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“Our American Way of Living’: Lucy Richardson Milligan and American Radio on the eve of World War II’

Tim Lockley

Lucy Richardson Milligan organised a series of radio talks entitled ‘Our American Way of Living’ to be broadcast during the intermissions of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts in 1940–41. She deliberately set out to counter fascist propaganda and embedded her talks within a program that had a very large audience. By doing so she co-opted one of the techniques of Nazi propagandists and did so in the year before the US entered WWII.

KEYWORDS United States; radio; metropolitan opera; propaganda; World War II; women

On the afternoon of 7 December 1940 twelve million Americans tuned into a new season of broadcasts from New York’s Metropolitan Opera. The opera, Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, was familiar, but during the third intermission former President Hoover addressed the broadcast audience on the subject of ‘Our American Democracy.’ Nothing like this had featured as an intermission feature before. For fifteen of the next sixteen weeks, leading Americans spoke on subjects such as ‘Our American Home’, ‘American Efficiency’ and ‘Our American Tomorrow’, all grouped under the heading ‘Our American Way of Living.’ This article explains how this series of radio talks came about, what purpose they were intended to serve, and why the Met Opera broadcasts were believed to be the ideal home for them.

Lucy Richardson Milligan

The person responsible for organising these talks was Lucy Richardson Milligan, President of the National Council of Women. Milligan was active in a number of women’s voluntary organisations, including the General Federation of Women’s Clubs with a particular focus on child welfare and women’s rights. In 1933 she was a delegate at the International Congress of Women, held in Chicago, that endorsed a radical stance on sexual, racial, and religious equality.¹ Milligan had two over-riding passions: music and radio. She was married to a well-known New York organist, Harold Vincent Milligan, and in 1925 helped found the National Music League supporting rising young artists. During the depression she raised funds for unemployed musicians via the Musician’s Emergency Fund and promoted English-language opera productions to make the art form more accessible to Americans.² In her quest to improve educational standards on radio she served as the first chair of the Women’s National Radio Committee (WNRC) in 1934, later chairing the

radio committee of the General Federation of Women's Clubs.³ From the outset the WNRC declared its intention to 'do something about radio' and began campaigning for 'a greater number of programs of lasting value' on the radio, particularly those that were educational and family orientated.⁴ In 1935 the WNRC inaugurated a series of radio awards for broadcasters to recognise quality educational programmes aimed at both children and adults. Jennifer Proffitt has pointed out that after 1939 these awards increasingly prioritised programming that 'embraced democratic ideals,' recognising the landmark CBS series 'Immigrants All' for instance. Yet some women were far more proactive in radio than Proffitt allows for, not only rewarding programmes they approved of but also commissioning new programmes and even venturing onto the air themselves.⁵

Lucy Milligan was just such a woman. She took a particularly prominent role in trying to improve the overall standard of American radio, giving public speeches and press interviews as well as featuring on several radio shows herself.⁶ She was well aware that radio had become an important battleground where competing ideologies sought to use the intimate nature of radio to influence political ideas and social attitudes. Addressing the National Association of Broadcasters in August 1940 she lauded 'our free and unprejudiced medium of radio' as 'one of the greatest weapons of American defense' indeed it had 'become [as] vital to free discussion in America as the Bill of Rights is to American liberties.'⁷ The most pressing issue facing the nation in 1940 was how far the US should engage with, or remain aloof from, the war in Europe. Isolationists believed that the US would be safer if it remained neutral, others pointed out that a victorious Germany would actually make the US less safe and less prosperous in the long run. Both sides saw radio as a method of getting their views heard.⁸ Since the vast majority of families had a radio by 1940, indeed many had more than one, the United States was even more vulnerable to radio propaganda than other nations.⁹ An American audience survey in 1939 revealed that two-thirds of the public used radio as their main source of news.¹⁰ The events of the later 1930s, particularly the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy and Spain, demonstrated vividly to those who paid attention that radio had become 'the most effective method of disseminating propaganda.'¹¹ By 1940 it was widely accepted that radio was a 'powerful and efficient instrument for holding the human mind,' and that the unscrupulous would try to 'gain control' of the airwaves in order to 'hold thinking into casts that serve their particular and personal ends.'¹² Previous scholarship has demonstrated the attention paid by the Roosevelt administration to shaping public opinion via the use of radio. The president himself said radio could 'overtake loudly proclaimed untruths', and he permitted his staff to use the threat of increased federal regulation to persuade the radio networks to broadcast more programs that were broadly supportive of the administration's position while silencing prominent critics.¹³ What is far less well understood is the role that groups outside formal administration control played in this process. The activities of the WNRC, and Lucy Milligan in particular, demonstrate how influential they could be.

