

Nationalism in Western Art Music: A Reassessment

by Robert Paul Kolt
Ouachita Baptist University
(koltr@obu.edu)

The American Musicological Society Southwest Chapter
Fall 2014
Ouachita Baptist University

Entering the intellectual and aesthetic minefield that is musical nationalism could be compared to traversing the five rivers of Hades, a deed that requires paying tribute to Charon while Cerberus angrily nips at one's heels; all the while contemplating the timeless warning of Dante and Monteverdi: "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate" ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter here"). However, a glimpse of musical nationalism's Elysian Fields might be possible if one is willing to admit that preconceived notions and outdated misconceptions abound concerning what is, or can be, the national in music; notions that cry out for critical reassessment. Let us first briefly examine a few of the major concepts that have historically defined musical nationalism and, as we will see, determining even a basic definition of nationalism in music has been highly problematic, at best.

Changing Perspectives of Musical Nationalism

In the nineteenth century, the era which saw the rise of musical nationalism, numerous scholars and composers both in Europe and America concluded that the national in music is seen in, among other things, the use of indigenous scales, melodies, harmonies, and rhythms.¹ But, some also admitted that, "in some instances the popular music of a nation has been considerably modified by foreign influences."² The problem here is that the so-called "unique qualities" of folk music are, in fact, common elements in the music of many cultures. Despite this fact, many nineteenth-century European composers embraced indigenous folk music with the mistaken belief that, in alchemist-like fashion, nationalism could be miraculously created from the base material of folk music's melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic eccentricities.

During this period in the United States, however, the more unattractive aspects of cultural and racial ethnocentrism were in full force, resulting in a dismissive bias towards the music of Native Americans and non-European minorities. For instance, the American music ethnographer, Louis Charles Elson, concluded that Native American cultures were "essentially unmusical and would find their music unrecognizable in a developed state."³

In the early twentieth century, especially in the United States, there arose the notion that musical nationalism also included aspects of patriotism, although explanations of exactly how this affected a perception of nationalistic content were equally inconclusive. The American scholar, Barbara Tischler, discussed the problem of patriotism as nationalism, especially during times of war and avers that the compositions of American composers during the years of World War I were essentially patriotic, as opposed to nationalistic, in that this music expressed the "feelings of the moment," but did not capture the "essential element" of American culture.⁴ However, Tischler fails to define this "essential element," and perhaps so because, as a nation comprised of numerous and diverse regions, cultures, races, political beliefs, religions, and tra-

ditions, it is impossible to discern this “essential element” of American culture and, by extension, that of any nation or cultural group. Alan Howard Levy addressed this problem and concluded that, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century composers in the United States sought to integrate elements of American art and vernacular/popular music. But opinions varied on exactly how to achieve such integration. Some wanted to use only the nation’s many racial, ethnic, vernacular, and regional traditions, while others wished to include European models. Some also advocated combining elements of the two sources, but extremists on both sides tenaciously forbade such combinations.⁵

While scholars grappled with these problems intellectually and philosophically, American composers attempted to deal with them more pragmatically. Nicholas Tawa notes that, although composers of the Second New-England School may have alluded to African- and Native- American music in some of their compositions, such as Edward MacDowell’s *Indian Suite*, they ultimately feared they might compromise the purely humanistic standards they tried to uphold. When these composers did incorporate a more complete musical reference, it was usually from British-American sources: Irish; Scottish; Welsh; and Cornish, rather than those more natavistic. Tawa also cites Arthur Foote’s belief that American composers could not consciously cultivate nationalism because it would have resulted in a forced, artificial manner of writing, unnatural to the composer and unappreciated by the public. The composers of the Second New-England School then, believed that, whatever shape nationalism took, it had to evolve spontaneously and be an unconscious presence during the act of composition.⁶

A generation later, American composer Arthur Farwell went so far as to call nationalism a “dangerous subject,” commenting that, “The subject of nationalism would appear to present the very genius of the amorphous and the protean.”⁷

In more recent investigations of nationalism in music, Celia Applegate points out that, definitions of “nation” and “nationalism” are by no means self-evident. She cites the general lack of agreement about what constitutes nationalism in music and believes the reason to be the erroneous assumption that national identity in music can be observed simply through its subject matter and structure, and futile attempts to define Barbara Tischler’s amorphous term, “the essential element” of a nation’s music.⁸

Richard Crawford takes the view that, in European tradition, nationalism and universalism were not diametrically opposed, a fact that brought international recognition to composers like Chopin, Mussorgsky, and to some extent, MacDowell in America. Ultimately, Crawford believes that “musical nationalism may be a collection of expressive, idiomatic traits somewhat analogous to varying accents within a common, spoken language,”⁹ yet he fails to define what these idiomatic traits are and how they might operate.

