Classical Music and American Studies: Closing the Gap
by Joseph Horowitz

For three years, beginning in fall 1892, musicians and music critics in Boston and New York engaged in a sustained and often bitter public debate over issues of race and national identity. This was the period during which Antonin Dvorak, in the throes of a New World epiphany, impetuously espoused a future American music based on “Negro melodies.” The outcome was a tale of two cities: In Boston – a Brahmin enclave with entrenched traditions, however young – Dvorak was denounced as a “negrophile”; in New York – then as now a city of immigrants – he was embraced as a mentor of genius. The entire episode, fractious and inspirational by turn, illustrates how the institutional history of American classical music – a topic little-studied except by a handful of music historians and even less known to Americanists at large – illuminates the American experience.

That historians ignore classical music is understandable. In our time, America’s musical high culture has degenerated into a formulaic entertainment divorced from the contemporary moment. Intellectuals know theater, dance, cinema, literature. Missing out on what our orchestras and opera companies are up to, they are for the most part not missing much. In the late Gilded Age, however, music was widely esteemed as “queen of the arts.” Classical music was in its American heyday. Wagnerism was a dominant cultural leitmotif. And Dvorak’s message to Americans was urgently disseminated and discussed.

An educational visionary, Jeannette Thurber, was the agent of his coming. Herself a graduate of the Paris Conservatory, she dreamt of creating an American music school of comparable distinction. This aspiration was in no way chauvinistic. American composers of the time typically studied in Germany – and as typically their symphonies and string quartets sounded German. Mrs. Thurber reasoned that if the United States were to acquire a native musical canon – were to acquire a concert idiom Americans would recognize as their own – it would help to keep gifted young musicians at home. Among other reasons, she chose Dvorak to direct her National Conservatory of Music in New York because she knew him to be a butcher’s son, a cultural nationalist, an instinctive democrat. Enticed by a salary he could not refuse, Dvorak arrived to discover himself appointed (as he put it in a letter to Prague) “to show [Americans] to the promised land and kingdom of a new and independent art, in short, to create a national music.” Overwhelmed by the scale and pace of American life, by the caliber of American orchestras, he more than took the bait.

Dvorak had already read Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* in Czech. He attended Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show at Madison Square Garden. In Iowa, he spent long evenings with the members of the Kickapoo Medicine Show. His fascination with Native American music was sustained and productive. But it was the “Negro melodies” – “Swing Low, “Deep River,” and other songs whose existence he had never suspected – that struck with revelatory force. His insight into the pertinence of black culture to American identity was not unique. Mrs. Thurber had already eagerly enrolled African-Americans on full scholarship – she sensed that they had as much to teach as to learn. But only an outsider, taken unawares,
could have experienced plantation song as a tumultuous surprise; and only an outsider could
degree it as Dvorak would.  

The most famous and controversial words Dovrak ever uttered were transcribed by a
reporter for the New York Herald in May 1893: “In the negro melodies of America I discover
all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.” The great event of the following
New York concert season, on December 15, was the premiere of Dvorak’s Symphony
“From the New World” at Carnegie Music Hall. Not the least remarkable aspect of this
instantly famous occasion was W. J. Henderson’s review in the next morning’s New York
Times. One of the crowning feats in American musical journalism, Henderson’s 3,000-word
essay on Dvorak’s new symphony (no other aspect of the concert – not even the name of the
conductor – is so much as mentioned) remains one of the most vivid and acute descriptions
ever penned of this most popular symphony ever composed on American soil. Grasping the
twin identity of the Largo, with its admixture of Hiawatha and plantation song, Henderson
wrote: “It is an idealized slave song made to fit the impressive quiet of night on the prairie.”
To consummate his exegesis, Henderson asked the crucial question: “Is it American?” His
answer was clarion:

In spite of all assertions to the contrary, the plantation songs of the American negro
possess a striking individuality. No matter whence their germs came, they have in their
growth been subjected to local influences which have made of them a new species. That
species is the direct result of causes climatic and political, but never anything else than
American. Our South is ours. Its twin does not exist. Our system of slavery, with all its
domestic and racial conditions, was ours, and its twin never existed. Out of the heart of this
slavery, environed by this sweet and languorous South, from the canebrake and the
cotton field, arose the spontaneous musical utterance of a people. That folk-music
struck an answering note in the American heart. . . . If those songs are not national, then
there is no such thing as national music.