In the summer of 1940 Milligan joined the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDA). As well as campaigning for practical aid to Britain the CDA also argued that 'something should and could be done to arouse the country to a positive, dynamic faith in democracy.' The problem, as the CDA perceived it, was that 'the American way of life is threatened from within and without by the menace of totalitarianism.'¹⁴ German and Italian propaganda, beamed directly into American homes either via shortwave or via

local foreign language stations, clearly aimed to demoralise; that the US could not hope to make a difference, that the war was nearly won, and that the American character was ill-suited to counter Germany militarily. This last theme was particularly popular. The ‘weak’ American, used to ‘luxury’ and corrupted by capitalism, where the young were ‘perverted by the movies’ and ‘poor cannot afford homes’ could not hope to beat the modern, efficient, and battle-hardened German state.¹⁵ The Deutscher Kurzwellensender had access to the most powerful shortwave transmitters in the world, ensuring clear reception, and a thousand staff. By its own estimate it had half a million regular listeners in the United States during the 1930s.¹⁶ Equally dangerous were local US stations broadcasting in Italian and German, as well as internal American voices such as the German American Bund, all generally promoting a pro-fascist line.¹⁷ Countering these assaults on the nature of American democracy became the central aim of radio reformers. While radio could be ‘an extremely sinister force’ when improperly used, some perceived it had the potential to be the solution and ‘a tremendously powerful element in the creation and maintenance of national morale.’¹⁸ Lucy Milligan concurred, placing ‘freedom of radio’ on a par with the four freedoms (of the press, of speech, of petition, and of assembly) enshrined in the Constitution.¹⁹ Given that it was not possible to prevent shortwave broadcasts from Europe being heard in the United States, the only way to counter demoralising propaganda was to offer alternate programming that refuted these claims.

Our American Way of Living

Between December 1940 and March 1941 Lucy Milligan organised a series of fifteen radio talks entitled ‘Our American Way of Living’ that were heard during the intermissions of the weekly broadcasts of New York’s Metropolitan Opera. Transmitted nationwide in the USA on the NBC Blue Network, the broadcasts were also heard in Canada and in Latin America and Europe via shortwave. Her choice of the Metropolitan Opera reflected both her own musicality and her deep involvement with New York’s musical scene. The Metropolitan Opera was one of NBC’s flagship cultural programmes. Starting in 1931 the network broadcast up to twenty Saturday matinee performances between December and May every year. Radio networks undertook this type of broadcasting in part because of the prestige that came with being associated with elite cultural institutions. In its advertising NBC prominently trumpeted its role as a purveyor of quality classical music that included the Boston and NBC Symphony Orchestras as well as the Met.²⁰ As David Goodman notes, US radio networks clearly bought into the idea that it was their role to educate and enlighten the general public, making them better citizens via sophisticated educational broadcasting.²¹

The 1940–41 opera broadcast season was the first to be sponsored by the Texas Company and company President W.S.S. Rogers asserted that they were ‘giving the people what they want—a high form of musical entertainment covering the widest range of tastes.’²² The inauguration of sponsorship by the Texas Company also induced an overhaul of the Met’s previously unstructured intermissions under the auspices of Henry and Geraldine Souvaine, well-known New York music producers. They introduced regular features that would run for the entire season including ‘At Home with the Metropolitan Opera Guild,’ featuring interviews with those working backstage, and the ‘Opera

Question Forum,' the forerunner of the Opera Quiz.²³ Lucy Milligan's husband, Harold, was an associate producer of these broadcasts with the Souvaines and it is easy to see how that personal connection led to the dedication of one intermission each week to Lucy Milligan's series of talks on 'Our American Way of Living.'²⁴ Before the first talk, Lucy Milligan gave a clear justification for organising what she deemed to be a 'vital and very timely' series. She feared that the blessings of American democracy were being 'taken for granted' and that a reticence or reluctance to trumpet America's 'great good fortune' had created a 'fertile field for the insidious and untruthful stories which are designed to undermine and sweep away the ultimate bulwark of any people, our confidence in our way of life.'²⁵ Every day Americans were hearing 'voices who would like to have us believe that our way of living is, in many respects, hopeless, inefficient and unsafe,' but she and the National Council of Women were not willing to leave listeners 'defenseless against the untruthful stories designed to undermine our confidence.'²⁶ The talks were intended 'to provide a searching analysis of the results which have accrued to us all through the century and a half of American independence' because 'the more thoroughly we become aware of our blessings, the more thoroughly we gain in national confidence and unity.'²⁷ Readers of *Opera News*, a weekly magazine mailed to more than 12,000 nationwide subscribers to the Metropolitan Opera Guild, were informed that 'These talks are intended to promote confidence in the American system of which such cultural contributions as the opera are an intrinsic part. They will illustrate the advantage and privileges to be enjoyed in a democracy as contrasted with the stifling forces unleashed under foreign ideologies.'²⁸ Milligan therefore intended to set out a positive vision of what America stood for, and what it had already achieved, with a specific emphasis on 'facts' that demonstrated the truth of the message.

