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## **Demand for a National Music Culture: The Emergence of American Style in Classical Music**

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# Demand for a National Music Culture

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The Emergence of American Style in Classical  
Music

Holly Cassell

4/25/2014

Today, when one thinks of American musical style within classical music, the names Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and Charles Ives are among the first names that come to one's mind. However, this new American style, exemplified by Copland, Gershwin and Ives, did not appear fully formed without the influence of earlier works. During the generation before these composers premiered their iconic works, there was an impetus for American composers to create a new national classical music style. Even Czech composer, Antonín Dvořák, encouraged American composers to create a new classical style for their country and break away from the Western classical tradition that many American composers had been loyally adhering to. By examining the work of composers active during the second half of the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century and the cultural influences at work, it is possible to perceive how and why American composers formed a new American classical music style.

In his article "Orchestral Repertory: Highbrow and Lowbrow," John Spitzer explains that in the 1850's and 1860's the repertory of American symphony orchestra concerts and the repertory of a concert in a beer garden were similar; both venues programmed a mix of popular and classical music for their concerts. Spitzer mentions that most of the music programmed during this era was opera-based, and it was common for symphonies to play overtures and arias from operas. Waltzes, polkas, quadrilles and fantasias were programmed in symphony concerts, too. There were many works programmed that featured instrumental and vocal soloists. At that time, it was unusual for American symphony orchestras to program a whole

symphony for a concert. Instead, symphony orchestras often performed just one movement of a symphony on a concert, if programming symphonic music at all.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1880's and 1890's, American orchestras were playing less popular music and switched to programming more "serious" music. The New York Philharmonic began to program less vocal music and instead began to play more symphonies and tone poems. Meanwhile, other venues (such as theaters and beer gardens) programmed more popular music. Spitzer compares this division of repertoire to the theory of "shared culture" as explained by American historian, Lawrence Levine. Levine explains that until the Civil War, Americans "shared culture" because there was a lack of culture for Americans to choose a cultural group to belong to. After the Civil War, more cultural opportunities appeared and a "cultural hierarchy" was formed. Levine explains that American culture of the late nineteenth century was divided into 'serious' (even worshipped by some) culture and 'popular' culture, and he references American orchestral repertoire as a prime example of the division of 'popular' culture and 'serious' or 'sacralized' culture.

Spitzer acknowledges that Levine's theory corresponds with the time in which American orchestras were changing; however, he notes there are two details that one should take into consideration when comparing American orchestras to his theory. First, Spitzer says, "American orchestras in the 1850s and 1860s programmed a mixed repertoire and played the same pieces in diverse venues because the audience for orchestral music was small, because dedicated venues for orchestral music were rare, and because the available orchestral

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<sup>1</sup> John Spitzer, "Orchestral Repertory: Highbrow and Lowbrow," in *American Orchestras in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by John Spitzer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 368-9.

repertory was limited.”<sup>2</sup> Second, Spitzer asserts that the musicians separated the repertory, not the audience. Musicians wanted the opportunity to play more “serious” music without it being punctuated by “light” or “popular” music, and several major orchestras made the performance of “serious” music their mission.

Mixed programming continued into the twentieth century, but the names of the orchestras were specifically chosen to reflect the nature of their programs. For example, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra took the word ‘symphony’ out of its name when performing “popular” concerts thus becoming the Cincinnati Orchestra to illustrate that “popular” music is not played by a “symphony” orchestra.<sup>3</sup>

American orchestras of the late 1850’s were comprised of mostly German musicians and directors and this was reflected in the repertory. Mostly German and Austrian music was programmed and it was difficult for American composers to have their music premiered by symphony orchestras under the direction of German and German-American conductors. “By the late 1850’s... nearly 25 percent of New York’s population was of German descent. In the orchestras of New York—including those in theaters, concert halls, beer gardens, and even the Philharmonic—the percentage rose as high as 80 percent. The repertory of these orchestras, as one might suspect, was heavily weighted toward Austro-Germanic music.”<sup>4</sup>

Many of America’s most famous composers of the late nineteenth century travelled to Europe for formal music education. For example, Edward MacDowell (1860-1908), composer and member of the Boston Six began his European studies at the Paris Conservatory at age 15.

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<sup>2</sup> Spitzer, 370.

<sup>3</sup> Spitzer 370-1.

<sup>4</sup> Brenda Nelson-Strauss, “Theodore Thomas and the cultivation of American Music,” in *American Orchestras in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by John Spitzer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 398.

