enlistment due to her brief affiliation with the CLS.

<sup>27</sup>*Communist Ownership of G.I. Schools: Hearing Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations . . . United States Senate, Second Session, Part I* (Washington DC: United States Printing Office, 1956), 5, 91, 103–4.

<sup>28</sup>Carlsson, “California Labor School: Historical Essay,” online.

<sup>29</sup>*Scholar and School*, 1; “Red Front Ruling Closes Labor School,” *San Rafael Daily Independent Journal*, May 3, 1957, 2; *Finding Aid to the CLS Collection*. Senator Joseph McCarthy spearheaded campaigns of political repression and persecution against left-wing individuals, alleged communists, and Soviet influence on American institutions during the late 1940s through the 1950s. Landon R. Y. Storres, “McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, July 2, 2015; <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.6>.

## Music Instruction at the California Labor School

Music instruction at the CLS began in summer 1944 with the introduction of a choral ensemble and a music appreciation course. In addition, a children's drama workshop met on Saturdays and included a one-hour lesson in dance and music.<sup>30</sup> In December 1945, Director Jenkins proposed the organization of a music department with a comprehensive curriculum consisting of courses in music history and culture, arranging, group piano, and choral singing. According to Jenkins,

At present, there are few means through which labor can find expression in music in the Bay area. Whatever the California Labor School can do in fostering appreciation and production of music among the trade unions and the many community groups in San Francisco will add to . . . the unity of the diverse cultural groups which make up the Bay Area.<sup>31</sup>

The proposal asked for \$5,000 for the coming year to cover the cost of (a) a music department director, (b) additional instructors, (c) sheet music, and (d) equipment and maintenance.<sup>32</sup>

Jenkins enlisted support from Isaac Stern, an American violinist, and Alfred Frankenstein, a music critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A letter signed by Stern and Frankenstein in March 1946 solicited donations for the music department and emphasized the desire to

. . . provide opportunities for cultural development for those sections of the community which are not now served by existing musical and cultural centers . . . [because] . . . no one who wishes to gain musical instruction or greater knowledge of music should be denied this privilege.<sup>33</sup>

The CLS offered an expanded music curriculum starting in spring 1946 that included Choral Singing I and II, Piano for Beginners I and II, and three different courses in music history and culture.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>CLS [catalog], summer 1944, 23, 27, 29. The CLS also offered Saturday classes for children in visual art. Future iterations of music and drama workshops included instrument making. CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, fall 1945), 25.

<sup>31</sup>David Jenkins, "Organization of a Music Department for the California Labor School," [unpublished document], December 17, 1945, 1, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC. Despite music programs in local public schools and universities, there were likely few if any institutions or organizations in the San Francisco area where common workers could study music or learn to use it to support the labor movement.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Alfred Frankenstein and Isaac Stern to potential donors, March 1, 1946, 1, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>34</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, spring 1946), 29.



## Music Appreciation, Fundamentals, and Songwriting

The CLS offered several courses related to music history, culture, and composition. Most of these classes met sporadically for one or two terms, probably due to student interest and faculty availability and expertise.

Music appreciation courses, such as “How to Enjoy Music” in fall 1944, provided “a brief historical survey of the elements of musical composition.”<sup>35</sup> The winter 1945 catalog described “What Is Music and How Should We Listen to It?” as “a brief survey of the development of music from the past to the present [as] illustrated by records and guest artists.”<sup>36</sup> “An Introduction to Classical Music” in fall 1948 consisted of twelve lessons devoted to one or two western composers or musical styles each week.<sup>37</sup> These and other classes related to art music, such as “Music Form and Content” and “Music of Our Day,” were intended to help “those without previous musical knowledge . . . develop [the] ability to hear and understand music . . . [and] . . . thereby the enjoyment of the music listener.”<sup>38</sup> Although not focused directly on a communist agenda, these courses were likely taught through a leftist lens. For example, a lesson on Soviet composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev focused on “the nature and development of musical forms under a socialist government.”<sup>39</sup> From a broader perspective, classes related to music history and culture provided an avenue for self-improvement by exposing people of the working class to artistic expression often reserved for the bourgeois elite.<sup>40</sup>

Students could also study popular genres. “Jazz Talks” (spring 1945) and “American Jazz” (fall 1945) consisted of a series of five informal lectures on several prominent black musicians and the character, history, and background of the genre.<sup>41</sup> This course expanded to ten sessions beginning in spring 1946.<sup>42</sup> Contrary to their Soviet counterparts who viewed jazz as a degenerate western art form, communists in the United States embraced this music as an embodiment of the national character, and to create a welcoming and familiar environment that would attract American workers to the party.<sup>43</sup> Classes in jazz at the CLS represented a progressive curriculum and preceded those at mainstream colleges and universities, where faculty often viewed

<sup>35</sup> CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, fall 1944), 29.

<sup>36</sup> CLS [Oakland campus catalog] (Oakland: CLS, fall 1945), 13.

<sup>37</sup> CLS [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, fall 1948), n.p.

<sup>38</sup> Quote from CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, summer 1946), 27 and (fall 1944), 29; *Announcing California Labor School* [flyer] (1954); *An Introduction to Classical Music* [outline] (San Francisco: CLS, 1948), 2, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>39</sup> *An Introduction to Classical Music* [outline], 2.

<sup>40</sup> Gettleman, “Lost World,” 210.

<sup>41</sup> CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, spring 1945), 27, 34; *Register Now: American Jazz* [flyer], (San Francisco: CLS, 1945). CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>42</sup> CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, spring 1946), 30.

<sup>43</sup> Ottanelli, *Communist Party of the United States*, 127–28.

