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CLASSICAL MUSIC FROM THE LATE 19th CENTURY TO THE EARLY 20th CENTURY: THE CREATION OF A DISTINCT AMERICAN MUSICAL SOUND

Marked by the conflict of the Civil War, the late 19th century of American history marks an extremely turbulent time for the United States of America. As the young nation reached the second half of the century, idle threats of a Southern secession from the union bloomed into an all-encompassing conflict. However, through the turbulence of the war, American music persisted. Strengthened in battle, the ideas of a reconstructed American national identity started to form a distinctly different American culture and way of life. This is reflected in the nation's shift in the music written after the war. Previously the Americans had followed the European standard which was centered on the old, primarily tonal, rules for composition. While these strict set of guidelines had been followed for much of the lifetime of classical music, Americans began to break away from the established standard. The strides made during the late 19th century, which followed into the early 20th, began laying the base for other distinctly American styles in the future. Given the climate of the era, the shifting of popular culture was inevitable. With massive upheaval in societal standards and ways of life of the ordinary American during this period, the only possible response was a corresponding shift in culture. In this way, the Civil War marked an era of rebirth in the American nation and in its music.

During this period, American music evolved and adapted to the turbulent path of the nation as it never had before. For even as the United States had previously fought to separate itself from the influences of Europe, compositions during the previous wartime eras continued to be influenced by distinctly European voices. ¹ Heavily reliant on the groundwork placed by their predecessors and countrymen, European settlers had brought the music of their homelands with them to America. This established a firm basis upon which American music grew over its early years.

As the nation neared celebrating a century of independence, this dedication and reliance on the styles and practices of the Old World had still not wavered. So as Americans further explored the European musical landscape, creating an infrastructure and audience for classical music from across the globe, they also created the infrastructure to support their own great composers. In order for the works of European composers to spread across America, they first had to be heard. To accommodate this, America began to gather its own “skilled singers and players,” building “schools and conservatories for training them” as well as “suitable concert halls and theaters” to host their performances. ² However, this infrastructure was difficult and costly to maintain and required a dedicated musical audience as the United States had never seen before.

¹ Steven Banfield, J.W. Ross, P.V. Bohlman, W. Brooks, M. Broyles, D. Cockrell, N. Cooke, J.C. DjeDje, D. Joyner, K.V.W. Keller, J. Koegel, V.L. Levine, J. Magee, D. Nicholls, S. Peles, K.K. Preston, R. Radano, L. Starr, and R. Walser, Edited by David Nicholls. *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 34-37.

² Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 351.

Previous American audiences had been mainly relegated to church services and the pastime of the wealthy elite. The music that was written for churches and services during this period was widely distributed for both four part choir and string quartets. One such example of this four-part music is William Billings' "Shiloh."³ Written originally for choir, the soprano, alto, tenor, bass style of the piece made it easily accessible to church choirs. Written as a piece to be sung at Christmas time, Billings' intent with "Shiloh" follows the spiritual nature of much of America's early music. This style and spiritual focus had its roots in the European tradition of choral and church music. In many ways, Billings followed this tradition of classical European choral pieces, as it can be analyzed in a similar manner.⁴

Analysis of "Shiloh" can be split into two primary methods, Roman numeral analysis and the chord progression.⁵ Both the chords and progression follows a majorly tonal style, popularized in European classical music. Given his reliance on the traditional European style, Billings failed to break any conventions of the old standard of classical music. A majority of music written for church choirs and ensembles followed this tonal style, and by doing so, classify as in the classical European canon of music of the period.⁶

³ William Billings, "The Suffolk Harmony", "Shiloh". Boston: J. Norman, 1786.

⁴ This pattern of tonal analysis follows that which is outlined in the first ten chapters of *Tonal Harmony*. For further information on the subject and this method of analysis, refer to: Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne, *Tonal Harmony*, 5th Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies), 2004, pgs. 16-151. The seventh edition of this textbook can also be referenced with few dissimilarities to the 5th.