In Richard Taruskin’s examination of musical nationalism, he, unlike Crawford, asserts that composers’ use of folk music removed their work from the international mainstream. He also relates that Willi Apel, editor of the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, characterized nationalism as “a reaction against the supremacy of German music; a degenerate tendency that undermines its universal or international character; and because of this, by about 1930 the nationalist movement had lost its impact nearly everywhere in the world.” This assumption, however, is highly erroneous because nationalism, as a motivating principal, did not come to full fruition until the decades of the 1930s through 1960s with composers such as Alberto Ginastera in Argentina and, concurrently in the United States, with Aaron Copland and those influenced by him. Taruskin affirms this when he states that: “One of the principal achievements of recent musical scholarship has been to discredit Apel’s definition, itself the product of a nationalist agenda.”¹⁰

Barbara Zuck asserts that the term “American musical nationalism” may refer to something brought from another country, such as a word, an idea, or a person. In this sense, “nationalism” implies a changing process as composers’ attempt to imbue their music with something distinctly American.¹¹ But this claim seems untenable for two reasons: one, like Tischler, Zuck fails to identify that which is “distinctly” American and; two, because much in American music has its aesthetic roots in European traditions.

As demonstrated thus far, most definitions of the national in music relied heavily on the use of folk music’s melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic features, but ignored folk-related means other than strictly musical, such as national legends and historical accounts as the basis for programmatic music and operas that are now regarded as nationalistic;¹² and all of these definitions engender more questions than answers. The German scholar, Carl Dahlhaus, however, took an approach that seems to bring order to the chaos.

Carl Dahlhaus on Musical Nationalism

According to Dahlhaus, by the mid-nineteenth century, concepts of European nationhood came to fruition with the political unification of the numerous German principalities and Italian city-states that retained the model of “monarchy-as-head-of-state.” Because this political paradigm was retained after unification, the emerging states also quickly embarked upon various policies of political and artistic imperialism. Consequently, European nationalism was seen as a means, not a hindrance, to universality.¹³

However, during the same period in the United States, the existing social and political climate gave rise to vastly different attitudes about the need to express national characteristics in the arts. The United States was far too fragmented socially, too involved with settling the vast expanses of an untamed continent, and too much in need of solving its own domestic, social, and economic problems to express a unified, cultural identity. In fact, it was not until many years after the Civil War that Americans even began to think of themselves as citizens of a unified nation, rather than a particular State within a loosely defined confederation. Therefore, unlike the sociopolitical realities in European nations during the nineteenth century, the concurrent political, social, and economic factors in the United States delayed both the ability and the need to define American cultural unity until the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when a more cohesive social and political solidarity was finally achieved. Until that point, what existed in the United States could better be termed as “various American regionalisms;” New England, Southern, Western, etc., rather than “nationalism.”

Dahlhaus also points out that, within the context of nineteenth-century European nationalism, the idea that “*der Volksgeist*,” “the spirit of the people,” formed the creative element in art. According to Dahlhaus, this “national spirit” manifested itself in folk music at an elementary level and, as it became renewed and transformed, eventually produced a national classicism that was seen as the final, perfect expression of something that first took shape in folk music. The use of folk music in larger compositional processes, therefore, should be considered as only an elementary level of expression that, alone, cannot carry the full weight of the total expression.¹⁴ Dahlhaus also states that this “national spirit” was essential because, until European nationalist movements began, musical content alone had been the usual method by which nationalism in music was assessed and, therefore, the roles of pre-compositional intent and post-compositional reception were never fully appreciated. Dahlhaus asserts that, if a composer intends a work to be nationalistic in character, and the listeners believe it to be so, then this is also an aesthetic fact that must be accepted. And this acceptance holds true even when stylistic analysis of strictly musical features fails to produce any

evidence.¹⁵ The important factor here is that listeners must recognize the nationalistic content and therefore, if a work of music is felt to be characteristically national, it is an inseparable feature of the work, not something extraneous.¹⁶

Dahlhaus also postulates that, if a work of art is not received by a sufficient number of people over time as being nationalistic in character, then regardless of its pre-compositional intent or musical content, it cannot be regarded as such.¹⁷ As he stated: “Musical nationalism is the outgrowth of categorical formations which are just as aesthetically real when they owe their impact less to a solid foothold in the musical material than to associations accumulated over the years.” The aesthetic fact of musical nationalism, therefore, does not necessarily form from the outset, but may (or may not) accrue over time.¹⁸ And by extending this idea of “collective agreement” to its logical conclusion, it follows that what may be a “musical fact of nationalism” for one particular group of people need not affect the meaning it has for others.