European practices and composed repertoire as superior to vernacular (i.e., African American) traditions and improvised music.<sup>44</sup>

A few courses focused on larger issues related to music and sociology. “Music of the American People” in summer 1945 included discussions on “how the people’s music is an influence on what they do and is itself formed by what they do and think.”<sup>45</sup> Likewise, a five-week lecture series in fall 1949 focused on “Music in Developing Society.”<sup>46</sup>

The CLS also offered courses related to music theory and composition. “Music Fundamentals” in the late 1940s and early 1950s focused on the basics of reading and writing music notation.<sup>47</sup> “Song Writers Group” in the mid to late 1940s called on musicians, songwriters, and poets to experiment with music composition around communist ideals. The class involved “a cooperative group in writing songs about world peace, unions, anti-discrimination, folk life, and other major fields in our daily lives.”<sup>48</sup> A flyer advertising the course stated that “. . . songs can be used as a method for expressing ideas and vital issues. . . . Songs for the people can be written by the people. All that is needed is some cooperative action between musicians and lyric writers.”<sup>49</sup> A report by the California Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities took a less favorable view, stating that the CLS had “inaugurated classes in the science of agitational song writing.”<sup>50</sup>

## Applied Lessons

Applied vocal and instrumental music was regularly offered at the CLS. “Piano for Beginners” began in fall 1945 and provided class instruction for up to ten students. The course provided “a working knowledge of . . . rhythm, scales, chords, elementary harmony, and sight reading” and expanded to include four levels by fall 1946.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, the institution offered classes in guitar starting in summer 1947 that focused on chordal accompaniment, and eventually on the history, literature, and technique of

---

<sup>44</sup>Leon De Bruin, “Jazz Education: Revolution or Devolution?” in *Revolutions in Music Education*, ed. Andrew Sutherland, Jane Southcott, and Leon De Bruin (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2022), 103.

<sup>45</sup>CLS [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, summer 1945), 25.

<sup>46</sup>CLS [brochure/schedule] (San Francisco: CLS, fall 1949), n.p.

<sup>47</sup>CLS [brochure/schedule], (spring & fall, 1948; Spring 1950), n.p.

<sup>48</sup>CLS [catalog], summer 1946, 28; fall 1946, 40; *CLS Yearbook & Catalog* (San Francisco: CLS, 1948), 32. The class was titled “Song Workshop” in 1948.

<sup>49</sup>Janet MacHarg and Len Ralston, *Wanted: Musicians, Song Writers, Poets* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1946), CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>50</sup>California Legislature, *Fifth Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities* (Sacramento: California State Senate, 1949), 543.

<sup>51</sup>CLS [catalog], fall 1945, quote on p. 23; fall 1946, 40.

the instrument.<sup>52</sup> Private lessons for guitar, piano, and violin were also available periodically during the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>53</sup>

Vocalists could study at the CLS through both class and private instruction. Class lessons during summer 1947 centered on the fundamentals of singing and were mainly intended to prepare students for participation in the CLS Chorus. However, instructor Frederick Welsh also offered private instruction “in classical and popular singing directed particularly to interpretation of songs of the people.” He also “provided training for those who have personal speech problems to correct foreign accent or stuttering, stammering, or lisping.”<sup>54</sup> These lessons helped recent immigrants improve their English, assimilate into American society, and avoid discrimination.<sup>55</sup>

### *Instrumental Ensembles*

The music department at the CLS occasionally offered ensemble courses for instrumentalists. The Modern Music Ensemble during the winter 1945 term consisted of a small orchestra for players with previous experience who performed “American music, both serious and popular” at school functions.<sup>56</sup> The Music Makers Workshop in spring and summer 1945 offered “an orchestra for fun for people who work” that met on Sunday evenings from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Participants rehearsed “serious and popular” folk music and did not pay a fee for the class.<sup>57</sup> An orchestra during the summer 1946 term emphasized music from the classical, romantic, and modern periods. Despite the complex repertoire, organizers encouraged participation by providing instruments and offering “special assistance . . . to less advanced students.”<sup>58</sup> Instrumental ensembles at the CLS were short lived, perhaps due to students’ lack of previous experience and opportunities to learn.<sup>59</sup>

### *Choral Singing*

Choral singing at the CLS began in summer 1944 when Naomi Sparrow, a local musician, organized the California Chorus on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. One session each week focused on the rehearsal of “folk, classic and topical songs” while the other provided instruction in music theory and appreciation.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>52</sup>*Guitar* [course outline], summer 1947, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC; *CLS* [brochures/schedules] (San Francisco: CLS, winter, summer, fall 1949).

<sup>53</sup>*CLS* [brochures/schedules], fall 1948, winter 1949, summer 1949, fall 1949, winter 1950.

<sup>54</sup>*CLS* [catalog], summer 1947, 29.

<sup>55</sup>Alene Moyer, *Foreign Accent: The Phenomenon of Non-Native Speech* (New York: Cambridge, 2013), 89–90.

<sup>56</sup>*CLS* [catalog], winter 1945, inside cover.

<sup>57</sup>*CLS* [catalog], spring 1945, 27; summer 1945, 25.

<sup>58</sup>*CLS* [catalog], summer 1946, 48.

<sup>59</sup>I found no other instrumental ensembles at the CLS after the summer 1946 term.

<sup>60</sup>*CLS* [catalog], summer 1944, 29.

By fall 1945, students enrolled in this ensemble through the Oakland campus and met on Thursday evenings in Berklee under the direction of Lorraine Campbell, a local singer, and a graduate of the University of California.<sup>61</sup>

The course catalog for the main campus of the CLS in San Francisco listed two levels of choral singing in spring 1946, each meeting for 2 hours on Monday nights. Choral Singing I was for beginners without the ability to read notation while Choral Singing II included students with prior experience or who had completed Choral Singing I. Leo E. Christiansen, a local church musician and former student at the school, served as conductor of the choir and director of the CLS music department.<sup>62</sup>

**Organization.** The CLS Chorus consisted of “office worker[s], social workers, writers, artists, longshoremen, warehousemen, waiters, technicians, housewives, students, veterans and public workers” and “allow[ed] no discrimination” when accepting members (see Figure 1).<sup>63</sup> Twenty-nine singers participated in the ensemble in June 1949 including six sopranos, eight altos, six tenors, and nine basses.<sup>64</sup> As was typical with communist organizations, everyone had a designated role and a voice in the decision-making process. The conductor had the final word on musical interpretation, policy, and programming. However, a repertoire committee solicited recommendations from the membership and met regularly with the conductor to discuss music selection. The librarian and a “house committee” maintained the music collection and other materials. The secretary was responsible to the director and monitored attendance records and handled correspondence.

A business agent elected by the members received performance requests, handled logistics, and collected fees from sponsoring organizations. This individual also ensured that the ensemble was presented in the best possible manner. One document, for example, stated that “The Chorus generally will not appear at cocktail parties, but if at an affair where refreshments are served, the dispensing of such refreshments must cease when the Chorus sings.” Policies of the CLS Chorus required a unanimous vote to accept an engagement. If 65 percent of the members were for and 35 percent against accepting a performance request, the engagement was declined unless the 35 percent adopted the position of the 65 percent. This practice ensured that every member agreed to participate in each appearance.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup>*CLS* (Oakland) [catalog] (Oakland: CLS, fall 1945), 13. Sparrow continued to serve as coordinator of the ensemble, which probably included singers from both the Oakland and San Francisco campuses.