Those tasked to speak on the topic of 'Our American Way of Living' were a mixture of the famous, the artistic, and leading members of intellectual or business circles. Some were certainly known to Milligan personally: Sadie Orr Dunbar, president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, was a close friend; H. W. Prentis, (chairman of the National Association of Manufacturers) was described as 'an old friend' since Milligan headed the organisation's Women's Division; and Robert Millikan (Head of CalTech) had joined Milligan in addressing the Institute for Education by Radio back in 1935. Milligan, Millikan, Florence Harriman and Robert Sherwood were all members of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies.

Speakers for 'Our American Way of Living' [Table 1]

Although the war had been raging in Europe for more than a year by the time the 1940–41 broadcast season began, the possible future involvement of the United States was evidently at the forefront of many people's minds. Lucy Milligan was careful to choose speakers from both isolationist and interventionist positions, highlighting themes all could agree on. Herbert Hoover and Robert Hutchins were founder members of the America First Committee, the most prominent anti-war organisation in the US. In one 1941 speech, Hutchins declared 'Before 1917 the country had serious problems. The war settled none of them and produced some new ones we had never dreamed of.' Where Hutchins agreed with the interventionists, however, was in the need for preparedness, and Milligan asked him to speak about this very topic.²⁹ Hutchins told the opera radio

Table 1.

Speakers for 'Our American Way of Living'. Audio recordings of many of the talks are available in either the Library of Congress or the New York Public Library.

Date	Speaker	Title	Notes
7 Dec 1940	Herbert Hoover	'Our American Democracy'	President 1929–33; organized the Finnish Relief Fund 1939; Member of America First
14 Dec 1940	Abraham Flexner	'Our American Freedom'	Head of Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations of Learning
21 Dec 1940	Robert E. Sherwood	'American Efficiency'	Playwright, <i>Idiot's Delight</i> (1936) won the Pulitzer Prize; wrote speeches for FDR; founder member of Council for Democracy (1940); joined Office of War Information (1942)
28 Dec 1940	Robert M. Hutchins	'American Preparedness'	President of the University of Chicago 1929–1945; Member of America First
4 Jan 1941	Florence Harriman	'Our American Home'	Member Democratic National committee 1920–52; Ambassador to Norway 1937–40; vice-chair of Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (1941)
11 Jan 1941	Philip D. Reed	'American Initiative'	President of General Electric 1940–42; head of War Production Board (1941); head of US Mission for Economic Affairs, London 1942–5.
18 Jan 1941	Bula Parran	'Longer Life'	Wife of Surgeon General Thomas Parran; assistant to Robert Sherwood at OWI (1942)
25 Jan 1941	Carl Sandburg	'The Soul of the People'	Poet/author, his <i>Abraham Lincoln: The War Years</i> (1939) won the Pulitzer Prize.
1 Feb 1941	Sadie Orr Dunbar	'Women in America'	President of the General Federation of Women's Clubs (1938–41)
8 Feb 1941	David Sarnoff	'American Progress in Communications'	President of RCA, parent company of NBC, 1929–1970
15 Feb 1941	Robert A. Millikan	'Our American Inventive Fertility'	Chairman of CalTech 1921–45; Won Nobel Prize for Physics (1923)
22 Feb 1941	No talk		
1 Mar 1941	Walt Disney	'American Culture'	Formed his own movie studio in 1925; made pro-war films such as <i>Victory Through Airpower</i> (1943).
8 Mar 1941	Henning Prentis	'American Business'	Chairman of National Association of Manufacturers, and president of Armstrong Cork Co 1934–50.
15 Mar 1941	Carl Compton	'Our American Tomorrow'	President of MIT 1930–48; served on the National Defense Research Committee (1940) and joined the Office of Scientific Research and Development (1941–5)
22 Mar 1941	Lily Pons	'Why I became an American citizen'	The Met's star French soprano who took US citizenship in 1940. In 1944–5 she gave numerous concerts for US troops fighting in Asia and Europe.