After studying at the Paris Conservatory for two years, he decided he was dissatisfied with the instruction he received and opted to study in Germany instead, studying at conservatories in Stuttgart, Wiesbaden, and Frankfurt.<sup>5</sup> MacDowell started a career as composer in Germany after he finished his education and stayed in Germany for several years. Finally in 1888, at age 27, MacDowell returned to America due to financial concerns. In 1889, MacDowell's *Piano Concerto No. 2* was premiered by the Theodore Thomas Orchestra in New York and then was played by the Boston Symphony a month later. The success of his concerto brought MacDowell's work to the attention of the American public.<sup>6</sup>

Although MacDowell was an undeniably skilled and gifted composer, some of his success with the piano concerto was due to arriving in America at the right time. Around 1890, the American public became interested in the history of music in America and music by new American composers.<sup>7</sup> This was lucky for MacDowell, as American composers had had trouble in prior years to have their works premiered by conductors and orchestras that favored German and Austrian music over other music. Although hailed as a great, new, American composer, MacDowell was not in favor of a nationalist music movement in America. He believed that nationalist music was created only for political needs and he did not want his music to be political in any way. MacDowell went as far to say that he did not support all-American concert programs because people would judge the music before they even listened to it just by knowing

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<sup>5</sup> Dolores Pesce and Margery Morgan Lowens, "MacDowell, Edward," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford University Press).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Crawford, "Edward MacDowell: Musical Nationalism and an American Tone Poet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996): 534.

<sup>7</sup> Crawford, 536.

that it was American music. He wanted American music, and all other music, to become respected for its content, not its nationality.<sup>8</sup>

Although MacDowell claimed to be against nationalist movements, he was interested in creating a national American musical style. Seemingly contradictory to his aversion to nationalism, MacDowell's rationale for his interest in creating an American style was that since he was an American, he could personally be inspired from the country's landscape and indigenous music. MacDowell was an advocate for universalism in music (the belief that music is a universal language) and believed that no matter where one drew influences from, music could speak to anyone from any culture. In MacDowell's *Woodland Sketches* for piano, the sketches are allegedly products of European style –due to MacDowell's European training –and inspiration he drew from American landscapes.<sup>9</sup>

MacDowell employed American Indian themes in his music (for example: *Fireside Tales*, Op. 61 and *Sea Pieces*, Op. 55), but he did not believe that simply using Indian melodies in music would create American national music. He did, however, allow himself to be inspired by American Indian music and use it for its universal appeal. Francis Brancalone explains how MacDowell drew inspiration from American Indian music to create the 'Dirge' theme used in many of his works:

For MacDowell, the use of Indian melodies did not constitute the creation of a national music. In conversation with the writer Hamlin Garland he addressed the difficulty of defining and producing such a music. "I do not believe in 'lifting' a Navajo theme and furbishing it into some kind of a musical composition and calling it American music. Our problem is not so simple as all that." MacDowell demonstrated that, even in a piece that so obviously includes native elements, he thought in more universal terms. The "Dirge" of the Indian Suite "seems to tell of a world sorrow. In it an Indian woman laments the

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<sup>8</sup> Crawford, 538-9.

<sup>9</sup> Crawford, 542-3.

death of her son. The 'Indian Suit' [sic] is the result of my studies of the Indians, their dances and their songs." This motive, which MacDowell incorporated into several subsequent compositions, seems to occur when his creative impulse was inspired by his emotional response to man's mortality. As Lawrence Gilman relates, "it is known that in composing the music [of the 'Dirge'] MacDowell was moved by the memory of his grief over the death of his master [Joachim] Raff." His remarks to Hamlin Garland indicate that he did not believe his use of these motives would produce the type of national music suggested by Antonín Dvořák in 1895.<sup>10</sup>

MacDowell thought that following a predetermined process of adapting or simply arranging folk or indigenous melodies to a European harmonic model for the sole purpose of making a national music was superficial and uncreative. He believed that one must find the essence of the music they are trying to adapt –the universal essence that speaks to all –and treat it with care so that the essence remains and is conveyed through the music.