<sup>62</sup>*CLS* [catalog], spring 1946, 29; *CLS* [catalog] (San Francisco: CLS, fall 1946), 4–5; “The Tom Mooney School,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 3, 1942, p. 8. Christiansen organized a chorus at the Oakland campus in the fall of 1948. *CLS* [brochure/schedule], fall 1948, n.p.

<sup>63</sup>*California Labor School Chorus* [unpublished document], n.d., 2, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>64</sup>*Annual Concert: California Labor School Chorus* [program], June 19, 1949, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>65</sup>*California Labor School Chorus* [unpublished document], n.d., 1–2. *The Annual Concert* [program] for June 19, 1949, p. 4, also listed an assistant director.



**Figure 1.** California Labor School chorus conducted by Leo E. Christiansen, circa 1950. Courtesy Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

*Performances and Repertoire.* The CLS Chorus appeared frequently at civic and school events and before trade unions, meetings of the AFL and CIO, and other organizations. Repertoire varied greatly and consisted of western art music, African American spirituals, labor songs, and folk selections from the United States and abroad.<sup>66</sup> Many selections contained original or adapted lyrics that supported communist ideals. Others represented patriotic music from countries with active communist movements including Russia, China, and Spain, sometimes sung in the original language.<sup>67</sup>

In May 1946, the ensemble performed “The House I Live In” during an event sponsored by the U.S. State Department honoring visitors from the Soviet Union.<sup>68</sup> This song by Earl Robinson (music) and Abel Meeropol (lyrics) extolled the ideals of American democracy and religious freedom. Meeropol was a white and Jewish writer and musician who was a member of the CPUSA. He and his wife adopted the children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg after they were executed in 1953 by the United States for

<sup>66</sup>CLS Chorus [repertoire list], n.d., 3.

<sup>67</sup>[review] *Daily Palo Alto Times*, May 19, 1947. CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC. The group sang in Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, and English. [Order form for CLS record], n.d., box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>68</sup>“Soviet Writers Are Due Here Today on Tour,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 10, 1946, 4.

espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.<sup>69</sup> Robinson was a white left-leaning composer and folk singer-songwriter blacklisted as a communist in the 1950s.<sup>70</sup> The CLS Chorus occasionally appeared with Robinson in concert and regularly presented his songs, including “Joe Hill” about a famous labor leader framed for murder and executed in 1915, and “The Same Boat Brother,” which conveyed a message of global cooperation.<sup>71</sup>

On October 9, 1949, the CLS Chorus sang “People’s Song” [Ch. “Rénmín zhī gē”] at a meeting of the Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association celebrating the twelfth anniversary of communist victories in China.<sup>72</sup> At this event, a group of forty Chinese males supporting Democracy in China violently interrupted the meeting and broke windows, smashed furniture, threw eggs, and spread blue dye around the hall.<sup>73</sup> In February 1949 and 1950, the ensemble performed songs of freedom and liberation at National Negro History Week celebrations. Selections in 1950 included a musical setting of the poem “Freedom Train,” by Langston Hughes, the spiritual “Go Down Moses,” and the Negro national anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”<sup>74</sup> On Friday, May 12, 1950, the chorus appeared with Earl Robinson and Paul Robeson at a concert sponsored by the local progressive party and the *California Eagle*, a black-owned newspaper.<sup>75</sup> Robeson was a popular African American singer, actor, and social activist who was investigated for his alleged involvement in the Communist Party, the early civil rights movement, and Soviet affairs.<sup>76</sup> According to the *California Eagle*, “The chorus of the California Labor School, directed by Earl Robinson, shared honors with Paul Robeson, and were applauded as they sang ‘May Day for Peace,’ ‘Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,’ and other popular songs. The climax came when, with Robeson taking the leading part, they sang ‘The Ballad for Americans,’ composed by Robinson.”<sup>77</sup>

The Chorus also presented full-length concerts at school and throughout the community. In April 1947 and June 1948, the ensemble presented joint recitals with the CLS Dance Company, led by Mimi Kagen. The program in 1947 included a selection

<sup>69</sup>Nancy Kovaleff Baker, “Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan): Political Commentator and Social Conscience,” *American Music* 20, no. 1 (2002): 25–26, 63–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052242>; Abel Meeropol performed and published his music under the pseudonym of Lewis Allan.

<sup>70</sup>Steven E. Gilbert and Jonas Westover, “Robinson, Earl (Hawley),” *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2257966>.

<sup>71</sup>“Earl Robinson Concert Tonight,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 23, 1945, C15; “Joe Hill,” CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC; “The Same Boat Brother,” [sheet music], Wisconsin (WI) Historical Society, California Labor School (CLS) Records, box 1, folder 9.

<sup>72</sup>Happy Lim to Leo E. Christiansen, September 6, 1949. Stanford Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>73</sup>“Outbreak in Chinatown,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 10, 1949, 1.

<sup>74</sup>“Meeting to Mark Observance of Negro History Week Here,” *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, January 29, 1949, 3; “Grand Festival,” [flyer], 1950, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>75</sup>“Paul Robeson Concert Draws Enthusiastic Thousands,” *California Eagle*, May 18, 1950, 1.

<sup>76</sup>Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex: Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012), 1–3, 14–15; *Report of Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California* (Sacramento: California State Senate, 1947), 288–93.

<sup>77</sup>“Paul Robeson Concert Draws Enthusiastic Thousands,” 30.

titled “She Died for Us,” sung by the Chorus to the tune of the Russian folksong “Meadowlands.” The work featured Kagan as a solo dancer portraying Zoya Anatolyevna Kosmodemyanskaya, an eighteen-year-old female Russian fighter who was tortured and hanged by the Nazis in 1941.<sup>78</sup> One selection in 1948 titled “The Whole Wide World Around,” featured words by singer/songwriter Tom Glazer sung to the choral “‘O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden’” (“O Sacred Head Now Wounded”), from J. S. Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*.<sup>79</sup> The first verse proclaims that,

Because we all are comrades wherever we may be,  
 One union shall unite us, forever proud and free.  
 No fascist shall defeat us, no tyrant strike us down,  
 All those who toil shall greet us, the whole wide world around.<sup>80</sup>