audience 'if you are going to prepare for war, you must know what you are willing to fight for', and he highlighted the fundamental democratic principles of 'law, equality, and justice.' Once these were understood then the individual would willingly 'respond to the call of the community and be prepared to surrender his goods, his temporal interests, and even his life to defend the community and the principles for which it stands.' Above all, democracy was a principle 'worth dying for.'³⁰ Robert Millikan, a member of the Committee to Defend Democracy, diametrically opposed to the America First Committee, actually echoed this sentiment in his talk, stating that democracies such as the USA needed to 'defend themselves against gangster nations who come out to rob, plunder and destroy them.' Millikan was an interventionist, believing that isolationism was 'worse than unintelligence, it is suicidal' and that it was only by working with allies around the world that totalitarianism could be defeated.³¹ Interventionists argued that the United States had to stand with Great Britain, two nations that had 'proved themselves democratic countries,' and be militant in the defence of freedom. If people did not fight for freedom and democracy, Abraham Flexner warned, then 'self-interest, prejudice and tradition' would destroy them.³²

The theme that the American people needed to be educated as to the blessings of democracy they enjoyed, recurs again and again in these talks. Abraham Flexner lamented the complacency of Americans: 'we speak lightly of the blessings of our way of life as if, like the rain which makes no distinction between the just and the unjust, we have only to sit passive so that our blessings may drop effortlessly on us.' Yet democracy was fragile, and 'the arduous way to live, for it is never satisfied, it is always struggling forward to something better, something higher.' Indeed, citizens had to be prepared to make sacrifices to 'safeguard America.'³³ Florence Harriman knew that the peace and prosperity of America seemed 'like an impossible dream-world' to many Europeans, yet many Americans 'hardly realize they are blessings.' It was well-known that Hitler himself had declared 'Mental confusion, contradiction of feeling, indecisiveness, panic: these are our weapons.' For Robert Sherwood, the 'apostles of appeasement,' people who considered 'our cause is already lost,' needed to be shown that the US would not be 'terrified into submission by propagandists abroad.'³⁴

The education of the listening public came under several broad themes: the democratic ideals that made America unique; the economic benefits that American citizens enjoyed; and the cultural opportunities which abounded. Many speakers stressed the importance of 'freedom' not just physical freedom but 'freedom of speech and action', 'political, intellectual and spiritual freedom', 'civil liberty', 'human rights', the freedom to work in any occupation, and listen and read without censorship. Hoover described the war raging in Europe as a fight against democracy, a 'sinister revolt against civilization.' The spectacular success of the axis powers in 1939–40 that had seen the conquest of France, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Poland and Czechoslovakia, did not, as Robert Sherwood was keen to point out, 'prove that democracy is dead.' Germany might have a well-oiled military machine and be an example of 'totalitarian efficiency', but Italy and Russia had fared far worse, with the latter's 'ghastly inefficiency' struggling to defeat Finland. Mussolini meanwhile had led Italy into 'one humiliating disaster after another.'³⁵ Democratic states would ultimately prove triumphant in this global struggle, speakers claimed, precisely because they gave their citizens opportunities to innovate, to provide creative

solutions for problems, and forge new technologies. As Bula Parran observed, democracy created an environment where ‘free minds may freely inquire.’ Yet the risk that ‘democracies will perish’ was very real, and Americans had to surrender their ‘narrow-gauged idea of sovereignty’ in order to work with other democracies to fight tyranny.³⁶

The economic benefits of democracy were reaffirmed several times to listeners. It was not simple good fortune that had made America powerful. Russia and China both had significant natural resources, but neither had exploited them as successfully as the United States.³⁷ The efficient American economy drove down costs while increasing productivity, with consequent improvements to wages and standards of living. Henning Prentis calculated that American wages were twelve times those in Russia, and four times those in Germany. The strength of the American economy had provided ‘more and better food, shelter, clothing and transportation, more education, more cultural opportunity, more leisure for everybody.’³⁸ Karl Compton argued that ‘technological progress’ in America had led to a lessening of human toil and a sharing of wealth, and that the US was now the ‘envy of every other people on earth.’³⁹

Despite the claim that the US had the ‘widest dissemination of wellbeing,’ poverty lingered in many regions. The struggles of the depression era had not been totally erased despite the New Deal, with the economic plight of African-Americans in particular remaining dire. Few speakers ventured into this territory. Abraham Flexner regretted ‘that Democracy [had] not come to prevail in the relations between the colored man and the white man [nor] in the relations between men and women’ but most contented themselves with pointing out that even the poor were better off in America than elsewhere in the world.⁴⁰ Bula Parran noted, encouragingly, that science-led public health initiatives were helping to combat common diseases and make all ‘Americans strong.’ Ultimately, healthier people were ‘better able to serve America.’⁴¹

