



WHAT DEFINES THE ‘SONG OF AMERICA’ – 250 YEARS ON?

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As the USA celebrates its 250th anniversary this summer, Jon Tolansky sits down with American baritone Thomas Hampson to hear about the work of his Hampson Foundation in archiving and sharing American Song, a genre which for him ‘makes democracy audible’



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‘If you want to get close to the true soul of America throughout its cultures and its epochs, I think your first step should be to understand the songs of our people: you cannot hear or sing them without having a pretty damn heavy heart sometimes, but they make democracy audible.’ American baritone Thomas Hampson is embarking on an enormous undertaking: a year of extensive events celebrating the 250th anniversary of the United States. Within the wide-ranging eclecticism of his art, the songs of his homeland have been an especial preoccupation, prompting intensive research as well as deeply impassioned performing and recording projects throughout the four decades of his internationally acclaimed career.

The performance and pedagogy of American Song feature prominently in the work of the [Hampson Foundation](#), Hampson’s large-scale interactive listening and study resource. Described by its founder as ‘first and foremost a repository for high quality digital multimedia materials connecting classic song and also opera with history and culture’ the foundation’s resources are available in full for free to everyone via the Hampson Foundation website.

“Through Song of America I'm inviting people to examine their own story”



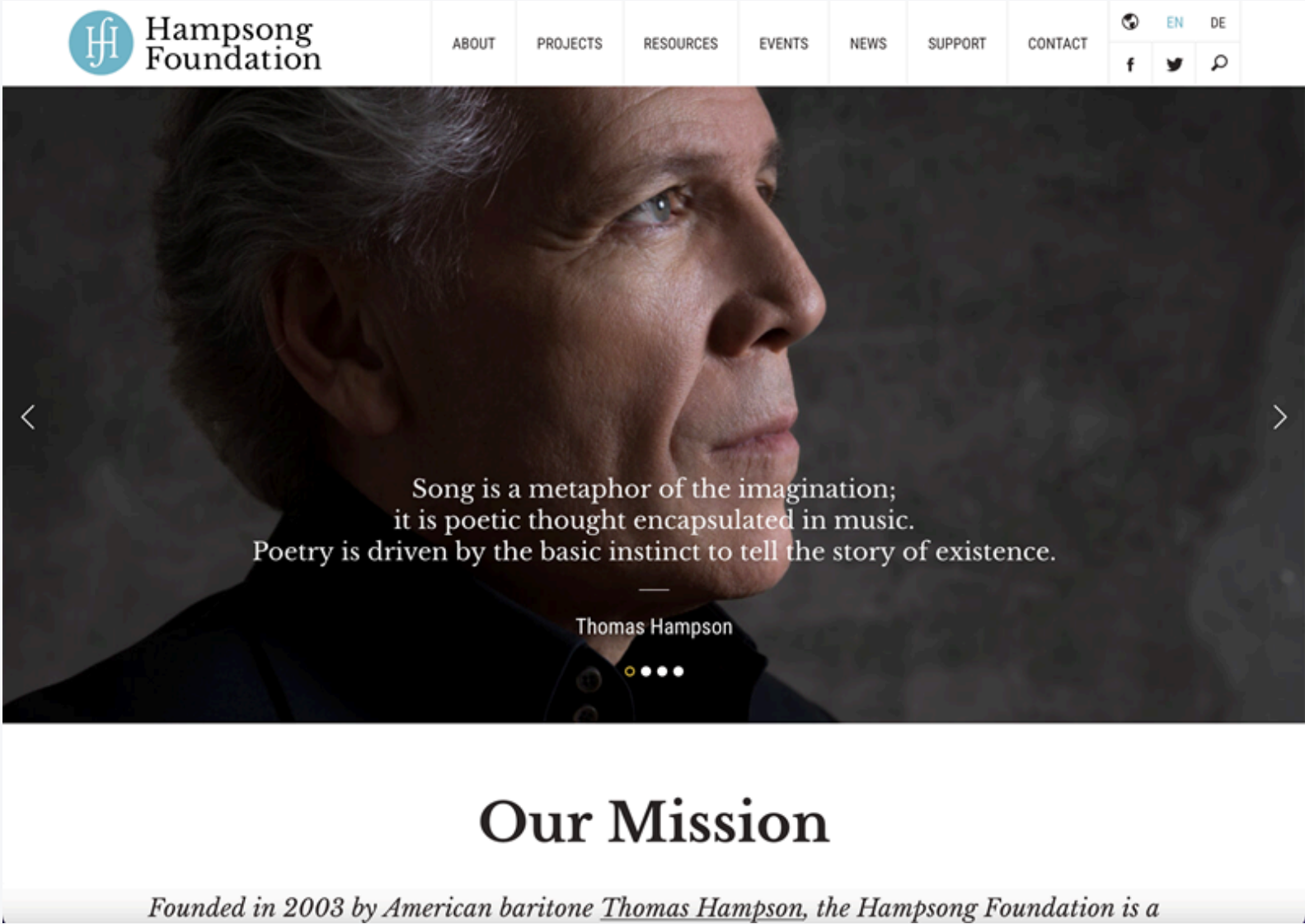
The cumulative story of American existence is told through a profusion of songs across the centuries, all spotlighted through Hampson’s panoramic yet ever-expanding **Song of America** project described on the website as ‘a comprehensive archive of American song that tells the story of our culture and nation, through the eyes of our poets and the ears of our composers’. As well as amassing an enormous database of information, writings and recordings, the archive houses a 13 part in-depth **radio documentary series** by the same name that Hampson designed and hosted for the WFMT Radio Network, with each programme written by a specific scholar. Together with Hampsong Foundation managing director, singer and scholar Christie Finn (pictured left ©Stefanie Diamanti), Hampson also helped co-found the ‘Singing Down the Barriers Institute’, which is ‘an intensive exploration of the repertoire of African American, African and African Diaspora concert composers for the university student, apprentice, teacher (private, high school or university),