In May 1947, the Chorus appeared with the Dance Company in their first feature performance off campus at a high school in Palo Alto. Prior to the concert, Christiansen reminded singers of the importance of this event saying, “Hitherto, it has been our good fortune to appear before friends. In this case, however, we shall face a highly critical audience that has heard the finest in choral groups and will compare us in matters of technique, shading, quality, etc.”<sup>81</sup> A review in the *Daily Palo Alto Times* praised the chorus’s “precision, . . . vigorous attack, . . . [and] clean diction (in Spanish, French and Russian as well as English!).” The writer also stated that “Their tone is nothing special, which makes it all the more remarkable that [Christiansen] can draw out of them as much variety in effect. They are at their best in the livelier folk songs. The railroad songs were delightful.”<sup>82</sup>

Christiansen occasionally challenged the CLS Chorus with extended multi-movement works. In December 1949 and January 1950, the ensemble presented *The Yellow River Cantata*, written by Chinese composer Xian Xinghai (1905–1945) in 1939.<sup>83</sup> Xinghai adapted the lyrics from a poem authored by Guang Weiren during the

<sup>78</sup> *California Labor School Chorus, Mimi Kagan and her Dance Company* [program], April 19 & 20, 1947, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC; Adrienne M. Harris, “The Lives and Deaths of a Soviet Saint in the Post-Soviet Period: The Case of Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, no. 2/4 (2011): 277, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41708343>.

<sup>79</sup> *The California Labor School Presents the California Labor School Chorus and the Mimi Kagan Dance Company in Concert* [program] (San Francisco: CLS, June 1948), 2, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>80</sup> Tom Glazer/J. S. Bach, “The Whole Wide World Around” [sheet music]. CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC; “The Whole Wide World Around,” See “Protest in Harmony” [website], <https://www.protestinharmony.org.uk/songs/the-whole-wide-world-around/> for lyrics and a recording. The Weavers and Peter, Paul and Mary recorded this song.

<sup>81</sup> Leo E. Christiansen to CLS Chorus Members, May 13, 1947. CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>82</sup> [review] 1947.

<sup>83</sup> *The California Labor School Presents the Yellow River Cantata* [flyers], December 1949 and January 1950, CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

Second Sino-Japanese War. The work described the oppression of the Chinese people under Japanese invasion and called for all to take up arms to defend China.<sup>84</sup> The Chorus performed an English translation of the original Chinese lyrics.<sup>85</sup> The often unison and two-part texture of the four vocal parts was relatively easy to learn and thus conducive to amateur singers.<sup>86</sup>

The CLS Chorus presented the first English performance of *The Song of the Forest* (*Pesn' o lesak*) by Dmitrii Shostakovich (Op. 81) on November 4, 1951, at the American Russian Institute celebration of American-Soviet Friendship Week.<sup>87</sup> The composer created this large-scale patriotic oratorio in 1949 on a text by the official poet of the Soviet Union, Yevgeny Dolmatovsky. The work glorifies Joseph Stalin and recounts his reforestation program in Russian and Siberian following the devastation of WWII. Required performances of “Song of the Forest” in communist Eastern bloc countries functioned as propaganda and reminded citizens of their subordination to the Soviet Union.<sup>88</sup> In recounting the performance, Christiansen said,

Our presentation . . . continues our interest in learning and presenting the people’s music of all nations. The vast afforestation project of which the cantata sings is an example of the peaceful occupation of the Soviet people. We look to the coming day when there shall be exchange visits of American and Soviet choral groups, each singing of their respective and harmonious plans for controlling nature.<sup>89</sup>

The ensemble also staged musicals around communist themes. In April and May 1950, they presented a one-act comedic satire on *Trial by Jury* by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. Lyrics freely adapted from the original operetta as well as *Pirates of Penzance* and *Pinafore* conveyed a story centering on the unjust trials of prominent

---

<sup>84</sup>Hon-Lun Yang, “The Making of a National Musical Icon: Xian Xinghai and His Yellow River Cantata,” In *Music, Power, and Politics*, ed. Annie J. Randall (New York: Routledge, 2004), 87–89.

<sup>85</sup>“California Labor School [reunion],” [audio recording no. 5], Remarks by Leo E. Christiansen. Recorded October 17, 1987, California Revealed: Labor Archives and Research Center web site, <https://californiarevealed.org/do/e27b8ba5-4740-447c-b68a-ae94398c648d>.

<sup>86</sup>Xiangtang Hong, “Performing the Yellow River Cantata” (DMA diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2009), 42, 47, 51. The Chorus might have performed the six-movement English version of the Cantata, translated by Wallingford Riegger in 1946 and accompanied by piano. Riegger’s version omitted movements three and six.

<sup>87</sup>*Song of the Forest: “Dawn of the Age of Peace,”* Music by Dmitri Shostakovich, Lyrics by Eugene Dolmatovsky, English Adaptation by Leo E. Christiansen [libretto] (San Francisco: CLS, 1951), front cover.

<sup>88</sup>Jack Weiner, “The Destalinization of Dmitrii Shostakovich’s ‘Song of the Forests,’ Op. 81 (1949),” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 38, no. 4 (1984): 215–16, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1346881>; Gerard McBurney, “Repertoire Note: *The Song of the Forests* (*Das Lied von den Wäldern: Oratorium*) op. 81 (1949),” n.d., <https://tinyurl.com/ms557ssx>.

<sup>89</sup>Irene J. Miller and Holland Roberts, “For Peace and Friendship,” *New World Review* 20, no. 9 (1952): 55.



communists in the United States.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, *North Atlantic*—written soon after the establishment of the anti-communist North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—was a political spoof on the musical *South Pacific* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein.<sup>91</sup> Songs included “There’s Nothing Like a Union” (to the tune of “There’s Nothing Like a Dame”), “I’m Gonna Wash That Union Outa My Hair” (tune: “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair”), and “Bally Hoo” (tune: “Bali Hai”). “Some Enchanted Evening” from the original musical became “Some Subversive Evening.” Figure 2 provides lyrics for the first two verses.<sup>92</sup>

**Recordings.** The CLS Chorus produced three ten-inch 78 r.p.m. records.<sup>93</sup> Members of the choir selected song titles and helped finance these projects. Giacomo Patri, an Italian-born American artist and teacher at the CLS, designed the label (see Figure 3). The first record, produced around the fall of 1947, consisted of two pieces—“La Marseillaise,” the national anthem of France by Claude Joseph Rouget, and “Viva La Quince Brigada,” about Irishmen who fought in the Spanish Civil War against Franco. The choir chose these songs because they demonstrated the group’s ability to sing in foreign languages.<sup>94</sup>

Two subsequent records featured the music and prose of African Americans. One recording produced during the 1949–50 academic year included the Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson; “No More Auction Block,” a negro revolt song; and “Jim Crow,” an American

VERSE 1	VERSE 2
Some subversive evening	Some subversive evening
You may see a stranger	Someone may be listening
You may see a stranger	You may hear him listening
From the F. B. I.	On your telephone
And somehow you know	And night after night
You know even then	Whatever is said
That somewhere you’ll see him	You’ll wonder if someone
Again and again	Is under the bed

**Figure 2.** Lyrics, verses 1 and 2, “Some Subversive Evening” from *North Atlantic*.

<sup>90</sup>“CLS [reunion],” Remarks by Leo E Christiansen, October 17, 1987; “Trial by Jury,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 4, 1950, 21; *Trial by Jury: Program and Libretto* (San Francisco: CLS, 1950), 17, WI Historical Society, CLS Records, box 1, folder 8.