With the conquest of European democracies being portrayed as an attempt ‘to destroy our Western Civilization’, several speakers stressed how the US had now become a haven not only for democracy but also for European culture.⁴² In a pointed reference to events in Germany in the 1930s Walt Disney remarked ‘we don’t burn books in this country.’ Disney believed that ‘freedom is the most precious word to culture’ since it encouraged artistic innovation and expression rather than enforced homogeneity. He also emphasized that one of the principal achievements of American democracy was making culture available to the masses. Not only were there plays, ballets, operas, and concerts to attend in most American cities, such pleasures were also broadcast on radio, ‘freely available to rich and poor alike in great abundance.’ Culture was, in short, ‘for anyone who wants it.’⁴³

The Audience

In broadcasting live opera, NBC had clearly taken a risk. Many feared that opera was ‘too visual’ for radio and lasted too long. Even short operas like *La Bohème*, containing less than two hours of music, would absorb more than three hours of broadcast time once three intermissions were added between the four acts. Wagner’s operas would last far longer. The instant popularity of these broadcasts ‘exceeded the most sanguine hopes of the company; for the limitation of radio in the matter of sight proved actually to be an asset

[due to] the power of imagination.' Listeners could imagine for themselves lavish or exotic locations far beyond what was possible on stage, and luxuriate in the best voices in the world without the 'visual impact of corpulent sopranos and paunchy tenors shatter[ing] the illusion.'⁴⁴ Domestic audiences climbed rapidly, reaching as high as 12 million by 1938, and the broadcasts were carried on 131 domestic US stations, more than any other sponsored program on the NBC network. Special listening clubs met in colleges, schools, libraries, and homes for the elderly, while nurses organised dedicated listening areas in hospitals and convalescent homes. Listeners were drawn from 'many nationalities and walks of life. Many are ex-musicians who can read the most difficult score with ease. Numbers of European refugees come, victims of the war, seeking solace in familiar music and exchanging anecdotes of the Berlin, Vienna and Prague opera houses.'⁴⁵ The international audience was truly global encompassing Europe, Latin America, Asia and Australia.⁴⁶ In December 1940 the Metropolitan Opera ranked 5th in the 'favourite program' category in one radio poll.⁴⁷

The large audience helps to explain Lucy Milligan's selection of the weekly Metropolitan Opera broadcasts as the delivery vehicle for this series of talks. A survey of those who had contributed toward the Met's funding drive in 1939–40 unsurprisingly showed that listeners were much wealthier, older and better educated than the general population.⁴⁸ Yet it would be wrong to characterize the Met's radio audience in this manner. The Met itself was pleased that listeners came from all 'walks of life' and that because of radio 'Grand opera is no longer the privilege of a few.'⁴⁹ National studies drew more nuanced conclusions about the probable audience for the Metropolitan Opera. Among the wealthy elite there was a clear preference for serious classical music ahead of other forms of radio entertainment. Wealthy people were three times more likely than poorer people to tune into the Metropolitan Opera but while classical music was far less popular among the lower classes, in terms of sheer numbers the lower classes actually formed the majority of the audience for classical music in the US in 1940. 20% of the lowest social classes equaled more actual listeners than 75% of the wealthiest social class. One study of the audience for the Philadelphia Orchestra concerts concluded that 70% of its audience came from the lowest social classes.⁵⁰ By using the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts Milligan had access to both a large and a surprisingly socially diverse audience.⁵¹

The fact that the Metropolitan Opera was broadcast on Saturday afternoons was important in shaping the gender of its audience. As with much of daytime radio, female listeners outnumbered male by two to one and they 'busied themselves at non-interfering tasks such as sewing and knitting during opera broadcasts.'⁵² As the chair of the Manhattan branch of the Women's Division of the Committee to Defend America, Lucy Milligan had already committed to making personal phone calls to New York women about the need to defend America by aiding Britain.⁵³ It is not surprising therefore that Milligan chose themes for some of these intermission talks that would speak directly to the Met's heavily female audience. Sadie Dunbar, President of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, extolled the achievements of 'great and courageous' women throughout American history. They had been full participants in the story of America and had been rewarded with a 'constant crescendo of rights and freedoms given to no other women in the history of the world.' The free and democratic society they had created was now under threat from external forces, and it was up to women to become 'the home guard of our American way of

living.’ Both Milligan and Dunbar were part of a long history of female volunteer activism in the United States that stretched back to the American Revolution.⁵⁴ As Dunbar put it, ‘Deep in the woman’s heart lies an infinite need to help others, to guide and to give selflessly toward the creation of a happier world,’ and both Dunbar and Milligan hoped to co-opt this female sense of civic duty to help ‘shape our today and our children’s tomorrow.’⁵⁵