Boston’s most influential music critic, Philip Hale, personified the “assertions to the
contrary” of which more would be heard. It was Hale who in 1896 would denounce the New
World influence of Dvorak the “negrophile.” In 1910 – fully six years after Dvorak’s death –
Hale was still contesting the New York view that Dvorak had struck an American chord. In a

1 Frederick Delius, born in England in 1862 to German parents, was a second major European composer so
smitten by American plantation song that his music was instantly stamped by “Negro melodies.” Delius was sent
by his father to Florida to manage an orange grove at the age of 22. The songs of the plantation workers were an
epiphany in which he discovered “a truly wonderful sense of musicianship and harmonic resource.” Hearing this
singing “in such romantic surroundings,” he later told his disciple Eric Fenby, “I first felt the urge to express
myself in music.” A few years later, his father finally agreed to allow him to study composition formally – in
Leipzig. For Delius, unlike Dvorak, the encounter with plantation song was early and formative. At least four
Delius compositions explicitly evoke the sounds of the American South: the Florida Suite (1887, revised 1889), the
operas The Magic Fountain (1895) and Koanga (1897), and – a veritable New World Symphony – Appalache:
“Variations on an old slave song with finale chorus” (1898-1903). The title does not denote the Carolina region,
but appropriates a Native American word for the whole of North American. The work begins with an
unforgettable preamble: an epic sunrise on virgin terrain. For Dvorak, the vast unpopulated American prairie
inspired feelings melancholy and existential; for Delius, the American landscape here revealed by the dawning
light is both physical and metaphysical: untrammeled, life-affirming. Next come the first stirrings of nature, then
the bustle of human life rising to a high pitch of elation; the orchestra fairly shouts, “America!”
Boston Symphony Orchestra program note for the *New World* Symphony, he expounded that “the negro” is “not inherently musical,” that his “folk-songs” were founded “on sentimental ballads sung by the white women of the plantation, or on camp-meeting tunes,” that “it would be absurd to characterize a school of music based on such a foundation as an ‘American school.’” Hale concluded: “Yet some will undoubtedly continue to insist that the symphony ‘From the New World’ is based, for the most part, on negro themes, and that the future of American music rests on the use of Congo, North American Indian, Creole, Greaser and Cowboy ditties, whinings, yawps, and whoopings.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, Boston’s most famous scientist was Louis Agassiz of Harvard, who taught that black and white human beings belonged to distinct species. After 1860, Agassiz had few scientific allies at Cambridge. But his views fed bias in the culture at large long after his death in 1873. In the 1890s – the decade of Dvorak in America – music reviews in the Boston daily press routinely employed the adjectives “barbarian” and “primitive” in “scientific” assessments of compositions by Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, and other “Slavs” in contradistinction to “Anglo-Saxon” masters occupying a higher evolutionary rung. Dvorak was viewed in Boston as an unwanted interloper. His view that “red” and “black” Americans could be considered emblematic or representative was thought naïve at best.

Hale was eighth in line of descent from Thomas Hale, who settled in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. Henry Edward Krehbiel – Hale’s opposite number in Manhattan, the pontifical “dean” of New York music critics – was the son of German immigrants. That Hale felt “American” was a matter of entitlement. Like many another immigrant or immigrant offspring, Krehbiel felt the need to investigate his national identity. A phenomenal autodidact (Hale was a product of Phillips Exeter and Yale; Krehbiel never went to college), he made himself into America’s leading authority on music and race. For the *New York Tribune*, he authored treatises (with bibliographies in English and German) on the music of Hebrews, Orientals, Russians, Scandinavians, Magyars, American Indians, and African Americans. In 1914, he wrote a pathbreaking 155-page study of *African American Folksongs*. Though Krehbiel’s notion that African-Americans are “inherently musical” sounds dated, his awakening to folk song, densely informed by transcribed details of rhythm and mode, was anything but quaint. He did not set Anglo-Saxons above Slavs. Like Dvorak, like Henderson, he considered plantation song the deepest, truest American folk song, and the most pregnant for American music to come.

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The larger study of New York and Boston as twin birthplaces for American classical music is a larger study in contrasts. But in neither city does the sudden and dynamic growth of an American classical music tradition fit stereotypes of meretricious Gilded Age culture. Equally irrelevant are George Santayana’s notion of a complacent “genteel tradition,” and concepts of “social control” and “sacralization” as more recently articulated by such important cultural historians as Alan Trachtenberg and Lawrence Levine. Gilded Age culture-bearers are routinely depicted as inane, timid, arrogant, or stupidly racist. Such portraiture misapplies a twentieth century template of understanding. The present-day observer of late nineteenth century behavior must grapple with a different reality: people of intelligence once believed in superior and inferior races, in religion being threatened by
science, in the inevitability of sharp class distinctions. They also lived in times of substantial economic and social instability. They were not any more obtuse or self-interested than we are today.