<sup>91</sup>Gettleman, *Lost World*, 207.

<sup>92</sup>*North Atlantic* [libretto], WI Historical Society, CLS Records, box 1, folder 8.

<sup>93</sup>All three CLS Chorus recordings are available at <https://archive.org/details/6-freedom-train-pt-1-2-cls>.

<sup>94</sup>*CLS Yearbook & Catalog*, 1948, 32; *CLS Chorus* [unpublished document], n.d., 5.



**Figure 3.** California Labor School chorus record label.

folksong with words adapted by the Almanac Singers. According to program notes associated with the recording, the song “Jim Crow” “. . . hammers home the point that only the elimination of Jim Crow and white Chauvinism through the development of Negro-white unity can ‘put an end to the slavery’ and help to build a land where ‘Everybody’s free.’”<sup>95</sup>

The third record, issued in the early 1950s, presented the poem “Freedom Train,” by Langston Hughes, read by Walter J. “Buddy” Green, and accompanied by the spiritual “Go Down Moses,” by the CLS Chorus.<sup>96</sup> Green was an African American member of the Communist Party, a local labor activist, and a staff member for the communist newspaper, the *People’s Daily World*.<sup>97</sup> The Freedom Train was a travelling museum sent from Washington DC by the Federal government in September 1947. This two-year initiative sought to promote patriotism in all forty-eight states through a display of important historical documents and artifacts. However, the Freedom Train soon

<sup>95</sup>CLS [brochure/schedule] (San Francisco: CLS, 1950, spring), n.p.; [CLS Chorus record order form w/ program notes], n.d. CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC. This quote from the order form incorporates lyrics from “Jim Crow.”

<sup>96</sup>CLS Chorus with Walter J. ‘Buddy’ Green, “Freedom Train,” recorded circa 1950 on CLS private label.

<sup>97</sup>“Investigation of Communist Activities in the San Francisco Bay Area-Part 2,” in *Hearings Before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-Third Congress, First Session* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954), 3232–3, 3407–9; Buddy Green and Steve Murdock, *The Jerry Newson Story* (Berkeley: East Bay Civil Rights Congress, 1950), back cover; “Communist Sentenced in East Bay,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 1947, 10.

encountered controversy due to its all-white staff and the fact that some cities in the South would not permit whites and blacks to view the exhibit together, as intended by organizers.<sup>98</sup> Hughes' poem, published the week of the train's departure, questioned if it truly represented freedom and predicted challenges along the journey, saying,

Who is the engineer on the Freedom Train?

Can a coal-black man drive the Freedom Train?

Or am I still a porter on the Freedom Train?

Is there ballot boxes on the Freedom Train?

Do colored folks vote on the Freedom Train?

When it stops in Mississippi, will it be made plain

Everybody's got a right to board the Freedom Train?<sup>99</sup>

### *Informal Music Learning*

In addition to curricular music courses, applied lessons, and ensembles, the CLS also offered informal and non-curricular music activities for the student body and the community at large. In some cases, the purpose of these events was to bring music to the masses. For example, the institution sponsored a series of recitals in May and June 1946 that included performances by the East Bay String Quartet and concert pianist Tanya Urey.<sup>100</sup> The *Berklee Daily Gazette* congratulated the CLS "on its efforts to bring to East Bay audiences programs of such high caliber."<sup>101</sup> Paul Robeson appeared in concerts under the auspices of the CLS in 1953 and 1955. The concert in 1955 included art songs, spirituals, and music of the Chinese, Mexican, and Jewish peoples. Alan Booth, an African American concert pianist, accompanied Robeson and performed several solo selections, including pieces by black composers Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

<sup>98</sup>Ted Widmer, "Remembering the Freedom Train," *New Yorker*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/remembering-the-freedom-train>.

<sup>99</sup>Langston Hughes, "Freedom Train," *Our World*, October 1947, <https://steamgiants.com/wiki/events/freedom-train-a-poem-by-langston-hughes/>.

<sup>100</sup>"Labor School to Present Concerts," *Berklee Daily Gazette*, May 8, 1946, 14. The Berklee branch of the CLS sponsored these concerts.

<sup>101</sup>Helana M. Redewill, "Concert Given by Tanya Ury," *Berklee Daily Gazette*, June 12, 1946, 6.

and Amanda Aldrich, Brazilian composer Camargo Guarnieri, and Chinese composer Liu Xue'an.<sup>102</sup>

Concerts of phonograph recordings were also common. A “Sunday Musicale” sponsored by the CLS Student Association in January 1949, for example, included recorded performances of Calypso, music from southern Africa, freedom songs, and anthems of the International Brigade.<sup>103</sup> A similar event the following month featured recordings of symphonic repertoire with commentary by CLS music instructor Bill Jones.<sup>104</sup> A series of concerts sponsored by the Labor School Chorus in summer 1955 presented “selections from new Soviet recordings—many not yet available in West Coast record shops.”<sup>105</sup>

Other music activities were more participatory. The Peoples Song Branch at the CLS was part of a national organization founded by Pete Seeger and others on December 31, 1945, to “create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people.”<sup>106</sup> This group regularly hosted gatherings sometimes referred to as “hootenannies,” which involved informal performances and sing-alongs of folk and labor songs.<sup>107</sup> The Song Branch also participated in local labor strikes. According to Christiansen, “We were expected to go out on the picket lines and entertain the strikers, which we did. We’d get a [flatbed] truck and a piano on the truck and a couple of musicians and a few of our singers and off we’d go during the strike.”<sup>108</sup> (See Figure 4.)