He further notes that traditional theories of musical nationalism cannot account for the fact that, on the aesthetic level, it is legitimate to hear certain folk-related intervals and harmonies as typically Polish when they occur in Chopin’s music, and typically Norwegian in the music of Grieg; a paradox that cannot be resolved by assigning extra-musical meaning to constituent parts of a common vocabulary.¹⁹ Dahlhaus felt it was unclear how such ethnic raw material belongs in the category of national at all, because the nineteenth-century assumption that folk music is always the music of a nation is questionable and unfounded; an assumption made no more valid because it found its way into music history textbooks.²⁰

The nationalistic content of opera also suffered from a misunderstanding of its aesthetic underpinnings, and perhaps more so because of the genre’s inclusion of non-musical elements such as spoken language, acting, and stagecraft. Nineteenth-century European opera’s aspiration towards nationalism was one of the characteristic -- and characteristically confused -- ideas of the era. The nineteenth-century fondness for disguising nationalism in the garb of national romanticism could lead one to claim that a national style in opera arose only after the personal style of a major composer, such as Giuseppe Verdi, became accepted as the style of the nation. That an opera could claim to be national at all only becomes intelligible once the political and socio-psychological functions, as they vary from country to country, are understood. The principal point of departure here is not the musical or dramatic substance of a work as much as the proclamation and perception of nationalism, along with the motives behind it.²¹ Therefore, with opera, as with abstract music, it is the perception of nationalistic content that may, or may not, create the aesthetic fact of nationalism.

For Dahlhaus then, the perception of musical nationalism does not and cannot result from the various musical elements with which composers infuse their works; rather, it is a phenomenon that occurs during the process of reception, after the fact of composition; and again, if the reception process fails to relate a sense of nationalistic content to a sufficient number of listener’s over time, the pre-compositional intentions of the composer remain unrealized. If Dahlhaus is correct in his theories, then a composer wishing to write a work that will be understood as nationalistic is presented with a seemingly insurmountable challenge: that is, how to create a perception of nationalistic content during the act of composition that may be ascertained by a sufficient number of listeners in the post-compositional, reception process. However, as correct as I believe Dahlhaus may be in the overall, the composer may not be completely devoid of the ability to compositionally influence the later reception process, especially as it concerns texted, dramatic music.

My own work on the American composer Robert Ward’s opera, *The Crucible*, has revealed that, by carefully using the libretto’s syntactic features -- speech rhythms and vocal inflections --

as the basis for composing the constituent musical elements -- melodic and rhythmic -- subtle, yet identifiable qualities are evident that may, indeed, aid in the post-compositional reception process. In *The Crucible*, Ward transferred the syntactic features of the rugged, four-square, rhythmic and inflective aspects of the libretto's New England speech patterns to the music. He accomplished this during the compositional process by first reading aloud each line of the libretto in "dramatic fashion," as would an actor speaking the line. When he settled on the best dramatic reading of that line, Ward then notated the resulting rhythmic patterns based on the length of each syllable and word, which then became the rhythmic model for that line of text (see two examples in "Addendum – Robert Ward Manuscripts"). In turn, the various rising and falling inflections of the spoken words became a model for the general melodic curve. By applying this methodology systematically (but not pedantically), Ward created a complimentary musical syntax analogous to the linguistic syntax. Over the past five decades, this compositional procedure has undoubtedly contributed to *The Crucible*'s post-compositional reception as an "American sounding," national opera, especially to American audiences; those most likely to hear and comprehend the synthesis of the American-English text and music.

In conclusion, while understanding exactly what may or may not constitute nationalism in Western art music has historically presented scholars and composers with numerous challenges, the phenomenon can, indeed, be defined and discerned if one is willing to reassess and abandon futile attempts to attribute purely musical factors alone to its definition and acknowledge the post-compositional, aesthetic realities.

Notes:

