"AMERICANISM" IN AMERICAN MUSIC

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THE dream in certain American musicians of "expressing national experience," "representing American life," "achieving an American style," in fine the wish to attain what might be termed "Americanism" in music, much censured today and equally much acclaimed, is generally assumed a recent one. Actually it is rich in background. The Revolutionists gave signs of harboring it. . . . . The colonial Americans had possessed the patriotism of Englishmen. This love of country, or pride in country, with the Revolution directed itself upon the natal soil. It affected the musicians or created an opportunity naively improved by them. Hopkinson stressed the fact that he was the first native-born American composer. Fiercely patriotic, Billings, not quite sixteen years after the Declaration, advertised the third collection of his fugueing-tunes as "American music." "Original American Compositions" by other composers followed: a *Harmonia Americana;* a *Columbian Repository of Sacred Harmony.* Certain of these hymns and tunes actually proved more popular than those by foreign musicians; from Billings' crudely contrapuntal pieces some of us have received whiffs of the scarcely definable essence we call Yankee; and it is conceivable that he and his colleagues intended in all sincerity to convey to the public the idea that their stuff not only was the product of Americans but the expression of a feeling characteristic of the American people. That such a feeling or unity among feelings, and even the subject of a consciousness characteristically American, did exist, was the opinion of at least one citizen, Mr. Jefferson. The phrase "the American mind," which gained glad currency in the period, was his: the idea must have penetrated many circles. The habit of considering the nation as an organic whole most certainly was developing, most thoroughly perhaps among New Englanders. Early attempts to embody national sentiment and subject-matter in music took form not alone in patriotic airs. Reinagle composed a ballad *America, Commerce and Freedom,*

while Gram, the Boston organist, volunteered *The Death-Song of an Indian Chief.*

Of somewhat later birth, to be sure, appear to have been the conceptions, possibly external and possibly the signs of an obscure necessity, that music by Americans might, should or would be autochthonous in point of theme, breath and coloration; might, should or would adjust the traditions of the art to the fresh air of American life, set free its intuition and imagination, even represent the national experience and further the national existence. Conceptions of this red, white and blue pigmentation related themselves at first to literature, reasonably, it might seem: since however we are inferring a profound tendency, this sketch must picture them. Barlow, the good federalist, dreamt of a literature representative of American political ideas. Under John Adams' sanction, Noah Webster in his *Dictionary* gave authority to the American usages of the English tongue. Irving, through an impetus due in part to Scott, avowedly composed his legends of the Hudson Valley with the purpose of clothing "home scenes and places and familiar names with those imaginative and whimsical associations so seldom met with in our new country, but which live like charms and spells about the cities of the Old World, binding the heart of the native inhabitant to his home." That Declaration of Intellectual Independence, Emerson's *The American Scholar,* of 1837, sounded the famous call for individualistic and American art: "The millions that around us are rushing into life cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.... is it not the chief disgrace in the world not to ... yield the peculiar fruit each man was created to bear? We will walk on our own feet . . . we will speak our own mind!" The disciple, Whitman, confessed that from the commencement he had asked himself "how best he could represent his own distinctive era and surroundings, America, Democracy" and that "the ambitious thought of his song" was to form "a great aggregate nation . . . through forming myriads of fully developed and enclosing individualities." To him as for his teacher, a free art seemed the necessary nurture of the freeman through whom alone Democracy might exist. Remonstrances of course put in their appearances. "Any literature as far as it is National is diseased, insomuch as it appeals to some climatic peculiarity" ran a sentence in the proem to a short-lived magazine in 1842. The writer was the future author of *The Bigelow Papers!* But the friend of Emily Dickinson, T. W. Higginson, after the Civil War took up the theme: "The truly cosmopolitan writer is . . . he who makes his local

coloring forever classic through the fascination of the dream it tells. . . . We need to become national, by simply accepting our own life."