Guest artists often appeared at the CLS and included Pete Seeger (1919–2014), Jenny Wells (1913–2016), and Ernie Lieberman (1930–2023).<sup>109</sup> According to publicity flyers, Wells sang “people’s songs . . . of China, the Soviet Union, France, South

<sup>102</sup>Paul Robeson Sings in San Francisco Concert [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1953), CLS Records, box 2, UofMLSCRC; Paul Robeson in Concert with Alan Booth [program] (San Francisco: CLS, 1955), CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC. Booth was also investigated by the Federal government in connection with his work at the Metropolitan School of Music in New York, which was identified as a communist controlled institution by the Committee on Un-American Activities in New York City. Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Communism in the Metropolitan Music School, Inc., and Related Fields: Hearings, Eighty-Fifth Congress, First Session* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1957), 757–60.

<sup>103</sup>*Sunday Afternoon Musicale: Calypso* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, January 1949), CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC. International Brigades were military units consisting of foreign volunteers who fought on the Republican side against the Nationalist forces during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). “International Brigades,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 30, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Brigades>.

<sup>104</sup>*Sunday Afternoon Musicale; Symphonic Music on Records* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, February 1949), CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

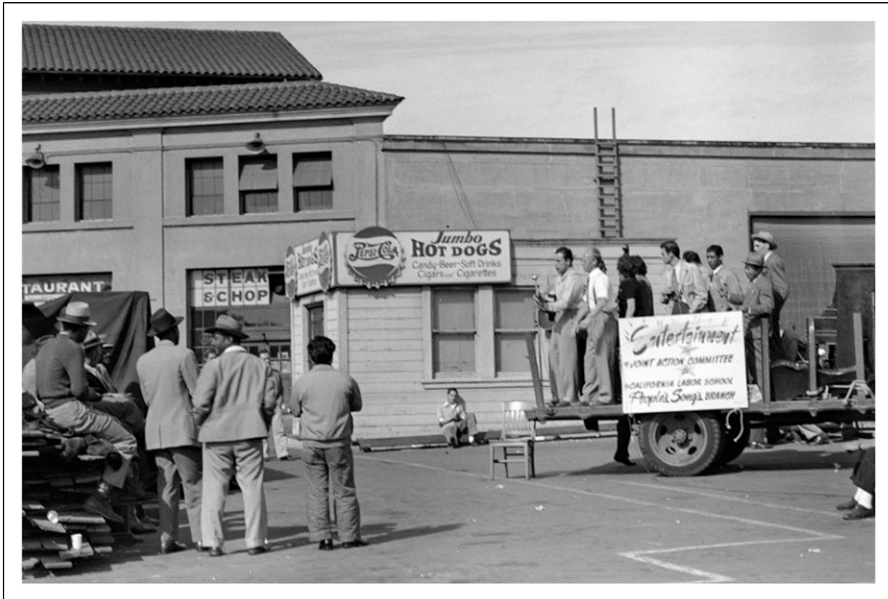
<sup>105</sup>*Sunday Evening Concerts* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1955), CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>106</sup>*Peoples Songs* 1, no. 1 (1946): 1.

<sup>107</sup>CLS [brochures/schedules], winter, summer, fall, 1949; “Education for Action: Opening Reception & People’s Songs Branch Labor Song Sing-a-Long,” Tenderloin Museum website, <https://www.tenderloinmuseum.org/public-programs-2023-1/2023/1/5/peoples-songs-branch>; “Music: Hootenanny,” *Time Magazine* 47, no. 15 (1946): 71–72.

<sup>108</sup>“CLS [reunion],” Remarks by Leo E. Christiansen.

<sup>109</sup>CLS: *Spring Term 1954* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1954); CLS Records, box 2, UofMLSCRC.



**Figure 4.** Performance by the California Labor School people's songs branch near Pier 40, San Francisco, California, circa 1950. Courtesy Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

Africa, Israel, [and] South America[,] and folk songs of the Mexican and Indian people of our own Southwest.”<sup>110</sup> Lieberman offered “an evening of fresh exciting entertainment—humorous and sad, of love and work and peace and freedom . . . to lift the hopes and aims of the people.”<sup>111</sup>

In April 1955, Malvina Reynolds (1900–1978) premiered music from her new book titled *Song in My Pocket*, published by the CLS the previous year.<sup>112</sup> According to CLS Director Holland Roberts, “The book is a bundle of songs inspired by the great people’s movements of our day [and] . . . sings for peace and children at play in a bomb-free world from Maine to Mandalay.”<sup>113</sup> Reynolds was a member of the Communist Party

<sup>110</sup>Jenny Wells: *Famous Folk Singer from the Southwest* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1954); CLS Records, box 2, UofMLSCRC. Wells was a scholar of Hispano music and a social and cultural activist from New Mexico. Rick Romancito, “Legendary Folk Singer Jenny Vincent Dies at 103,” *Taos News*, May 9, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/9nke7ayr>.

<sup>111</sup>Ernie Lieberman and Judy Job in a *Concert of Song and Dance* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1954), CLS Records, box 2, UofMLSCRC. Lieberman sang for unions, civil rights groups, the peace movement, and other causes into the 1980s. “Ernest Lieberman Obituary,” *Mercury News*, September 23, 2023, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/mercurynews/name/ernest-lieberman-obituary?id=53081258>.

<sup>112</sup>*The Stone Flower/Spring Sing* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1955), CLS Records, box 1, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>113</sup>Malvina Reynolds, *Song in My Pocket* (San Francisco: CLS, 1954), inside back cover. The CLS Graphic Workshop produced the cover design and illustrations for the book.

who began her career as a singer and songwriter at the age of 45. Her songs reflected the radical political tradition of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie and frequently addressed issues around feminism, technology, the environment, and peace.<sup>114</sup>

### CLS Faculty

Communists and non-communists alike taught at the CLS. Although most faculty likely held left-leaning political views, the institution did not require instructors to be members of the party.<sup>115</sup> Faculty worked on an adjunct basis and received a standard hourly rate based on course load.<sup>116</sup>

Music faculty came from varied backgrounds. Leo Edward Christiansen (1912–2006) served as music director and on the Board of Directors of the CLS, conducted the chorus, and taught piano, voice, and various other classes. Christiansen was also the choir master and organist at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin (Episcopal) in San Francisco and a former director of the People's Chorus.<sup>117</sup> Following his tenure at the CLS, he served as music director at St. Stephens Episcopal Church, conducted local community ensembles, and taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the College of Marin, and Marin Country Day School.<sup>118</sup>

Several instructors were prominent performers and teachers of classical music. Naomi Sparrow (California Chorus and Children's Drama Workshop) was an active pianist and chamber musician in the San Francisco area and eventually taught at Stanford University.<sup>119</sup> Tomo A. Yagodka (1903–1977) (*How to Enjoy Music*) was a composer and concert pianist who studied with Edward Elgar and performed throughout the United States and abroad. He became director of music therapy at Camarillo State Hospital in 1949 and served in this position for 19 years.<sup>120</sup> Ada Clement (1878–1952) (*What Is Music and How Should We Listen to It?*) was an active concert pianist who founded and directed the San Francisco Conservatory.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>114</sup>David K. Dunaway and Richard Carlin. "Reynolds [née Milder], Malvina," *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2267531>.

