

John Philip Sousa critiques modern music, 1930

Introduction

John Philip Sousa (1854–1932), an American composer of classical music, served as the director of the United States Marine Band from 1880 to 1892. During Sousa’s time as leader of “The President’s Own,” as the band was called, he composed some of the best-known pieces of music closely associated with official functions of the United States government and military. These include the famous march “The Washington Post” as well as the equally well-known official march of the United States Marine Corps, “Semper Fidelis,” and the official march of the United States, “The Stars and Stripes Forever.”

In this letter written just two years prior to his death, Sousa declared that the only true measure of the value of music was its beauty. For Sousa, music was inspired from “something above,” and the music of the 1920s was devoid of divine character.

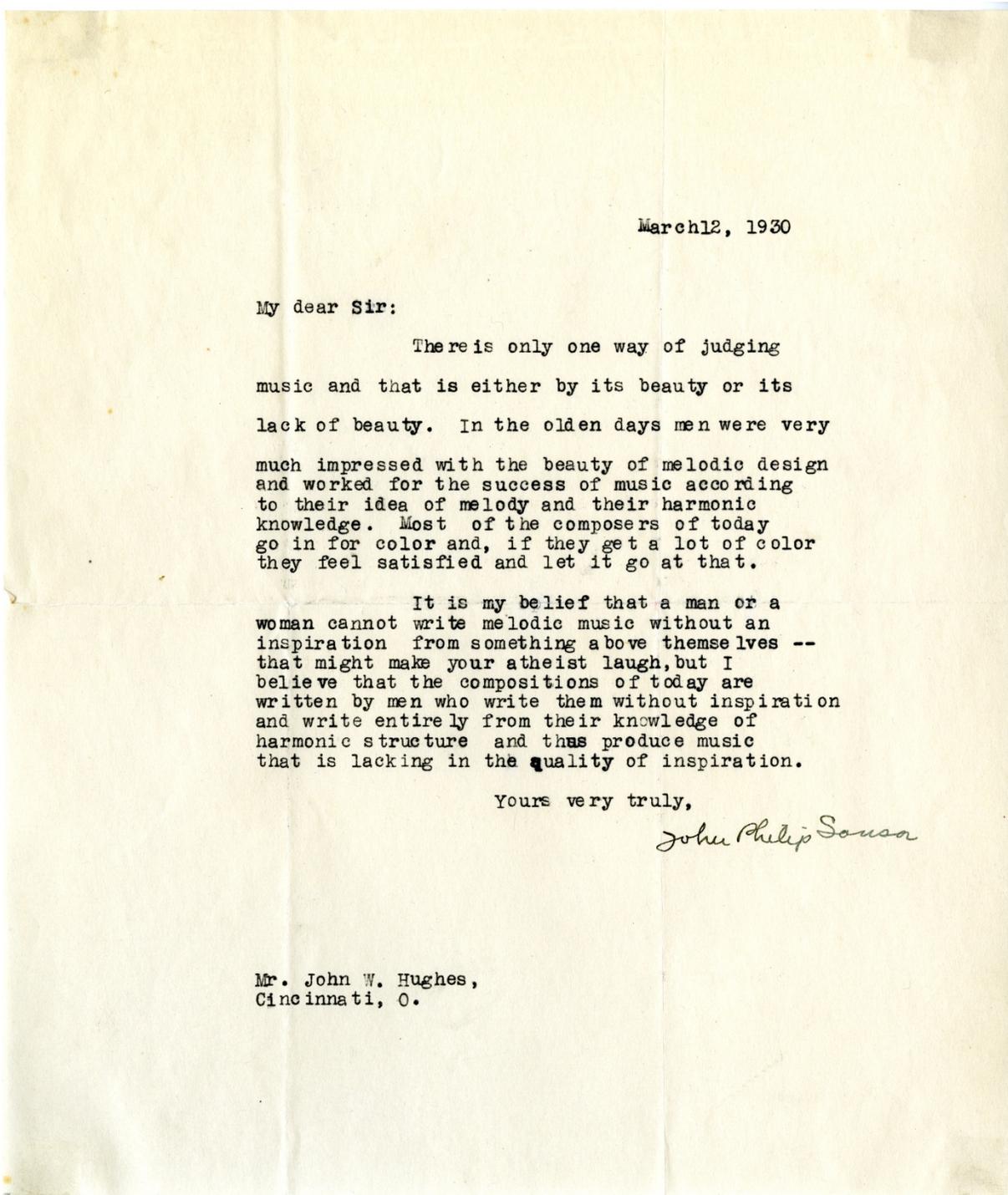
Questions for Discussion

Read the Introduction and the document and then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the questions which follow. NOTE: A helpful resource can be online websites which can provide samples of Sousa’s music as well as a variety of the popular music of the 1920s.

1. Sousa was a well-respected composer of what is often referred to as military music. Compare the tempo and tunes of his most famous works with popular tunes from the 1920s that conformed to styles such as jazz, ragtime, Broadway show tunes, or blues.
2. To what extent is Sousa’s letter an example of a person who feels that “time has passed him by”?
3. On July 4, many holiday concerts and fireworks displays end with the playing of John Philip Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever.” How can we account for the current popularity of that tune?
4. For students of music theory: How did Sousa attempt to explain the relationship of melodic design to inspired compositions?

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Image



John P. Sousa to John W. Hughes, March 12, 1930. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05508.231)

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Transcript

John P. Sousa to John W. Hughes, March 12, 1930. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05508.231)

March 12, 1930

My Dear Sir:

There is only one way of judging music and that is either by its beauty or its lack of beauty. In the olden days men were very much impressed with the beauty of melodic design and worked for the success of music according to their idea of melody and their harmonic knowledge. Most of the composers of today go in for color and, if they get a lot of color they feel satisfied and let it go at that.

It is my belief that a man or a woman cannot write melodic music without an inspiration from something above themselves – that might make your atheist laugh, but I believe that the compositions of today are written by men who write them without inspiration and write entirely from their knowledge of harmonic structure and thus produce music that is lacking in the quality of inspiration.

Yours very truly,

John Philip Sousa

Mr. John W. Hughes

Cincinnati, O