coach, choral conductor, church musician, professional singer or organisation administrator.’ This remarkable enterprise has embodied online and in-person teaching and discussion events plus performances, all organised in collaboration with a range of international performance and education venues.

Hampson launched the Song of America online database in 2009, and in this current year of the USA's 250th anniversary it takes on a dynamically dedicated focus that has an especially far-reaching contemporary resonance for him. ‘If you take the volatile development of our American culture through the 19th and 20th centuries and you look at it through the people who were composing music in those times,’ Hampson explains, ‘you start to see a vivid narrative of the very essence of what we call the United States of America, and you immediately identify one crucial element: it is a political and social landscape of myriad cultures. You see an America that is, by definition, eclectic and diverse, and driven by a purpose to recognise, in an empathetic way, diversity and the otherness of the people around you. Quite frankly, whereas in those days that purpose in the USA was a celebratory process of concord and understanding, it has over time been replaced by a polarising polemic of division that right now has exploded into the frightening situation we so cruelly ironically see in this 250th anniversary year of when the United States of America was created on its principles of democracy. I believe, strongly, that one of the islands of quiet solitude we can offer to people as a détente today is the performance of the richly varied and diverse music of our American heritage past and also present within the landscape of multitudinous cultures in a political unity called the *United States*.’

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In that very spirit, the Hampsong Foundation's celebration of USA’s 250th anniversary also includes the writing of a new book: *Thomas Hampson’s Song of America*. The title is a collaboration between Hampson and Foundation managing director Finn, as the book is deeply linked to the project and mission of the Foundation. ‘In a sense the book is in two parts,’ Finn explains. ‘One part opens out the perspective of how Thomas first discovered American Song early in his life and then integrated the genre into his expanding wide-ranging repertoire. We see how as his career transitioned into such an unusually broad range of different international areas, he consciously disseminated his fast growing American song repertoire into them through different means, creating a worldwide contextual visibility for the songs and, most especially through the Song of America manifestations, beginning in the 1990s and continuing through today, transferring that awareness and knowledge to the next generation.’