III

It was in the spry 50's that the possibly strange idea associating musical science and style with national spirit and body, began voicing itself. Atop the metropolitan public's acquaintance with Italian operatic and German instrumental art, and the proliferation of Foster's songs, wishes for an "American" music began expressing themselves in the papers.* Fry, author of the first American opera, the Donizetti-like *Leonora,* proclaimed his belief not only that his compatriots would have the ability to compose as well as Europeans, but that they ought to reject foreign traditions and found an "American School." Then in a newspaper account of the premiere of an Italian opera by Whitman, whose love of music significantly embraced both the melodies of Verdi and the minstrel-shows we encounter, "You envy Italy and almost become an enthusiast; you wish for an equal art here and an equal science and style underlain by perfect understanding of American realities and with appropriateness to our national spirit and body." These lines, which incidentally reveal an itch for a beautiful unity in American life, make one suspect the poet might have been talking with a picturesque personage known to New York as "Father Heinrich." For Anthony Heinrich, a native of Bohemia and possibly a Czech, was the author of innumerable symphonic exploitations of American subjects and themes, certain of which he believed to be "authentic voices of Nature." In the first years of the century he had come to Kentucky; and about the time when Glinka, saturated with the Slavic folksong and in Italy, was facing the conception of a national opera utilizing the "national" music, had begun writing his *Indian Fanfares, Comanche Reels, Manitou Airs, Sioux Galliards* and *Pocahontas Waltzes.* (*"Heinrich! Mir graut's vor dir!"*) Some of his symphonic poems he managed to have performed in the Eastern cities: what is more interesting, he seems in his dizzy way to have preached the idea that every country, if it wishes to make its contribution to humanity at large, must develop its peculiar culture; and that the inevitable basis of music is the expression of the stratas of the folk immediately in contact with nature. This idea, one of the excuses of "nationalistic" poetry and music, was widespread among the Slavic subjects of the so-called Holy Roman Empire, indeed among all the "Wends, Poles and Russians" to whom Herder's philosophy of culture sympathetically had communicated it. It was the outcome of

*The source of this information, a kind one, is Dr. C. S. Smith - at this moment at work on an extended study of the problems of American music. The source of some other bits is the valuable handbook of J. T. Howard.

the general conception – announced by Machiavelli and the French economist and philosopher Jean Bodin respectively in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, elaborated by Montesquieu and Winckelmann in the early eighteenth, and grandiosely organized by Herder in the latter part of the century – of the influence of topography upon the human spirit; the close relations between the soil, the life of the nation (not of the race!) and the character of art; and the folksong's special representation of those historical manifestations of God, the peoples. The idea that the differences in the melodic styles of the various nationalities were the consequence of the differences between the inflections in their various speeches, of course had been disseminated by J. J. Rousseau's famous *Lettre Sur La Musique Françoise.*

Definitely it was a Czech who did infect certain American composers of a later generation and not imperceptible gifts, possibly prepared for it by vague influences persistent from the mid-century, with the impetus commonly associated with the nationalistic effort in music. This individual was Antonin Dvorák, from 1892 to 1895 director of the "National Conservatory" in New York. Saturated from childhood with the Slavonic folksong, he directed his pupils – among them were H. W. Loomis, R. Goldmark and H. R. Shelley – toward Negro and other American folklore as the possible source of style. Differences of opinion immediately made themselves felt, on the part of MacDowell, for instance, who, friend though he was to Grieg, refused to see national peculiarities in folksongs. Yet it is to be remarked that MacDowell's own experiments with Indian motives and New England subjects mainly date from that period. Of the American folklorists, the most thorough and aggressive however was Arthur Farwell, whose recent works, the *Violin Sonata* in particular, point out his honorable position among post-Franckian, late-romantic composers such as C. M. Loeffler and Florent Schmitt. As a young man, Farwell had been in Berlin: there he had observed the German resistance to the nationalistic musical movements, and on his return to the States had seen in the startling contrast to the European of New-World skies, air, milieu, the reason for his bewitchment with the dream and intimations of a new and American music. In the interests of the "nationalistic" and all the progressive and impressionistic work of his generation, some of which was hallmarked by a poetic use of harmony, he founded the Wa-Wan Press: it published pieces by H. F. Gilbert, by Noble Kreider – whose later seclusion probably was a blow to music – and one or two by such future celeb-

rities as Lawrence Gilman and Katherine Ruth Heyman. In the interests of his press he got up a program of original fantasies on Indian themes and a lecture *I Hear America Singing*: with them he toured the land during several seasons. Some of the response he met is betokened by a cartoon of the period representing Farwell pounding the box above a legend running "Wow-wow! I hear America singing 'Wow-wow!'." Of importance is his later statement that in order to provide food for serious persons, American music must "wrench itself free from the uninspiriting and nationally inappropriate character it has acquired as the result of the German influence."