<sup>115</sup>*Scholar and School*, 8–9.

<sup>116</sup>CLS [catalog], unpublished document], n.d., 1.

<sup>117</sup>CLS [catalog], spring 1946, 29. The People's Chorus was likely a community group consisting of labor union members or other left-leaning individuals. This ensemble participated in the CIO Labor Day parade in 1941. "Labor Day: Men Who Make the U.S. the Arsenal of Democracy March on Market Street Today," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 1, 1941, 1.

<sup>118</sup>"Choir to Perform at Guild Tea," *San Rafael Daily Independent Journal*, December 12, 1962, 73; "Curtain Call," *San Rafael Daily Independent Journal*, December 14, 1957, 25.

<sup>119</sup>"Obituaries," *Stanford Magazine*, March/April 1999, <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/obituaries-11670>.

<sup>120</sup>CLS [catalog], summer 1944, n.p.; Tomo A. Yagodka, "Relationships in a Music Therapy Program at a Large State Mental Hospital," *Bulletin - National Music Council* 11, no. 3 (1951): 22; "Obituaries," *Ventura County Star*, August 20, 1977, 12.

<sup>121</sup>CLS [catalog], spring 1945, 27; "Miss Ada Clement, M.V. Musician Dies at Home," *Daily Independent Journal*, July 19, 1952, 3. Joseph Biskind taught this course on the Oakland campus in fall 1945. CLS [Oakland campus catalog], fall 1945, 13.

Thompson V. Chesnut (1918–2007) (instrumental ensembles) played French horn in the All American Youth Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski before serving in the U.S. Army during WWII. He founded the Servicemen’s Symphony Orchestra and led a dance band at the CIO Servicemen’s Center in San Francisco.<sup>122</sup>

Other music instructors at the CLS focused on twentieth-century art music or popular genres. Iva Dee Hiatt (1919–1980) (American Jazz, Music of Our Day) studied with Ernest Bloch, Roger Sessions, and Randall Thompson, and earned a Master of Music degree at the University of California Berkeley in 1941. She taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the University of California Extension Division before accepting a position as Director of Choral Music at Smith College in 1948.<sup>123</sup> Ralph Auf de Heide (1915–2008) (Music of the American People) wrote and produced daily music programs for the Office of War Information during WWII. He eventually sold phonograph records and equipment, collected folk music, and wrote record reviews and articles on jazz, folk, and classical music.<sup>124</sup> Janet MacHarg (1923–2003) (Songwriters Workshop) was a political songwriter, cabaret performer, and writer. She joined the Communist Party and became a prominent social activist for the feminist movement, the peace movement, and LGBTQ rights.<sup>125</sup> Lou Gottlieb (1923–1996) taught Music Fundamentals at the CLS in spring 1950. During the following decade, he performed as a jazz pianist and singer, arranged music for the Kingston Trio, and earned a doctorate in musicology from the University of California at Berkeley. In 1959, he helped form the Limeliter Trio where he played bass and served as the comic spokesperson for the group. One music critic stated that the Limeliter “attained a stature equaled perhaps only by The Kingston Trio and The Weavers.”<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

The CLS existed from 1942 to 1957 as a center for adult education affiliated with the Communist Party. Although the curriculum focused on Marxism and labor, the institution also offered classes in general subjects, vocational training, life skills, and the arts to enrich the lives of the immigrants, industrial workers, and people of color that it

<sup>122</sup>“Thompson V Chesnut,” *United States World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938–1946*, FamilySearch database, <https://shorturl.at/aozDH>; “Musical Programs of the Month,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 31, 1940, 26; “USO Club to Hear Servicemen’s Symphony Debut,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 1944, 13.

<sup>123</sup>“Iva Dee Hiatt Papers: Biographical/Historical,” Smith College - Libraries [website], <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/4/resources/202>.

<sup>124</sup>CLS [catalog], spring 1945, 27, 34; “Obituary: Ralph Auf der Heide,” *Santa Barbra Independent*, July 15, 2008, <https://www.independent.com/obits/2008/07/15/ralph-auf-der-heide/>.

<sup>125</sup>“Janet MacHarg Papers: Collection Overview,” accessed November 28, 2023, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8v69rhk/>.

<sup>126</sup>“Lou Gottlieb, 72, the Bass Player for 1960’s Folk Trio Limeliter,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1996, 31; Quote as cited by Steve Rubenstein, “Lou Gottlieb [obituary],” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 12, 1996, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Lou-Gottlieb-2974908.php>.

served.<sup>127</sup> Many people studied music at the CLS for personal growth and enjoyment. Others developed performance and composition skills useful in promoting the values of the Communist Party and the American labor movement. Faculty and guest artists included left-leaning musicians and teachers from a variety of cultural and musical backgrounds, many of whom were or became important social activists during the mid twentieth century.

All music activities probably assumed a communist perspective either directly or indirectly. Classes and ensembles incorporated popular (i.e., people's) music including jazz, folk, labor, and satirical songs, and patriotic repertoire of communist countries outside the United States. Music appreciation courses provided opportunities for people with limited means and experience to study classical repertoire often reserved for the middle and upper classes. Performances by ensembles and guest artists featured music by composers of color and from non-western cultures.<sup>128</sup> Songwriting classes developed artists and materials for the labor and progressive movement.<sup>129</sup> Hootenannies and similar events allowed the CLS community to participate in corporate music making around shared values.<sup>130</sup> According to one observer,

It strikes me that one of the very things the CLS did was to let workers know . . . that culture belonged to them too. That art and drama and music and literature was not just the property of those people that had seats at the opera and who were on the self-perpetuating board of directors at the [fine arts] museum, but that it was for everyone.<sup>131</sup>

The CLS taught music until it closed in 1957. However, the number of courses decreased through the 1950s as fewer students enrolled in the institution.<sup>132</sup> The only music offerings listed in the winter 1957 schedule were beginning and advanced sections of class guitar.<sup>133</sup>

Music instruction at the CLS was a political act that should remind teachers today of the ethics involved in selecting repertoire to promote specific values, perspectives, and positions.<sup>134</sup> In its purest form, communism promotes freedom and equality for everyone through a classless society administered by common citizens without the need for laws. However, the realities and failures of this “Utopian Marxist vision” has often led party leaders to violate human rights and implement policies of social control to

<sup>127</sup>Carlsson, “California Labor School: Historical Essay,” online.