1. Engel, Carl. *Introduction to the Study of National Music*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867, 1, hereafter referred to as Engel, *National Music*.
2. Engel, *National Music*, 1.
3. Elson, Louis Charles. *The National Music of America and Its Sources*. Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1924; Reprinted Detroit: Gale Research Co., Book Tower, 1974, 271.
4. Tischler, Barbara. *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 91.
5. Levy, Alan Howard. "Musical Nationalism: American Composers' Search for Identity," *Contributions in American Studies*, 66. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983, viii.
6. Tawa, Nicolas. *The Coming of Age of American Art Music: New England's Classical Romanticists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991, 66, 198-99.
7. Krueger, Karl. *The Musical Heritage of the United States: The Unknown Portion*. New York: Society for the Preservation of American Musical Heritage, Inc., 1973, 49.
8. Applegate, Celia. "How German Is It? Nationalism and the Idea of Serious Music in the Early Nineteenth Century," *19th-Century Music*. 21/3 (Spring 1998), 274. See also, Sedak, Eva. "Extraterritoriality and the Revelation of 'The National Idiom in Music,'" *History of European Ideas*, 16/4-6 (1993), 735.
9. Crawford, Richard. *America's Musical Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, 377-78. See also, Crawford, Richard. "Edward MacDowell: Musical Nationalism and an American Tone Poet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*. 49/3 (Fall 1996), 541.
10. Taruskin, Richard, and Stanley Sadie, ed. "Nationalism," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition, London: Macmillan Reference, 2000, 27/689-706, hereafter referred to as, Taruskin, "Nationalism."
11. Zuck, Barbara. "A History of Musical Americanisms," *Studies in Musicology, USA*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980, XIX, 4-11.
12. Taruskin, "Nationalism," 27/689-706.
13. Dahlhaus, Carl. *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, translated by Mary Whittall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 81-82, hereafter referred to as Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*.
14. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 81-82.

15. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 86-87.
16. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 87-92.
17. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 86-92, 95.
18. Dahlhaus, Carl. *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 38-41, hereafter referred to as Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*. Dahlhaus's theories regarding post-compositional aesthetic reality are analogous to and can often supersede commonly accepted views of linguistic "reality." For example, audiences have come to accept a modern-day, upper-class British accent as Shakespeare's linguistic reality when, in fact, such an accent did not exist during his era. The present British accent came into use after 1660, following the collapse of the Commonwealth, with the Restoration and Charles II's ascension to the throne. Charles II's French-influenced manner of speech then became the new standard. The English accent during Shakespeare's time had been closer to that exhibited by the inhabitants of Cornwall, the same accent now associated with the New England Puritans. In similar fashion, the manipulation of language in *The Crucible* is immediately recognized by English-speaking audiences as a Puritan New-England linguistic "reality."
19. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 95.
20. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 92.
21. Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 217.

References

- Applegate, Celia. "How German Is It? Nationalism and the Idea of Serious Music in the Early Nineteenth Century," *19th-Century Music*. 21/3 (Spring 1998), 274.
- Crawford, Richard. *America's Musical Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- _____. "Edward MacDowell: Musical Nationalism and an American Tone Poet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*. 49/3 (Fall 1996), 541.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, translated by Mary Whittall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- Elson, Louis Charles. *The National Music of America and Its Sources*. Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1924; Reprinted Detroit: Gale Research Co., Book Tower, 1974.
- Engel, Carl. *Introduction to the Study of National Music*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867.
- Krueger, Karl. *The Musical Heritage of the United States: The Unknown Portion*. New York: Society for the Preservation of American Musical Heritage, Inc., 1973.
- Levy, Alan Howard. "Musical Nationalism: American Composers' Search for Identity," *Contributions in American Studies*, 66. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- Sedak, Eva. "Extraterritoriality and the Revelation of 'The National Idiom in Music,'" *History of European Ideas*, 16/4-6 (1993), 735.
- Taruskin, Richard, and Stanley Sadie, ed. "Nationalism," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition. London: Macmillan Reference, 2000, 27/689-706.
- Tawa, Nicolas. *The Coming of Age of American Art Music: New England's Classical Romanticists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991.
- Tischler, Barbara. *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Zuck, Barbara. "A History of Musical Americanisms," *Studies in Musicology, USA*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980, XIX, 4-11.

Addendum – Robert Ward Manuscripts

The Crucible, Act I, Scene 2

Abigail | I have enemies | in this town
For three long years I have fought
To make this stiff-necked parcel
Respect and ^{my} ~~obey~~ now bring corruption
in my footsteps

3 you ^a compromise my very character.

Child, I have given you a home
And the clothes upon your back. I must
Have the truth before I speak to them down stairs. So

4 Give me an upright answer. []

4 Why did Josiah Proctor discharge you from her service?
Comes but rarely now to church - she will not sit so
close to something soiled, - she says. What meant she by that?

The Crucible, Act IV, Scene 2

Dad- I must have legal pro f--
J- You are the high court-- your word is god. Tell them I confessed myself; tell them Proctor broke his knees, ^{and} wept like a woman; tell them what you will...
Dad- Do you mean to deny this confession when you are free?
J- I mean to deny nothing. But this is my name. I have given you my soul; leave me my name.
Dad- Is that document a lie? I do not deal in lies. You will give me your honest confession in my hand, or I cannot keep you from the gallows... Which way do you go, Mister Proctor, weeping in fury, tears the paper. Marshal!
(in greater fury) Marshal!
Par- (hysterically) Proctor, Proctor! ^{Hold! you must not die man}
M- You cannot do this, you cannot ^{kill} die--