⁵ Further analysis of "Shiloh" can be found in the appendix on the attached sheet music for Billings' "Suffolk Harmony", "Shiloh".

⁶ For more information on the tonal style, reference the later chapters of *The Oxford History of English Music*, which provides a framework for the guidelines European tonal music followed during this period as well as its progression through the early 20th century. John

The first group of composers to bid for the attention of the American public during this period was the First New England School. Centered in Boston, this small collection of tight-knit composers consisted of several of the most renowned Americans in the field. Even as well-known American composers, the members of the First School had very little influence outside of the United States. Due to the lack of prominent or successful American composers in the era, this was the case for many Americans during the first century of American independence. As remarked by William Henry Fry, a member of this first school, art composers “were rare, even in the largest cities” of America.⁷ In discussing the art composer, Fry referred to those who followed the common style of composition at the time as well as to well-trained American composers. He further commented on the state of American composition in stating that “by composers we do not mean the writers of ‘sheet music’ any more than we would call poets the fillers-up of the corners of a village newspaper”.⁸ These composers began to break the absolute dominance of European classical music styles in the American landscape. Yet even as American infrastructure and interest began to grow under the First New England School, the American musical style had not yet come into its own.

Regardless of their lack of deviation, this group of composers began a tradition of strong composition and collaboration that was notably centered in Boston. These “talented, professionally trained, energetic, and idealistic” composers flourished in the environment of Boston “because of the excellence of its composers, schools, performance opportunities, and a

Caldwell, *The Oxford History of English Music Volume 2: c.1715 to Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 382-391.

⁷ Nicholas E. Tawa, *The Coming of Age of American Art Music: New England’s Classical Romanticists* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

social milieu that encouraged fellowship among composers.”⁹ Unlike a good deal of America at the time, this environment had been long fostered in Boston as it had gradually developed its own infrastructure for musical performance. While many other larger metropolitan areas, like New York City, held a similar draw for composers, the unique culture and musical landscape of Boston was especially hospitable to the native-born composer during this period. This tradition held true from the antebellum culture of Boston to its post-war Reconstructionist attitude.

Music from this period is based primarily in European models of the parlor song. Usually written for piano with occasional vocal accompaniment, the parlor song became dominant in American musical circles and the high society culture in which it originated. One such piece of parlor song during this time was Edward MacDowell’s collection of short movements called “Woodland Sketches.”¹⁰ An American-born composer, MacDowell’s work became highly influential after his time in the First New England School. In his “Woodland Sketches” the most notable and popular of the ten movements was “To a Wild Rose,” a piece for solo piano with no vocal accompaniment. Being his most influential work it lent itself well to an overall idea of the compositional styles and structure the First New England School followed. The analysis of the piece consists of three major parts, Roman numeral analysis, the chord progressions, and overall structure of the piece.

In both Roman numeral analysis and in its chord progressions “To a Wild Rose” is relatively simple. The chords are mostly triadic and in root position, the least complicated method of chord writing. While he intersperses a fair amount of less stable inverted chords and seventh chords to add color to the piece, the root position I chord is the most prevalent. Given

⁹ Tawa, 3.

¹⁰ Edward MacDowell, “Woodland Sketches”, Mov. 1, “To a Wild Rose”. New York, Arthur D. Schmidt: Elikn & Co., Ltd., London, 1899.

the simplicity of the initial three bar motive, the first lines of the piece can be seen as moving towards the eventual V to I resolution in measures seven to eight. This also reflects the overall structure of the first page of “To a Wild Rose.”¹¹ With a three bar statement that begins the piece it progresses to a second section that closely mirrors the first. These two themes are then repeated with minor changes in measures one through sixteen. Given the nature of the piece and its structure, “To a Wild Rose” resembles the classical European tonal style followed at the time, not marking it as distinctly American in any way. But this did not dissuade the American public. The piece’s simple melody was easy to play and gave the American, Edward MacDowell, a spot in popular parlor song repertoire. However, American classical music required something to fully push it in to a style of its own.