<sup>128</sup>For example, *CLS* [catalog], spring 1946, 29–30; *CLS Chorus and Mimi Kagan Dance Company in Concert* [program], June 1948, 2–3; *Paul Robeson in Concert with Alan Booth* [program], 1955.

<sup>129</sup>*CLS Yearbook & Catalog*, 1948, 32.

<sup>130</sup>For example, *Young Folks Hoot'nanny with Ernie Lieberman* [flyer] (San Francisco: CLS, 1954), CLS Records, box 2, UofMLSCRC.

<sup>131</sup>“CLS [reunion],” Quote by Robert F. Cherny, History Department, San Francisco State University.

<sup>132</sup>Carlsson, “California Labor School: Historical Essay,” online.

<sup>133</sup>*CLS* [brochure/schedule] (San Francisco: CLS, 1957), 2.

<sup>134</sup>Simon Keller, “Forward: On Patriotism and Education,” in *Patriotism and Nationalism in Music Education*, ed. David G. Herbert and Alexandra Kertz-Welzel (New York: Routledge, 2016), xiv–xviii.



remain in power.<sup>135</sup> Likewise, pro-American music commonly presented in PK–16 schools today such as “The Star Spangled Banner,” “America the Beautiful,” or “God Bless America,” might not reflect the experiences of people of color, non-Christians, or those in low socioeconomic conditions. Music educators should consider students’ varied backgrounds when programming patriotic and religious selections or planning performances related to national observances such as Veterans Day and Memorial Day. These decisions might provide opportunities to discuss varied meanings and implications of value-laden repertoire for different social groups in the classroom.<sup>136</sup>

Labor schools operated by the CPUSA provided education to adults unable or uninterested in pursuing a four-year degree and served as predecessors to modern community colleges.<sup>137</sup> Perhaps music activities at the CLS could inform colleges and other organizations looking to provide affordable and accessible enrichment instruction for adult learners. Such offering could include informal and short-term sessions—like Hootenannies and Sunday Musicales at the CLS—that facilitate music making through singing, recreational instruments, or drum circle, or provide opportunities for guided listening or songwriting.<sup>138</sup>

In many ways, the music curriculum at the CLS reflected recommendations for tertiary study today by the College Music Society (CMS) Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major (TFUMM). The TFUMM called for “fundamental change” in collegiate programs that would “reflect relevant needs” and close the gap between “music in the real world” and “music in the academy.” They made recommendations that would lead students to become “improvisor-composer-performers” through a curriculum focused on “creativity, diversity, and integration.” The TFUMM also advocated for more student choice and individualized course plans, streamlined and diversified classes in music theory and history, and an emphasis on service to the community and society.<sup>139</sup>

Similarly, the CLS offered a curriculum that included art music, contemporary popular styles, and folk music from cultures around the world. Students of varying abilities were free to plan their programs around personal interests and encouraged to use their musicianship to engage the community and foster social change locally and abroad. Coursework could have prepared a student as an improvisor-composer-

---

<sup>135</sup>Alice Erh-Soon Tay, “Communist Visions, Communist Realities, and the Role of Law,” *Journal of Law and Society* 17, no. 2 (1990): 155–57.

<sup>136</sup>Carlos R. Abril, “A National Anthem: Patriotic Symbol or Democratic Action,” in *Patriotism and Nationalism in Music Education*, ed. David G. Herbert and Alexandra Kertz-Welzel (New York: Routledge, 2016), 90–92.

<sup>137</sup>Hines, “The Communist Community College,” online.

<sup>138</sup>For example, “Adult Programs,” Old Town School of Folk Music website, <https://www.oldtownschool.org/classes/adults/>.

<sup>139</sup>Patricia Shehan Campbell, David Myers, and Ed Sarath, *Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors* (2016), iii–v, 10–11, 17, quotes on p. iii, College Music Society web site, <https://www.music.org/pdf/pubs/tfumm/TFUMM.pdf>.

performer capable of writing, accompanying, and leading songs at rallies and other events. Perhaps aspects of the music curriculum at the CLS might serve as an example of potential changes in modern undergraduate degree programs.<sup>140</sup>

Future studies should continue to examine the use of music education to support political and social agendas throughout history. This research might reveal the ethical concerns and effectiveness of such practices in the past and suggest ways of addressing similar issues today. Several examples from the United States and beyond exist in the literature.<sup>141</sup>

Historians should also investigate post-secondary music instruction as related to nontraditional curricula, world music, and popular genres. This research might indicate more work in these areas than previously thought, especially outside typical four-year colleges and universities.<sup>142</sup> Findings from these studies could lead to a greater understanding of music education in tertiary institutions during the early and mid twentieth century and provide examples for restructuring current degree and non-degree programs.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Phillip M. Hash  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3384-4715>

---

<sup>140</sup>Campbell, Myers, and Sarath, *Transforming Music Study*, iii–v.

<sup>141</sup>Paul D. Sanders, “Temperance Songs in American School Songbooks, 1865–1899,” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 38, no. 2, 178–208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536600616667602>; Adam Cathcart, “Music and Politics in Hitler’s Germany,” *Madison Historical Review* 3, no. 1 (2006), <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol3/iss1/1>; Anicia Timberlake, “The Practice and Politics of Children’s Music Education in the German Democratic Republic, 1949–1976” (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2015); Angela Hao-Chun Lee, “Nationalism in School Texts in Taiwan,” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 25, no. 1 (2003): 36–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/153660060302500105>.

<sup>142</sup>For example, Kenneth E. Prouty, “The History of Jazz Education: A Critical Reassessment,” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 26, no. 2 (2005): 79–88; Bryan Powell, “A History of Popular Music Education in the United States,” *Journal of Popular Music Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 87–93, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jpme\\_00079\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jpme_00079_1).