The notion of social control, bedeviling such accounts, treats Gilded Age institutions of culture as agencies of elite empowerment, created in part to co-opt the restless energies of the less privileged. But to study classical music in late nineteenth century New York is to discover the absence of any cultural elite correlating with class or ethnicity. Old New York wealth inhabited the boxes at the Academy of Music. New wealth built and occupied the boxes of the Metropolitan Opera House uptown. For boxholders, opera was a glamorous and expensive French or Italian entertainment. But for the Germans who took over the Metropolitan for seven seasons, beginning in 1884, opera was Wagner. Stereotypes notwithstanding, never in the 124-year history of the Met was artistic policy so at war with social purpose as during this eventful first decade. The Germans held the boxholders hostage, imposing a religious silence. In 1891, the boxholders revolted and banned opera in German. In 1895 the Germans rebelled in turn. The result was an uneasy (and little remembered) balance of power: a coexistence of dual Metropolitan companies, French/Italian and German, each with its own orchestra, chorus, singers, and conductors.

In many accounts, the personification of the early Met was Mrs. Caroline Astor, whose annual ball defined high society and who arrived at the opera 9 pm every Monday so decked in diamonds and emeralds as to resemble a “walking chandelier.” The gaudy imagery of Mrs. Astor is as misleadingly incomplete as that of Gounod’s *Faust* at the Academy of Music as famously recounted by Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* (1921). *Faust*, in Wharton, is an expensive backdrop to social display, a metaphor for artifice and pretension. But as true a picture of the Academy of Music – of New York opera in its boisterous adolescense -- is evinced by the “lager bear cavern,” a basement haunt documented by the *New York Evening Post* where between acts, “in a cloud of cigar smoke and amid the fumes of lager and liquor, the artists and their friends refresh themselves with copious libations. . . . As soon as the music commences, the rotund German drops his lager; the Frenchman shrugs his shoulders and says “Mon Dieu”; the Italian quotes Count Luna in *Trovatore* and sings “Andiamo”; the yellow Cubans and Spaniards give a twirl to their moustaches; the English or New York swell struts toward the stairs, and in a few moments the motley crowd are in the seats or lobbies.”

If this underground vignette is as salient for the Academy of Music as Wharton’s prisoners of fashion, as representative of the early Met as Mrs. Astor were the middle-aged women who at the close of *Tristan und Isolde* observed as awestruck silence and then – the *Musical Courier* tells us -- “stood on the chairs and screamed their delight for what seemed hours.” So polyglot was New York culture that as of 1918 the Met’s president, board chairman, and dominant shareholder was an immigrant German: Otto Kahn. So confused were hierarchies of status and wealth that Kahn was denied a box because his parents were Jewish -- and that he appeared not to care.

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Dvorak’s prophesy that “Negro melodies” would foster an “American school of music” came true and did not. Dvorak had in mind symphonies and operas audibly infused
with the black vernacular – but there is only one Porgy and Bess. Rather, the black tunes Dvorak adored fostered a popular genre he could not have predicted. Jazz must be regarded as America’s most remarkable musical contribution during the interwar decades. But American classical musicians and their supporters responded with indifference or hostility. This story of the “jazz threat” revisits the subject matter of race and national identity ignited by Dvorak – and again exemplifies how the history of American classical music holds up an illuminating mirror to the American experience.

When Maurice Ravel landed in New York in 1928 he told Olin Downes of the New York Times:

I think you have too little realization of yourselves and that you still look too far away over the water. . . . I think you know that I greatly admire and value – more, I think, than many American composers – American jazz. . . . I am waiting to see more Americans appear with the honesty and vision to realize the significance of their popular product, and the technic and imagination to base on original and creative art upon it.

