

AMERICAN MUSIC OF THE NINETEEN CENTURY

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In the nineteenth century there was a continual flow of European musicians to the New England states and it is impossible to include them all in this essay.

The Englishman Benjamin Carr (1769-1831) settled in Philadelphia in 1793 and the man called 'the father of American music', Gottlieb Graupner (1767- 1836), did much to make orchestral concerts both popular and 'a society event' and establishing what Americans call the concert season which later gave way. This Graupner must not be confused with Christoph Graupner (1683-1760) who, incidentally, was probably the most prolific composer of all time with about 1762 cantatas/ church music to his name.

Concerts which were deemed society events were and are embarrassing. For people to go to concerts to show off their jewels and finery and to look, usually disapprovingly, at others not so wealthy is an affront to any decent person. The equivalent today in British society is Royal Ascot. Is it a race meeting or a fashion show?

The answer is obvious. It is a race meeting.

This snobbery was at its height in Vienna in the time of the Strauss composers. It was not music that was the interest and, judging by the music's poor quality and triviality, that cannot be disputed.

It was not long before American concerts were the sole domain of the rich and famous and an excuse to dress up and show off. Opera houses were founded and these venues were greater occasions to parade oneself or, to quote a vulgar modern expression, to strut one's stuff. However when oratorios were staged, many Americans were a little more circumspect.

Opera and oratorio usually told a story or recounted a series of events. This found its way into orchestral music which attempted to tell a story - what we came to call 'programme music'. Early examples of this are the symphonic poems of Richard Strauss. Perhaps the first American composer to write any such programme music was Anton Philip Heinrich (1781- 1861) who came from Bohemia and arrived in Philadelphia in the early 19th century.

The other innovation was nationalism although composers like Aaron Copland used to say that America had no nationalistic music until jazz came along and that jazz is the only national music of true America. That is possibly correct but William Henry Fry (1813-1864) has the distinction of writing the first American grand opera, *Leonora*, in 1845 followed by *Notre Dame de Paris* in 1863. Fry's father was the publisher of the *National Gazette* and his son became the editor of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and had travelled to Europe as correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. In Paris, Fry met Berlioz hoping to secure a performance of his opera *Leonora*. Fry returned to America in 1852 and became an enthusiastic champion of American music. He wrote four programmatic symphonies: *Childe Harold*, *A Day in the Country*, *The Breaking Heart* and *Santa Claus*. The last symphony was the subject of a long correspondence in the *Musical World* journal coming in for great criticism. His *Concert Overture: Macbeth* is an episodic work and such works are never satisfactory (what we call 'stop and start' music) and it seems too calculated to be attractive. Fry died of tuberculosis in the Caribbean two years after this work was completed.

Another early American symphonist was George Frederick Bristow (1825-1898) missing from many reference books and that in itself is a disgrace. He is a very important composer and has at least four symphonies to his name.

Bristow was a first generation American composer, the son of musical English parents who had emigrated to New York during the year in which George was born. He showed an early talent as a violinist and when the Philharmonic Society was founded in 1842 he was one of the first violins, a post he held for almost 40 years. But he resigned in protest in 1854 because the orchestra rarely played any works by Americans. He was persuaded to re-enlist and some American works were performed. He promoted American music but this was greeted with apathy and indifference.

In Britain today, British music is not promoted or championed. If British music is played in the concert hall it is usually lashings of Elgar and Britten with some Holst, Vaughan Williams and Walton. Contemporary British composers who are the only ones served well in Britain are Maxwell Davies, Turnage and James MacMillan. There are so many British composers unknown in the modern concert hall and I hasten to say that many of these are far greater composers than those who we do hear.

Bristow has the distinction of composing the second American opera, *Rip van Winkle* premiered in Nibb's theatre in 1855 and having a successful run for four weeks. His Symphony no. 1 dates from 1856 and the Symphony no. 2 in D minor was performed that same year, the Symphony no. 3 in 1859 and the Symphony no. 4 was completed in 1872. Bristow did not number his symphonies as a rule but the second he did as opus 24. It is subtitled the *Julien* as it was written as homage to the French conductor Louis Antoine Julien who toured America in 1853. It is curious work in four large movements but it has many serious weaknesses, all the weaknesses that we find in Elgar, for instance. It is bloated, thickly orchestrated, turgid and repetitious and it lacks structure and discipline. It is loose and does not progress from one idea to another and, again like Elgar, has sequences which get nowhere. The Symphony no 3 in F sharp minor Op 26 has these same Elgarian weaknesses and rambles on causing one to wonder if it will ever end. However, there are some attractions and extended parts for the harp. There is an andante called a nocturne and a scherzo called the butterfly's frolic but we must remember that these were the days when nature and life were of interest to people not, as today, the television and the internet which fascinate so many. And remember Tchaikovsky wrote a piece *My dolly is ill*.