By the late 1850’s, the outlook of American politics became increasingly grim as the two sides of the nation leaned towards a seemingly inevitable conflict. As this heated political struggle came to a head with the gradual secession of the southern states, the northern states were faced with the new political map of the United States against that of the recently formed Confederate States. Like the other northern states and their cities, Boston felt the aftershocks of the south’s refusal to remain in the union. It felt the greatest hit when the North’s military and its drafts were put into place. Drawing young men from the states and shifting the national focus to that of a nation at war took its toll on the city. One of the first blows to Boston’s cultural center was the war’s effect on the arts.

While ballads of patriotism and anthems of northern victory left musicians with something to sing during the war, they only covered a small amount of what the industry was

¹¹ Further analysis of “Woodland Sketches”, “To a Wild Rose” can be found in the appendix on the attached sheet music for MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose”.

before it.¹² As sheet music from this vein consisted of the majority of new American compositions, those who composed for larger ensembles or had made their living performing such music were impacted greatly by the outbreak of war.

But however strong it felt to the Americans, the strain of the war was not felt in all corners of the globe. European music composers continued to write as they had for the previous hundreds of years, including prominent British composer Charles Hubert Hastings Parry. Head of one of Britain's most influential music universities and conservatories, Parry's work reflects the classical British style he came from. Parry, while pushing for the evolution of British musical ideas, stalwartly remained rooted in the older traditions of European style classical music. One example of his less revolutionary work is his 1877 "Sonata No. 1 in F Major."¹³

Similar to MacDowell's "Woodland Sketches," which fell under the same tonal style of writing, the work of a majority English-born composers like Charles Hubert Hastings Parry can be analyzed in a tonal style. Similarly, much of Parry's first sonata follows the tonal model well. The progression of his chords, with the exception of an inverted seventh chord, is standard in every way. Even when Parry uses inverted chords, they serve as mild tension to be quickly resolved or stabilized by a following passage. His adherence to the tonal style can also be seen in his usage of dissonance throughout the beginning of the piece.

In passages with repeated sixteenth notes, he begins on a strong I or V chord, and then moves the fifth of the chord up a third. While this note does not belong in the major triad he initially writes, it replicates a seventh chord without a fifth. Given the writing of the seventh

¹² Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, from 1709 to 1909*, Vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 288.

¹³ Charles Hubert Hastings Parry, "Sonata No. 1 in F Major", London: Lamborn Cock, 1877.

chord, Parry creates only mild dissonance in the chord and remains firmly in the old European cannon of composition. The overall structure of the piece also resembles the British compositional roots in which Parry was raised. Starting with a I chord to a V, the progression in first page acts as an elaboration on the V chord, or in its usage of a minor second chord, leading to an eventual V to I that characterizes the first page of the sonata.¹⁴ Parry's adherence to long-held European standards can be found in many other pieces of music written during this time period. One such example is found in European composer Dvořák's piece for piano, titled "Humoreske".¹⁵

The entirety of the composition of "Humoreske" itself is incredibly similar to that of Parry's "Sonata No. 1 in F Major". Both utilized simple progressions and relatively few unstable or dissonant chords. While Dvořák uses a three inverted seventh chords in total, one in first inversion and two in third, they primarily serve as elaborations of the V and I chords that proceed and follow them.¹⁶ Given these traits, Dvořák's piece follows the European model of art music written for piano, as does Parry. Their dependency on the set ideas of composition, which had been developed in Europe far before the writing of these pieces, highlights the European ideal of classical compositions of the era. A combination of the aforementioned simple structure with the types of chords used evidence the reliance on the rules of tonal music and the impact they had on Europe's compositional freedoms during this period. But the rules of musical progression were

¹⁴ Further analysis of "Sonata No. 1 in F Major" can be found in the appendix on the attached sheet music for Parry's "Sonata No. 1 in F Major".