MacDowell's claim that the creation of an American national music cannot be as simple as arranging American Indian melodies makes an important point. Not only does it distinguish his desire to create universalistic music from Dvořák's desire for America to produce a nationalist music, but it reminds one that there are other factors involved in the creation of the American musical style. Richard Crawford mentions in his article, "Edward MacDowell: Musical Nationalism and an American Tone Poet," that nationalism was a movement in nineteenth-century Europe that divided countries and helped new countries distinguish themselves from their old counterparts. Therefore, one can understand why America did not need a nationalist music movement similar to the nationalist movements in Europe.<sup>11</sup> During the late nineteenth century, America was no longer a brand-new nation that needed to distinguish itself from an

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Brancaloneone, "Edward MacDowell and Indian Motives," *American Music* 7 (1989): 359-60.

<sup>11</sup> Crawford, 540-1.



old counterpart. Furthermore, the many different kinds of indigenous music, ethnic groups, and immigrant culture made the situation complex.

To create an American style, composers would need to find an effective way to fuse the different indigenous music of their country while representing the music of various immigrant groups that found new homes in America (including the prevalent Western music extolled by German-Americans). However, with so many different musical influences, creating a national style could be a complicated process. Some composers, like MacDowell, wanted use the music that inspired them, but if too many American composers borrowed American Indian music in their compositions, this could lead to the belief that American music is mostly a style influenced by American Indian music. Perhaps this is one reason that MacDowell felt the need to categorize his music as universalism and not nationalism.

It is ironic that MacDowell would return to America after being in Europe for almost half of his life and then assume the identity of an “American” composer. Furthermore, the American public happily embraced MacDowell as a great American composer when he had been living in Europe his entire adult life. It is likely that MacDowell saw that it was better for his popularity as a composer to identify as an American.

Like Edward MacDowell, George Whitefield Chadwick (1854-1931) was a member of the Boston Six whose music represents a complex identity. In her article “Nationality versus Universality: The Identity of George W. Chadwick’s Symphonic Poems,” Hon-Lun Yang acknowledges the need for more detailed studies on the music of these New England composers. She also notes that:

In addition, when evaluating the music of this group of composers, some writers tend to focus on only one aspect of two seemingly polarized features, emphasizing and

very often overemphasizing either the European influences or the American characteristics of their works. But the fact of the matter is that these composers' works, like many American artifacts of the nineteenth century, frequently manifest an identity that is complex, even seemingly contradictory, paradoxical, and chameleon-like.<sup>12</sup>

Like MacDowell and several other American composers of the time, Chadwick went to Europe for his formal music education. He studied in Leipzig and Munich and then returned to the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Chadwick hoped America would generate a great composer, yet he never suggested that the “Great American Composer” should write nationalist music. In the 1890’s, the demand for the emergence of the “Great American Composer” was high. Coupled with that demand was the demand for American music, whether or not it was nationalistic like the possible American music Dvořák described.<sup>14</sup> Chadwick, like MacDowell, was not inspired by Dvořák’s “recipe” for creating a national style, yet he was determined to create music that was American in style. Chadwick’s *Symphonic Sketches* have been considered as some of the best evidence of Americanism in his music. In *Sketches*, Chadwick uses rhythms and syncopation that portray the “typical” energy of an American. His choice of instrumentation –often featuring brass and percussion, and many wind solos –creates a unique sound that, at times, is more like a composition for band, rather than orchestra.<sup>15</sup>

Virtuoso pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869) is recognized as one of the first great contributors to the emerging American style. About 30 years older than MacDowell and Chadwick, Gottschalk’s music predicts trends in the defining of America’s

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<sup>12</sup> Hon-Lun Yang, “Nationality versus Universality: The Identity of George W. Chadwick’s Symphonic Poems,” *American Music* 21 (2003): 2.

<sup>13</sup> Bill F. Faucett, *George Whitfield Chadwick: The Life and Music of the Pride of New England*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012), 46-72.

<sup>14</sup> Faucett, 174.

<sup>15</sup> Faucett, 181.

classical music that would not take place until the end of the nineteenth century. Gottschalk studied in Europe, but unlike MacDowell and Chadwick, he did not study music in Germany; he only studied in France.<sup>16</sup> As a performing concert pianist, Gottschalk travelled throughout Europe and South America on tour. Through his travels, Gottschalk became familiar with many musical styles, and his music reflects the influence of many musical cultures.<sup>17</sup> According to Irving Lowens's and Frederic Starr's biography of Gottschalk, Gottschalk's music was ahead of its time. "Although Gottschalk was by no means an 'advanced' composer, even in terms of his own day, his sensitivity to local colour enabled him to forecast, with uncanny prescience, American musical developments that did not actually take place until the end of the 19th century."<sup>18</sup>

It was not only Gottschalk's extensive travelling that contributed to his tendency to fuse music of different styles together. Before Gottschalk even left America for his studies in Paris, he had become familiar with West Indian songs that he had heard in New Orleans. Gottschalk's familiarity with these West Indian songs heavily influenced *Bamboula*, one of Gottschalk's first and most successful pieces.<sup>19</sup> It was fortunate for Gottschalk to have been born in New Orleans, as the musical fusion that was ongoing in the city may have had the greatest influence over his musical style, including all his travels.