It was not by accident that the benefits of the American way of life for children were highlighted to an audience composed largely of mothers and homemakers who might be listening as they ‘peel potatoes or mend a pair of socks.’ The detrimental impact of war on European domesticity was harrowingly described by Florence Harriman based on her first-hand experiences. Relentless bombing had reduced homes to ‘smoking ruins’ and many urban parents had been forced to send their children away to safety in the countryside. In the occupied nations children were encouraged to become ‘stool pigeons’ to ‘spy’ and inform against parents holding subversive views, violating the sanctity of the familial bond. The women listening were urged to use their community networks to counter attempts to turn neighbours against each other: ‘You, Mrs Brown, Mrs Meyer, Mrs Tonetti, you are important, the future of our American democracy is up to you. Spread our doctrine of democracy in your own communities ... seek out the foreign born in your community, make them your friends, show them that they too are an important part of our American way of living. From abroad they are deluged by counter-claims, so don’t be shy yourself in telling them the truth.’⁵⁶ The successful history of the USA as a nation of immigrants had proved that all races of people ‘can live together and work together [in] peace and harmony’ thus Lily Pons urged listeners ‘don’t allow yourselves to be divided’ since ‘in patriotic unity is your strength.’⁵⁷

Impact of the talks

Gauging the impact of the broadcasts of ‘Our American Way of Living’ is not easy since there was no systematic attempt to measure the audience’s response. The National Council of Women tried to ensure the talks received the widest dissemination possible beyond the immediate radio audience. Lucy Milligan promised one speaker that the NCW would ‘see to it that many other American men and women who are not in our radio audience this afternoon will have the opportunity to read and hear the talk you have given,’ suggesting that a transcription of the talk would be circulated and offered to news outlets for reprinting. It is also possible that audio recordings were made available for playback.⁵⁸ The text of Hoover’s speech was printed in its entirety by the New York Times, but this seems to have been a special courtesy offered to a former president as no other talk was reprinted complete.⁵⁹ Newspapers in New York, Boston and Washington did, however, offer periodic summaries, highlighting key phrases from the talks such as Sherwood’s ‘apostles of appeasement’ or Hutchins’ ‘moral preparedness’.⁶⁰

Letters from the radio audience provides at least some indication of how the series was received. ‘J F McC’ thought the talks were ‘a fine addition to an already matchless broadcast’; ‘G N V’ agreed ‘the American intermission, arranged by our sponsor, is a right move, truly valued in this confused year.’ Mrs W C Allen believed they would help to ‘promote the spirit of unity so necessary at this time’ and ‘AA’ from Chicago was even more forthcoming: ‘If the pillars of ideal democracy are the spirit of cooperation, respect

for the individual in his or her uniqueness and the use of intelligence as the method of approach to the tasks of life—these opera broadcasts constitute a real example of ideal democracy. What a comforting thought to see and hear the radio, one of the emotion-arousing channels of information and inspiration, functioning to spread democracy at a time when [it] is used in other countries for destructive propaganda.⁶¹

Lucy Milligan declared herself 'proud and happy by your enthusiastic reception of our short curtain talks on our 'American Way of Living'. Letters and telegrams alike tell us that you agree with the National Council of Women that such a series is not only important and timely but vitally needed today.'⁶² Milton Cross, the Met's regular announcer, agreed that the series was 'much discussed,' 'widely heralded' and that many had hailed it 'as a significant contribution to greater national confidence and unity.'⁶³ Looking back at the series during the final broadcast of the season, Milligan thought that the talks had been 'very necessary' to make Americans 'better fortified to face the problems of today,' and she hoped they had 'strengthened the resolve of all of us to resist those voices whose only purpose is to play upon our emotions in order to incite prejudice and hatred and so destroy our national unity.'⁶⁴