¹⁵ Antonín Dvořák, "Humoreske", Op. 101, No. 7, Simplified Ed. (New York: De Luxe Music Co.), 1914.

¹⁶ Further analysis of "Humoreske" can be found in the appendix on the attached sheet music for Dvořák's "Humoreske".

far less harsh than those of a nation at war. While the European nations were mostly unaffected by the pressures of war, those in the United States saw the effects of the war not only on their doorstep, but in their music. In the North the war began to affect the type of music produced, but neither Europe nor the North felt the weight of war as distinctly as the Southern music producers. However, even when under the strain of maintaining an army at war, southern musical styles became an essential part of what “the [Civil War] needed to forge a characteristically American style of folk music.”¹⁷ However, this first realization of musical independence was not easily won.

The first of the hints of a new American musical style came out of the conflict of this era. One of the early American-written pieces to come out of the Civil War period was from composer John Knowles Paine. His “String Quartet Op. 5”, “Moderato” began to plant the roots for a new American vision of classical music.¹⁸ While he followed many of the traditions of European music in the tonality, simplicity, and progression of his writing, he begins to deviate from them as well. His usage of non-chord tones, indicated in parentheses, as well as the structure of his triads and seventh chords vary a great deal from European standards. With the exclusion of the third in several of his chords, Paine destabilizes the chord by not fully defining it as major or minor in the context of the piece. Similarly, his usage of chromatic passages, where tones move up by a half step instead of following the Diatonic or Aeolian scales, push further

¹⁷ Struble, 21.

¹⁸ John Knowles Paine, “String Quartet” Op. 5, “Moderato”, (New York: Work Projects Administration and the New York Public Library), 1940.

away from the European model.¹⁹ Beginning with his early pieces for strings, Paine's works gained notoriety in a way previous American composers had failed to in the century before.²⁰ This would begin the formation of what would become the Second New England School. But Paine's works were some of the few pieces written by an American-born composer to find its way into America's public conscious of classical music during the Civil War.

While the North's production had been limited, southern music was hit far harder, as almost all resources had to be sacrificed to the engine of war to maintain a state of constant combat against their northern neighbors. Even upon the cusp of a grand shift in American music, the outlook and production of the industry in the South looked increasingly grim.²¹ A great majority of the printing and publishing houses lay in the north, as did the means required to create, reproduce and distribute sheet music. This stripped the South of a majority of the required pieces to effectively or reasonably produce sheet music on a large scale. When attempting to print and distribute music during the war, the South quickly found out the reliance they had upon the northern music industry. Due to the fact that almost all of the "major piano manufactories were [concentrated] in the North; [and] the making of printing presses and type founding were Northern monopolies" as well as the fact that "95 percent of the county's paper mills were located above the Mason-Dixon line."²² During this period, the South struggled to

¹⁹ These two terms refer to the major and minor scales, which are at the core of the tonal music analyzed in this paper.

²⁰ Further analysis of "String Quartet Op. 5", "Moderato" can be found in the appendix on the attached sheet music for Paine's "Moderato".

²¹ John Warthen Struble, *American Classical Music: MacDowell through Minimalism* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 1995), 21.

²² Sanjek, 288.

learn how to “make do or do without” these essential features of the music industry.²³ In the antebellum era, the southern region of the United States had controlled a great deal of the music publication and creation of new music. These effects all compounded on the southern music industry to the point where it could hardly sustain itself as the economy began to suffer under later conditions of the war.

As the effects of the war took their toll, southern wartime production fell to less than half of antebellum statistics. With “fewer than fifty Confederate music publishers” left to issue copyrighted music, and even fewer publishers remained open in the Reconstruction Era.²⁴ Impacted immensely by the shortage of paper and printed materials used to support the war effort, these numbers fell even further when the southern offensive began to take damage and lose ground. The enactment of the “Scorched Earth” policy by General Sherman in the northern advancement in to Georgia only tightened the North’s grip on the few resources the South received during the Civil War. Combined with the blockade that had been systematically depriving the South of essential trade from overseas for a majority of the war, what became known as the North’s Anaconda Plan had taken its toll. While finding students to mentor during this period was a difficult, but not impossible, task in the earlier months of the war, the Anaconda Plan had subsequently squeezed the south of most of its musicians. Burdened with a faltering economy, the arts and non-essential industries of the confederacy suffered immensely without the economic support they had enjoyed during peacetime.²⁵

²³ *Ibid*, 289.