In Gottschalk's two movement work, *Symphonie Romantique*, (written in Havana in 1860) there is a clear evidence of fusion of different musical styles; however, the work is still mostly European in style. Gottschalk's use of instrumentation aids him as he tries to depict a

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<sup>16</sup> Irving Lowens and S. Frederick Starr, "Gottschalk, Louis Moreau," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford University Press).

<sup>17</sup> Lowens.

<sup>18</sup> Lowens.

<sup>19</sup> Lowens.

tropical scene in the first movement, “Noche en los Tropicós.” The slow trumpet solo accompanied by strings creates the image of a hot evening. The quiet tremolo in the strings at the end of the movement conjures images of quiet stirrings of insects on a hot summer night and an active flute part towards the beginning of the first movement evokes the sound of flowing water. The second movement of *Symphonie Romantique*, “Festa Criolla,” employs percussion instruments foreign to the Western tradition, such as the guiro and maracas. Half way through the movement, the strings play what sounds like a folk tune, which then becomes the base of a fugue. The entire movement is rife with syncopated rhythms and Latin percussion instruments, but there is still a decidedly European influence, as evidenced by the fugue and symphonic orchestration. Yet, the piece is ahead of its time in comparison to other pieces that fuse South-American music and European music in a similar way.

Gottschalk’s music is important to the discussion of the creation of a new American style, because effective fusion of different musical styles is central to the emergence of an American style. Gottschalk’s *Le Banjo*, *Op. 15*, directly quotes “Camptown Races” and the piano bass line is written like the bass line a banjo would have, thus approaching American folk music through the classical piano tradition. Similarly, in one of Gottschalk’s more famous pieces for piano solo, *Bamboula*, Gottschalk uses the piano to combine West Indie folk songs with a classical piano technique. Gottschalk’s use of folk songs and syncopated rhythms in his piano solo pieces foreshadows ragtime.

John Knowles Paine, (1839-1906) a composer and member of the Boston Six, was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He formally studied music in Berlin for three years and then returned to America. Paine’s music is known for his adherence to the German style that he

learned during his musical studies. He did not try to write in a new American style like his contemporaries, MacDowell and Chadwick, but he brought more chromaticism to his compositions than the compositions of the composers that he had studied in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Paine did not compose much in his older years, so his career as a composer was probably unaffected by the demand for true American music that began around 1890. Paine's adherence to a German tradition (although he was an older contemporary of Chadwick and MacDowell) shows a shift in cultural values over time in nineteenth-century America.

In New England, It was not until the generation of composers after MacDowell and Chadwick that fusion of different styles manifested itself as what might be perceived as an American style today. John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951), student of John Paine at Harvard and contemporary of Charles Ives, created music that one might recognize as American in his *Adventures in a Perambulator* (1914).<sup>21</sup> Some of Carpenter's works emulate the German Romantic style that he learned from Paine, but other works, including *Adventures in a Perambulator*, contain elements of jazz which Carpenter had discovered in Chicago. *Adventures in a Perambulator*, a tale of American childhood, was Carpenter's first orchestral work and contains jazz rhythms.<sup>22</sup>

Often times, it is assumed that older music is more conservative than newer music. However, in the case of these composers –Paine, Chadwick, MacDowell, and Gottschalk –this assumption does not hold true. Gottschalk, the earliest of these composers, writes what becomes the most progressive music in terms of writing a new American style. However, one

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<sup>20</sup> Kenneth C. Roberts and John C. Schmidt, "Paine, John Knowles," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford University Press).

<sup>21</sup> Thomas C. Pierson, "Carpenter, John Alden," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, (Oxford University Press).

<sup>22</sup> Pierson

should note that Gottschalk is the only one of these composers that did not live in New England and the only one (excepting Carpenter) that did not train formally in Germany. Perhaps the diversity of musical styles that could be found in New Orleans contributed to Gottschalk's tendency to fuse styles in his earlier works and why he continued to fuse different musical styles throughout his compositional career.