While it is impossible to know how many of the 12 million domestic listeners had their minds changed by listening to these broadcasts, perhaps the clearest indication of success comes from the fact that after war was declared in December 1941, Milligan's initiative began to be copied by others who clearly thought they had been influential. In choosing the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts Milligan had effectively stolen an idea from Nazi propagandists: she had embedded a political message within a much longer program. Deutscher Kurzwellensender programmers did not simply beam 11 h of Hitler's speeches to the rest of the world via shortwave. Not even the most ardent Nazi thought they would reach a wide audience like that. Instead they inter-twined short political messages among 'a choice assortment of broadcasting viands, sparkling musical champagne, dance music and comic bits.'⁶⁵ High-quality music and comedy were crucially important in attracting an audience. Given Milligan's deep familiarity with the methods being used by overseas propagandists, once likening them to a 'Trojan Horse', this is surely a conscious imitation.⁶⁶ People tuned into the Met broadcasts to hear opera of the highest quality, not the intermissions, but the audience was actually very attentive—93% of listeners stated they heard the entire broadcast each week including intermissions.⁶⁷ No other classical music broadcast had an intermission with a political message before US entry to WWII but after Pearl Harbour some classical music broadcasts became much more closely associated with political themes. Politicians and military commanders were invited to give short talks on the progress of the war during broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic and the NBC Symphony. The US Treasury Department used classical concerts to sell War Bonds and when General Motors assumed the sponsorship of the NBC Symphony in 1943 it did not promote cars, but instead highlighted the fact that its factories were dedicated to the production of war materials.

The Metropolitan Opera also became even more overtly patriotic. From November 1941 the National Anthem was played before each broadcast, and the Texas Company and Henry and Geraldine Souvaine extended Milligan's idea of using the intermissions of the Met broadcasts for political ends. Starting in November 1942 and continuing for the next three seasons, one intermission of each broadcast was devoted to the Opera

Victory Rally. Hosted by a different Met star each week, the rallies featured short talks by ambassadors, politicians and leading Americans on military themes and increasingly, what shape the peace might take. Justifying the move, the General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, Edward Johnson, wrote in *Opera News* ‘We at home must fight to maintain those concepts and institutions which are symbolic of our democracy and which we believe are worth preserving. For in this global war of ideologies and not nationalities we are fighting to preserve our cultural as well as our political institutions.’⁶⁸ In this sense, imitation of Milligan’s initiative was the sincerest form of flattery.

Conclusion

The series ‘Our American Way of Living’ is an excellent example of an active attempt by an American woman to direct nationwide sentiment on the eve of World War II. Lucy Milligan clearly understood the risk to American national morale from subtle, and later more overt, foreign propaganda that was being heard over the radio, but she was not content with passively handing out awards to programme makers. Addressing the annual meeting National Council of Women in November 1940 she told members they had a responsibility to instill in all American women ‘an awareness of the impending struggle between democracy and dictatorships.’⁶⁹ Acting outside of any formal administration control she led by example by proactively utilising her personal, marital, and musical contacts to secure a weekly slot on one of America’s most popular classical music programmes. Careful thought was given to the choice of speakers and their topics in order to appeal to most listeners. Speakers were drawn from both isolationist and interventionist camps, thus avoiding accusations of partisan bias, and several were chosen who could speak directly to the interests of a socially diverse but heavily female audience. Lucy Milligan is an unsung hero in the battle for US airwaves in the early 1940s, making her mark more than eighteenth months before the founding of the Office for War Information in June 1942. Shortly after the conclusion of this series of talks, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs appointed her to head their new department of national defence that aimed ‘to organize 40,000,000 women in the interest of preparedness.’⁷⁰ Few women were better qualified to take up that post.

Notes

1. *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* v.53, 481–2. *New York Times* 14 Mar 1926 and 22 July 1933
2. *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* v.53, 481. *New York Times*, 29 Oct 1929, 24 Feb 1932, 30 April 1935.
3. There is some confusion as to when Milligan stepped down as chair of the WNRC. The *New York Times* described her as a ‘former chairman’ in 1937, while *Broadcasting Magazine* believed her still to be chair in 1939. She served on the WNRC awards committee in 1938. By 1939 she was chairing the radio committee of the GFWC. *New York Times* 28 March 1937, 1 May 1938, 30 April 1939. *Broadcasting Magazine* 15 March 1939.
4. *New York Times* May 12, 1935.
5. Proffitt, “War, Peace, and Free Radio,” 2–4.