²⁴ Sanjek, 292.

²⁵ Richard Crawford, *The American Musical Landscape* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), 41-69.

Yet the Civil War period was not entirely an era of loss for America's musical culture; it also became a period of immense growth. In the interim between battles, army camps became a mixing pot for musical styles and popular songs to spread across the nation. The Civil War's musical background was marked by the great movement and turmoil that surrounded its two warring armies, who brought their musical tastes and cultural standards with them. War brought:

“[massive] numbers of young men in both sides were uprooted from their native regions and moved, along with their respective armies they comprised, up and down the eastern seaboard and far out into the relative wilderness of Texas and the Midwest. And they took their regional folksongs with them, mixing and intermingling during the lulls between the fighting.”²⁶

As the war tore apart the land, it gave birth to a new American national and musical identity in the wake of the casualties. Subsequently, in the midst of this proximity “began the first significant cross-fertilization of American vernacular music styles in our history, reflected in the many hundreds of popular songs spawned by the war.”²⁷ Songs like “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, “Dixie”, and “Yellow Rose of Texas” became increasingly popular due to this “cross-fertilization” during the war.²⁸

Through close proximity in combat and in camps, soldiers from both sides began to hear the same familiar songs across the front lines. Reminiscent of home, but with a new national spin put upon it, a fledgling cultural revolution was at hand.

²⁶ Struble, 22-23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ For more on how these songs, “Dixie” in particular, became incredibly widespread during the Civil War, reference Coleman Hutchison, *Apples & Ashes* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 173-204.

With the emergence of America from the end of the Civil War, the nation had become reborn in a fire that had badly scorched the South, but left the northern states and the union as a whole far stronger than it was before. ²⁹ However, even with this newly formed national identity and resolve, the country itself still lacked a unique musical sound.

It took the emergence of the Second New England School to truly begin America's shift away from its reliance on the old tradition of European classical music. The nation had risen from the conflict of the Civil War to a reinforced national identity, which had only grown by the 1890's, when the Second New England School began its rise to prominence. Comprised of notable members such as John Knowles Paine, George W. Chadwick, Arthur Foote, and Amy Beech, among others, this group of native New Englanders spanned much of the nation's native born composers of note. ³⁰ Later joined by Edward MacDowell and a couple of other non-Bostonians or immigrants, they formed the Second New England School. Known by many names, such as the Boston Group, the Boston Classicists, or the Boston Academics, the Second School found a place in Boston's culture and musical life.

Deeply entrenched in Boston's musical and cultural identity, the Second New England School found its way during the Reconstruction Era. So began the process of ushering in the beginnings of a new musical sound to the American continent as the nation itself started to rebuild and reinvent itself. It is clear that the Civil War had created a "stage [that] was well prepared for the important developments of the second half of the century," and the Second New England School capitalized on that stage. ³¹ As the school found its feet, so did the nation itself.

²⁹ Struble, 20-22.

³⁰ Crawford, 352.

³¹ Banfield, 213.

Two sides of the nation needed to be mended. A reevaluation of policy and politics made, and the addition of the 13th Amendment made Reconstruction and reconciliation of separate peoples and culture necessary. The Civil War, in a musical context, is best described as a “crucible” in which the American people and culture had been tempered. ³² In war, the nation found the solidarity and national character necessary to rebuild itself and the basis of its culture.

During the Civil War, the United States also found what they desperately “needed to forge a characteristically American style of [music] which would later become the partial basis of a serious attempt at a national classical style.” ³³ This was the beginning of what the Second New England School attempted during the late 1800’s.