However, this is not to claim that American composers in New England were more conservative compared composers in other regions of the United States. For example, composer and music educator from St. Louis, William Henry Pommer (1851-1937) is in ways more conservative than MacDowell and Chadwick. As a young adult, Pommer studied at the Leipzig Conservatory and then went to study organ and counterpoint with Anton Bruckner in Vienna before returning to St. Louis.<sup>23</sup> Pommer held many musical positions in St. Louis throughout his career, some of which included private music teacher, public school teacher in the St. Louis area, professor of music at the University of Missouri, and director of various singing societies.<sup>24</sup>

Pommer's music is mostly Germanic in style and has shares characteristics of Robert Schumann's music. Pommer would sometimes write on American subject matter, yet his music shows that he had no or little interest in deviating from the established Western style. His "Indian Cradle Song" sets a poem depicting the life (or imagined life) of an American Indian family, however, the music does not reference American Indian music at all. Pommer, like Paine was reluctant to use borrow from other styles. He lived in St. Louis when ragtime was a new

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<sup>23</sup> Janice Wenger, *William Henry Pommer: His Life and Works* (Kansas-City: University of Missouri Kansas City, 1987), pp. 168-177.

<sup>24</sup> Janice Wenger, "William Henry Pommer: Missouri Musician," *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 12 (1991): 13-26; see pp.13-14.

musical style and the blues were travelling down the Mississippi River to St. Louis, but he never references these styles in his work. Therefore, it seems that the conservative works (works with little or no fusion of other styles with the Western style) cannot be attributed to a regional idiosyncrasy in American classical music of the late nineteenth century.

All of the American composers mentioned above went to Europe to study; most of them studied in Germany or in a combination of different places. For many young American musicians, the Leipzig Conservatory was a popular destination. The Leipzig Conservatory set up a system of higher education in music that was innovative in its day. It served as a model for many other music programs and conservatories in Europe and in America. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Leipzig Conservatory attracted many foreign students; in 1873, 55 percent of the students at the conservatory were foreign pupils.<sup>25</sup> It was American pianists that studied in Leipzig and then returned to America that established the “serious” piano recital tradition in America in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>26</sup> The image of the native-born and European-trained pianist grew in popularity in the 1860s and 1870s, and successful American graduates of the Leipzig Conservatory made it a popular place for American musicians to study.

Financial hardships and other difficulties of travel that made studying abroad problematic attested to the need for similar institutions in America. Therefore, several now famous American conservatories were founded. Many of them followed the basic form and philosophy that the Leipzig Conservatory had developed. In 1865, the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music were founded. The Chicago Musical College,

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<sup>25</sup> Leonard Phillips, *The Leipzig Conservatory: 1843-1881* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 203.

<sup>26</sup> Phillips, 222-3.

Chicago Conservatory, New England Conservatory and Philadelphia Academy of Music were also founded at around the same time.<sup>27</sup> These conservatories would help to perpetuate the Western music tradition –or at least a Western approach to music –in America.

The above mentioned composers all studied in Europe at some point in their early careers and learned the same Western classical tradition. However, excepting Gottschalk, a new American classical style began to take root roughly between the 1890's and the 1920's. If all of these composers had experienced similar training, why had a more defined American style not emerged earlier? Simply put, the demand for an American musical style was not high enough in classical music until near the end of the nineteenth century for composers to create an American style.

The lack of demand for American classical music and the praise of European culture throughout the nineteenth century would have deterred American composers from writing in an American style. Even if they had wanted to forge a new American style, they probably would not have been able to be successful as a composer. Since Gottschalk was a touring virtuoso pianist, he likely could compose anything he wanted in good taste and have it still be welcomed (especially if it was he performing it on piano). Also, the division between popular and serious music in concert venues may have dissuaded American composers from using the folk music of American Indians and immigrant groups in their classical compositions. Furthermore, the dominance of German and German-American conductors and musicians in American symphony orchestras during the nineteenth century contributed to the favoring of German and Austrian symphony programs.

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<sup>27</sup> Phillips, 223.



Furthermore, to create an American national style within classical music, American composers had to fuse different musical styles. The classification of “classical music” in this instance refers to Western music, mostly Germanic music. Therefore, no matter which styles would be fused to create an American classical style, one of the elements would have to be Western music. To create a national style for a nation as large as the United States and with as many indigenous and immigrant music cultures, some styles would have to be fused to create music that represented America and its history.

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