6. For her broadcasts in 1940 alone see 'Armchair Quartet' 29 Feb; 'Quilting Bee' 19 June; 'Echoes of History' 10 July, 'National Association of Broadcasters' 3 Aug and 'National Association of Manufacturers' Convention' 12 Dec.
7. *Broadcasting* 15 Aug 1940, 52.
8. Horton, *Radio Goes to War*, 33.
9. Craig, *Fireside Politics*, 12.
10. Dyer, *Radio in Wartime*, 57
11. Whitton "War by Radio," 584; see also Luconi, "The Voice of the Motherland" and Fay. "Casualties of war"
12. Frost, *Is American Radio Democratic?*, 108, 119.
13. Steele, *Propaganda in an open society*, 135, see also 127–40.
14. *Freedom of Assembly*, preface.
15. Rolo, *Radio Goes to War*, 92.
16. Berg, *On the short waves*, 73–74, 209.
17. See Fay, 'Casualties of War', 66; Bernstein, *Swastika Nation*, and Grover, *Nazis in Newark*, 189.
18. Angell, "Radio and National Morale," 352.
19. *Broadcasting* 2 June 1941, 25.
20. In a 1936 pamphlet 'NBC around the world' the centre-spread of pictures of key artists included three stars of the Metropolitan Opera. <http://www.ontheshortwaves.com/Stations/NBC-pamphlet-1936.pdf>
21. Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition*, 117–9.
22. *Opera News* 9 Dec 1940.
23. Jackson, *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met*, 323–31; *Broadcasting* 1 Nov 1940, 105.
24. See Harold Milligan's obituary, *New York Times* 14 April 1951.
25. Milligan, introduction Met Broadcast 7 Dec 1940.
26. Milligan introduction Met Broadcast 28 Dec 1940, script for intermission introduction 14 Dec 1940 in White Network Broadcast Logs, NBC archives, Library of Congress, microfilm.
27. Milligan introduction Met Broadcast 22 Mar 1941; 8 Mar 1941.
28. *Opera News* 16 Dec 1940; for Guild membership information see Affron, *Grand Opera*, 144.
29. Mayer, *Robert Maynard Hutchins*, 213; Sarles, *The Story of America First*, 1.
30. Met Broadcast 28 December 1940.
31. Met Broadcast 15 Feb 1941.
32. Abraham Flexner to Thomas Jones, 21 Dec 1940 Thomas Jones Papers [National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth].
33. Although Flexner's talk does not survive in audio or written form, later intermissions quoted these sentences from his talk. Met Broadcast 15 Mar 41.
34. Met Broadcast 21 Dec 1940 and 28 Dec 1940.
35. Met Broadcast 21 Dec 1940.
36. Met Broadcast 18 Jan 1941, 15 Feb 1941.
37. Met Broadcast 11 Jan 1941, 15 Feb 1941.
38. Met Broadcast 8 Mar 1941.
39. Met Broadcast 15 Mar 41.
40. Abraham Flexner to Thomas Jones, 21 Dec 1940 Thomas Jones Papers.
41. Met Broadcast 18 Jan 1941.
42. Met Broadcast 21 Dec 1940.

43. Met Broadcast 22 Feb 1941.
44. Chotzinoff, “Music in Radio,” 7.
45. *Opera News* 25 Nov 1940.
46. Kerby, “Radio’s Music,” 305.
47. *Broadcasting*, 15 Dec 1940.
48. The National Broadcasting Company’s Survey among Listener-Contributors to the Metropolitan Opera Fund, August 1940 (Met archives, typescript), 4. Of more than 150,000 donors, completed questionnaires from just 887 were used for this survey.
49. *Opera News* 25 Nov 40, 9 Dec 40.
50. Beville, “The ABCDs of Radio,” 203–204.
51. *Opera News* 4 Nov 40.
52. The National Broadcasting Company’s Survey among Listener-Contributors to the Metropolitan Opera Fund, August 1940 (Met archives, typescript), 12.
53. Paton-Walsh, *Our War Too*, 98.
54. See for example Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism* and Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*.
55. Met Broadcast 1 Feb 1941.
56. Met Broadcast 4 Jan 1941.
57. Met Broadcast 22 March 41
58. Met Broadcast 21 Dec 1940. Recordings of ‘Immigrants All’ were made available by the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, see *Defense of Main St*, 76.
59. *New York Times* 8 Dec 1940.
60. See for example, *Boston Globe* 8 Dec 1940; *DC Star* 5 Jan 1941; *Washington Post* 31 Jan 1941. *New York Times* 22 Dec 1940 and 29 Dec 1940.
61. *Opera News* 27 Jan, 3 & 10 Feb 1941 and ‘Letters’ Met Broadcast 14 Dec 1940.
62. script for intermission introduction 14 Dec 1940 in NBC archives, LOC.
63. Met Broadcast 21 Dec 1940, 8 Feb 1941, 4 Jan 1941.
64. Met Broadcast 22 Mar 1941.
65. Whitton “War by Radio,” 592.
66. *New York Times*, 23 May 1940.
67. The National Broadcasting Company’s Survey among Listener-Contributors to the Metropolitan Opera Fund, August 1940 (Met archives, typescript), 11.
68. *Opera News* 5 Oct 1942.
69. *New York Times*, 24 Nov 1940.
70. *New York Times* 28 May 1941, on OWI see Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda* 1.

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