Critics and further composers took up the theme, while about 1910 the "Indian" movement culminated and *Shanewis* and *Natoma* mounted the Metropolitan's boards. H. T. Finck thought to ridicule the idea of the necessity of a folksong-basis for music by pointing out Wagner's freedom from folksong elements (see *A Siegfried Idyll!*); but Oscar Sonneck insisted that all music was indefinably but ineluctably national and the choice confronting American composers that between a musical Volapük and a living style of their own. R. De Koven even went so far as to say that the weakness of American music flowed from the absence of a strong "nationalism" in American life, and H. F. Gilbert in Russell Herts' *The International* for 1913, declared his belief that "the greatest creative artists . . . have been the mouthpieces of a people . . . their masterpieces an expression and extension of the race-consciousness." (Horrified he would have been, had he lived, to see the deadly perversion of this idea at the hands of Nazidom!)

Then, first through the Metropolitan's performance of *Boris,* and through the Boston Symphony; later, during the Great War through the recitals of Ornstein and the performances by Diaghilev's Ballet, there came to the country experience of the music of Debussy and Ravel who in shattering the academic Germanic traditions had returned to the pre-Gluckist, pre-Italian tradition of their country's music; also experience of the modal and polytonal music of modern and ethnographic Russians and Hungarians – the early Stravinsky and Bartok. Bloch arrived; his music was performed – and all this work had the indefinable and yet ineluctable aroma of what was national and racial in the various peoples, and the breath of the soil.

And suddenly there began emerging, wakening excitement and commanding the attention and respect of serious people, a music by

American composers that had a breath, a coloration, a feel to it some of us called, indeed could not help calling "American." Possibly our ears had temporarily been rendered hypersensitive to national differences. Possibly the "national" feel to the work indeed was strong, the result of rhythms and intervals peculiarly American. This feel alone did not create the importance of the music, to be sure. Still an enormous part of the charm flowed from its identification of ourselves. Curiously enough, some of the composers were innocent of any "nationalism," were in fact averse to it. Others, saturated with folklore – Ives, for example – seemed to have sought for a music conformative to folklore and for a national or regional expressivity; and quite in Farwell's manner to have recognized the reason for their search in the specialty of the milieu. Most important however is the circumstance that this generation, perhaps the most gifted for music of high quality ever brought forth in America, had emerged while, under the blows largely of the European nationalists, the academic and Germanic tradition had lost its *kudos*.

III

Wherefore, in conclusion, this little personal hypothesis: that all this "Americanism," this idea and pursuit of national or regional or local styles, and manipulation of folklore, was inevitable precisely as European musical "nationalism" was inevitable: the direct consequence of two conditions whose reality we assume. One of these conditions was the dominance during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a grammar of music that all in all was German. These relations of tonic and dominant, these developments and codas, these elaborate cadences and major-minor systems, thought to be incumbent on all music, may for some strange reason have been peculiarly adjustable to the expression of feeling under German conditions of life; they were not so favorable to the expression of feelings born of others. By reason of the immense idealism of German music and the technical proficiency of its composers, this grammar had imposed itself upon the West; with the consequence that composers subject to other than German conditions and members of communities where the musical impulse was unsteady on its feet, were impelled to use a grammar unadjustable to their experience and thus inwardly deprived of originality and perfect truthfulness to their own feeling. In a blind effort towards freedom they turned to folklore, which lured them with intimations of older, suppler systems – and rationalized their intuitive direction with the aid of certain philosophical ideas. At last, under blows delivered from within

as well as from without, the German grammar lost its strangle-hold – and music with the quality of other-regional experience emerged. The other of the possible conditions apparently motivating this nationalism is the one that creative individuals from time to time unite with their communities – and strive beautifully to shape them – through the production of symbols of certain spiritual values or ideal aspirations apparently latent in these communities. These symbols to some degree, more or less involuntarily, couch themselves in the style and color of the community's traditional art. Such a symbol would appear to be that nobly-impelled and viciously misused piece, *Die Meistersinger,* with its references to three hundred years of German music. Still in each case the value of the efforts and interpretations to the world would seem to flow not from their motives but from the quality of the feeling they embody and the dignity, the probity and the austerity of the embodying means.