In fact, for legions of important European composers who visited or moved to the United States after World War I – Bartok, Hindemith, Milhaud, Stravinsky, and Weill, to name a few -- jazz mattered more than Aaron Copland or Roy Harris ever could; as with Dvorak, their outsiders’ view clarified what native prejudice and experience obscured. The jazz decades were decades, too, of what Virgil Thomson called the “music appreciation racket,” a mentoring literature that ignored or disparaged Ellington and Armstrong. In Cleveland, a Music Memory Contest listed among its purposes “to cultivate a distaste for jazz and other lower forms.” To a remarkable degree, American composers followed suit. Dvorak had said of Negro melodies: “They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or any purpose.” How much more circumscribed was Aaron Copland’s endorsement of jazz half a century later; it had, he wrote in 1941, “only two expressions: the well-known ‘blues’ mood, and the wild, abandoned, almost hysterical and grotesque mood so dear to the youth of all ages. . . . Any serious composer who attempted to work within those two moods sooner or later became aware of their severe limitations.” Copland compared “interest in jazz” with “interest . . . in the primitive arts and crafts of aboriginal peoples.” Listening to jazz as a stunted art music, he was more Eurocentric than the Europeans who flocked to Harlem – or who, as in the case of Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G and Violin Sonata, appropriated jazz more variously than he could.

Though they lived in the same city, Copland and George Gershwin did not know one another, and Gershwin does not figure in Copland’s occasional surveys of important or promising American composers. When in 1937 Copland was asked to compare his music with “Mr. Gershwin’s jazz,” he opined, “Gershwin is serious up to a point. My idea was to intensify it. Not what you get in the dance hall but to use it cubistically – to make it more exciting than ordinary jazz.” But it was Paul Rosenfeld, who influentially championed Copland, Roy Harris, and other musical highbrows in intellectual circles, who took the gloves off: he detected in Gershwin the Russian Jew a “weakness of spirit, possibly as a consequence of the circumstance that the new world attracted the less stable types.” These
were the years, as well, when Harris was called (as in *Time* Magazine) the “great white hope” of American music. Classical music was itself colored white.

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My last example of how the history of American classical music mirrors and interprets the larger American experience has nothing to do with race and national identity. As I was finishing the final chapter of my *Classical Music in America*, I happened to be reading *The Natural*, Joe Klein’s 2003 biography of Bill Clinton, and there discovered a summary paragraph that stopped me short. An ongoing theme of American classical music is that, in the absence of state arts subsidies taken for granted abroad, the course of our musical high culture has been shaped by individuals of vision – and that otherwise the marketplace has taken over.

Jeannette Thurber and Antonin Dvorak were two of the visionaries who superintended American classical music in its dynamic infancy. As representative a figure for the interwar decades was Arthur Judson – the “Robert Moses” of American classical music, its most potent and controversial power-broker. Judson – who at one time ran both the New York Philharmonic and Philadelphia Orchestra as well as Columbia Artists Management, with its supreme roster of conductors and soloists – was in 1931 challenged by the *New York Times* to defend Arturo Toscanini’s ultra-conservative Philharmonic programming. He responded: “There are certain composers like Bruckner and Mahler who have not yet been accepted heartily by the American public. Certain of their works are played from time to time and it may be that they will gradually attain their permanent place in the repertory. We can only go as far as the public will go with us.” Judson’s notion that the audience leads taste was something new. Previously, it had been understood hat the central purposes of an orchestra or music director included the introduction of new and unfamiliar works. Conductors like Leopold Stokowski in Philadelphia and Serge Koussevitzky in Boston proudly maintained this tradition into more timid music appreciation times. Judson, by comparison, did not claim to be an artistic leader. He was and declared himself a successful music businessman. A personification of commercial forces, he equally embodied the “crisis in leadership” Klein decries when he writes:

> Marketing has been the most insidious force in the shrinking of public life. The ubiquitous pollsters and advertising consultants who dominated late-twentieth-century politics were thuddingly pragmatic. They asked people what they wanted. The answers were always predictable: better schools, better health care, safer streets – and lower taxes. And so the politicians themselves became thuddingly pragmatic. They became followers, not leaders . . . Their message tended to congeal in the safest, most conservative precincts of the political middle, without any of the spontaneous brilliance and stray eccentricities and unplanned moments of courage that sparkle when a true leader is at work.

The same media culture, the same shrewd, small-minded tactics that have diminished politics and government in the United States diminished American classical music over the course of the twentieth century. To recall Thurber and Dvorak is to recall their vision that an
American conservatory of music could attain an excellence and prestige commensurate with that of music schools in France or Germany, that an American symphony could mean as much to Americans as Beethoven’s Fifth does to Berliners or Viennese. And these were practical dreams: Thurber created a world-class American conservatory; Dvorak composed an enduring symphony saturated with plantation song and with the imagery of Longfellow’s Hiawatha. Thurber and Dvorak were not short-term strategists banking on the safety of ingrained prejudice and opinion. Rather, they shared an inspirational, ecumenical vision of America – a vision whole and wholesome, transcending differences in race and culture.

Now is a time for practical dreamers.