However, the first piece that began to shape the American style of classical music was not written by an American. Known as the Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95, “From the New World” or simply as the “New World Symphony”, Dvořák’s work embodied the emerging hallmarks of a new method of writing classical music. ³⁴ Written during his time in America, Czech born composer Dvořák’s 9th symphony set a standard for a new era of music in the Americas. While the previous pieces examined in this paper have fallen nearly in to the tonal style of writing, Dvořák’s “New World Symphony” cannot be analyzed so easily. ³⁵

Even as many of Dvořák’s progressions are closely aligned with the tonal style, other chords and movements are not. As there are relatively few non-chord tones to provide

³² Struble, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Antonín Dvořák, arr. Paul Juon. “Symphonie No. 9”, Op. 95. For Piano. Berlin: N. Simrock, 1899

³⁵ Further analysis of the “New World Symphony” can be found in the appendix on the attached sheet music for Dvořák’s “Symphonie No. 9”.

dissonance in this excerpt, the composer instead employs raised or diminished tones. While they remain inside their respective chords, they shift the sonority of the chord itself. Given the addition of these altered chords, the motion and destination of the piece becomes less clear to the listener. As both major and minor versions of chords are introduced alongside less stable chord inversions, Dvořák's "New World Symphony" strays further from the European classical cannon and towards the emerging American sound.

This American sound consisted of traces of the old European standard on which it was built alongside a budding sense of individuality in the American composer. Where European works from this period and into the early 20th century remained tonal at their core, following simple elaborations on a solely V to I progression, Americans did not. As the minor ii chord was introduced to this, the seeds of jazz in the Americas found root. In the usage of less stable and more dissonant chords, the tonal style became less and less pertinent to the American composer. Marked by experimentation in to a new frontier of music, not as tonal and structured as it had been before, the American style began to loosen the rules around the order of classical music. It was based on folk song, European roots, integration of cultures and of North and South. Born of conflict and tempered in the reformation of the union, the uniquely American sound came from the dissonance felt between its people and the cultures they had developed.

In the rapidly shifting and evolving environment, the citizens of the United States saw dramatic change in their politics and everyday lives in the post war era. This shift was not entirely harmful to the American people. The art and music of this period greatly reflect this immense fluctuation in the way Americans simultaneously embraced and adapted to their shifting environment as well simultaneously rejecting many of these changes. The conflict

between new and traditional ideas of what classical music was defined by was mirrored in the battle over how the United States should hold itself in a post-war society.

The Reconstruction Era is marked as a crossroads in which America could choose their fate and determine the path the nation would take. Whether to follow the old European standard, as music and culture had reflected in many years for decades, or forge its own distinct American standard. Both national identity and the American musical landscape transformed rapidly as the 19th century drew to a close. The 20th century found a new America that had begun to shift away from the ideals it had once held sacred to create its own sense of individual culture and art form.

While the legacy of the composers of this era is left behind primarily in scores, their true impact on the modern American musical landscape is found in their “passionate advocacy of indigenous classical composition” in an era where “such an idea was openly scorned in Europe and, at best, grudgingly tolerated in the United States.”³⁶ Such advocacy was essential in the creation of a new American sound. As seen in the early to mid-20th century, the passion and trailblazing efforts put forth by this group of composers marked the true beginning of American music coming into its own.

Evidenced in the birth of jazz, folk, and other culturally inspired styles of music, the American standard had begun to reshape itself during the late 19th century. From the solely tonal based compositions that the Americans had brought with them from Europe, to a new and innovative sound influenced by the people and conflict of the era, the Civil War period brought great change to the American musical landscape as it moved away from the conflict of war and into the 20th century. The American sound developed in the 1860’s and into the 1900’s was one

³⁶ Struble, 29.

of change, and one that refused to follow the set guidelines that classical composers had followed before. It would become the foundation for all American classical music to follow it.

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