And what about the book’s other parts? Hampson elaborates: ‘Yes the vehicle driving the book is my American Song passion and story, but at the end of the day I am very concerned for it to be understood that this is most of all a handbook that goes way beyond just me.’

“As you hold the mirror up to yourself in the United States of America, whichever way you turn it is another prism in which to see the diversity and pluralism of our country”

‘Because,’ continues Finn, ‘it includes quite a volume of previously published liner notes, program notes, essays, and various academic writings by Thomas that have been based on deep historical and cultural research. However, quite a large portion of these cannot be found in other places beyond maybe our website or even hidden in our archives somewhere. There is also detailed database information about composers and poets, as well as some of the poetry from the songs that are referenced; and there are Thomas’ thoughts and observations on specific songs. So indeed, these are essentials of a handbook, and especially of value for people who maybe have not engaged at all with American arts and letters other than maybe just knowing a few songs. The purpose is to reveal the great depth and richness of the genre, both past and present, which will be largely unknown to many lovers, and even connoisseurs, of music’.



And with that same trail-blazing agenda, the homepage of the *Song of America* database is being redesigned and rebuilt in a new cutting-edge way, launching this summer so as to coincide with its USA 250 celebrations. ‘We have conceived a considerably more accessible usability format both for the general music lover as well as for the pedagogical user,’ Hampson enthuses. ‘So, there will be a lot of new interactive cross-referencing within the database.

'The website will be more listening forward in the first instance,' Finn elaborates. 'As you approach the site, the actual song listening experience hits you more immediately before the more academic, pedagogical and database elements, which will nevertheless still be as voluminous as always, of course – but right away the very first experience you have on opening the site is that exciting listening sensation and engaging with the song.'

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And so the listener straight away can sample the expansive array of song that features in *Song of America* projects, most of which reflect the Foundation's past and present partnerships with institutions like the University of Michigan and organisations like the African American Art Song Alliance. For Hampson, the songs themselves carry particularly powerful connotations in the present time: 'Freedom has been the big beacon of America: the ideal of freedom in expression and self-exploration, and therefore empathy. And so the practicing of civic responsibility through the performance of music and poetry is especially what Song of America is trying to offer young people – and now more than ever before with a profound concern of helping to keep the memory of our heritage alive.'



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'Through Song of America I'm inviting people to examine their own story. That story in the complex history of the United States can extend from the beginning euphoric celebration of freedom in Francis Hopkinson's *My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free* to the admittedly dark and even horrifying chapters of our history mirrored in Ricky Ian Gordon's *Song for a Dark Girl*, which is a setting of the Langston Hughes poetry depicting a lynching. What I am trying to get across here is that most of the poets and composers in America to this day reflect as much upon being an American artist or poet or musician as much as what they're trying to say in their poetry or music. And so, it's a very, very rich dialogue that's going on in the texture and tapestry of what it means to be American and leave evidence of an American existence. For me, pluralism has been that existence's lifeblood: as has been the American essence that you can agree to disagree, and after a huge argument, you can buy the other person a cup of coffee.'

'That fundamental American empathy at the moment is certainly under extraordinary stress as we live in a highly politicised even paranoid Realpolitik. More than ever, we must try and protect it as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our founding. And American Song is one of the most potently emotive ways to do this. Song is the mirror of mankind's souls: you find yourself in it, somewhere – and as you hold the mirror up to yourself in the United States of America, whichever way you turn it is another prism in which to see the diversity and pluralism of our country. The more that we in song can continue to explore and celebrate that, the more, I fervently hope, we can help to preserve our community and the soul of America. *E Pluribus Unum*, indeed'.

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