

## Panel Proposal for 2024 DGFA Annual Meeting “American Soundscapes”

Axel Jansen, German Historical Institute Washington

### **American Music in Times of Political Crisis during the 1930s**

This panel considers the cultural and political role of music in times of economic and political crisis. The Great Depression and the rise of dictatorships in Europe challenged American culture and politics to regain its footing in an age shaped by fear. The panel focuses on the decade that preceded the U.S. federal government’s international deployment of culture by exploring milieus and genres on the cusp of becoming part of American global engagement. As part of a “Faustian bargain” that preserved racial segregation to build a new national state (Ira Katznelson), New Deal programs such as the Federal Music Project (FMP) documented and recognized distinct American musical traditions. The FMP recorded and documented folk songs including black spirituals, hillbilly songs, and Native American music. Vaudeville and minstrel shows had given rise to jazz. The New Deal invigorated a discourse about cultural nationalism among composers of classical music and created opportunities for new roles of music in society. By exploring the role, uses, and transformation of different genres prominent in the 1930s (such as folk, jazz, and classical music), the panel addresses distinct American musical traditions just before each would move onto the larger stage provided by the music industry and radio as well as the national and international uses of music during World War II and the Cold War.

Contributions to this panel may focus on topic such as:

- The Federal Music Project and the Great Depression
- Native American Music and the Federal Music Project
- Music and Racial Segregation before and during World War II
- American Folk Music
- The New Deal, the U.S. music industry, and the rise of radio
- Music, World War II, and American culture abroad
- Protest songs and political movements from the 1930s

### *Confirmed Speaker*

**Marcus Gräser, “The Ironies of Cultural Nationalism in a Transnational Age. Aaron Copland and American Music in the 1930s/40s”**

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During the 1930s wave of cultural nationalism composers intensified their efforts to create music that could be considered American and different from European art music, which had dominated classical music in the U.S. This paper focuses on the writings of composer Aaron Copland and on his engagement in the politics of music. The political context for their work prompted composers such as Copland to reflect on their work. No generation of composers wrote as diligently as did this group during the 1920s and 30s. Copland was a key proponent of developing a particular American music. But while he sought to establish a peculiar American music, his music contradicted such claims by endorsing ideals of universal modernism. In doing so, Copland expanded on his generation's exposure to European music (and on his own experience in Paris), which had left him committed to the European idea of modern music. Such contradictions inherent in Copland's writings, his music, and in his political engagement were tokens of his time. By comparing Copland to Austrian composer Ernst Krenek, this paper will show how Copland shared with exiled European composers in the U.S. the intellectual challenge to negotiate nationalism and universalism, and to create a national tradition from the universal language of music.