The Symphony no. 4 is even more curious. It is known as the *Arcadian Symphony* and yet has a subtitle *The Pioneer*. It is more a suite than a symphony. There is an orthodox opening movement, a slow adagio built upon a hymn tune, and a third movement which is an Indian war dance and very brash.

America has only ever won one war and that was the war between themselves, the American Civil War of 1861-5. It was the war in which the IRA was born since Irish emigrés were fighting for liberation of slaves whereas back home they felt that Ireland was dominated by the English. This war produced a different type of music particularly ballads and nostalgia songs and, of course, songs which were associated with the black people. It was the age of Stephen Foster and the Southern plantation songs. Foster lived from 1826 to 1864 dying a year before the war ended. Sadly his songs are parodied and ridiculed these days, but, if sung well and sensibly, they capture a slice of American history that no other composer has. *Oh! Susanna*, *Camptown Races*, *Old folks at Home*, *My Old Kentucky home*, *Jeannie with the light brown hair*, *Masa's in the cold, cold ground*, *Old Black Joe* and *Beautiful Dreamer* are examples of easy listening music which conveys a nostalgic sentiment.

A musician of importance was Theodore Thomas (1835-1905) whose championship of modern American music changed people's attitudes to it. He was a man of vision. He had come to America from Essen in 1845 and was a violin prodigy touring with outstanding success. He promoted chamber music along with William Mason and, in 1858, had to deputise for the conductor Anschutz at short notice to conduct Halévy's *La Juive* at the New York Opera House. This took him into conducting and he formed his own orchestra, the *Thomas Orchestra*, which toured widely throughout America, giving thousands the first experience of seeing an orchestra. He mixed lightweight and popular works with those of more substance. From 1873 he organised the *Cincinnati Music Festival*. In 1876 he was invited to become the conductor of the *New York Philharmonic* which he did, but he retained his own orchestra. His example created a desire for the formation of many symphony orchestras throughout

the States and although some ventures were financially ruinous it did not break the back of this musical pioneer whereas men of lesser quality would have given up. He gave premieres of such works as Richard Strauss's Symphony in F minor.

It was in this climate of musical growth that the first really great American composer emerged, John Knowles Paine who lived from 1839 to 1906. He was universally acclaimed in his own lifetime not only as a composer but as a teacher. Then he slipped into obscurity. His Symphony no. 1 in C is a masterpiece of symphonic form although it did earn him the name of the American Brahms, one of those stupid comments and comparisons made by people who talk rubbish. There is no way that Paine could have known any work of Brahms. This is the first real symphony by an America because Paine thought symphonically. It was second nature to him. His memorable thematic material is strong, his orchestration is first rate and the music has character and is logical in its construction. The fact that so many people compare composers is often odious and absurd and I recall Walton's understandable anger at the ludicrous suggestion that he was Elgar's successor.

Theodore Thomas introduced Paine's Symphony no. 1 to America in 1876. The Symphony no. 2 in A has been dismissed as having been written by Bruckner, another use of the heresy of musical comparison. This symphony had a rapturous reception at its premiere. Other works of his received the same deserved praise such as his Symphonic Poem: The Tempest, and the engaging Shakespeare overture As You Like It. It is reported that even sophisticated ladies cheered and waved their handkerchiefs in the air as part of the applause for Paine's work.

Paine was born in Portland, Maine of a musical family. He studied under Herman Kutzschmar, an emigré from Saxony and this led to Paine wanting to complete his musical studies in Germany. He became an organ pupil of Carl Haupt in Berlin in 1858 and was to become a brilliant organist. He returned to America in 1861 and was active in introducing Bach's organ music to the American public. He gave a concert tour in Germany during 1866-7. In 1862 he had begun to teach at Harvard and from 1872 became an assistant professor and a full professor three years later in 1875. He wrote a Mass in D and America's first oratorio, St Peter. The American composer, Gunther Schuller, recorded the Mass over twenty years ago. The attractive Moorish Dances from his opera Azara are popular.

What Paine did for orchestral music Arthur William Foote did for chamber music. He was a pupil of Paine and his long life brings us into the 20th century. He lived from 1853 to 1937 and while he has written impressive orchestral scores, the Suite in D minor Op 36, his superb Francesca da Rimini Op 24 and, the Four Character Pieces after the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Op 48 it is his chamber music that has had the greatest impact possibly because he was the first major American composer in this genre. There is a sumptuous Night Piece for flute and strings of 1917, a Suite for string orchestra of 1910 which has an intimate chamber music feel about it, a splendid Piano Quintet in F sharp minor Op 67, a very well written Violin Sonata in G minor Op 20 and, of all his string quartets, the D major Op 70 has the distinction of being recorded many times.

Foote was a new Englander from Salem, Mass and had early training with Paine at Harvard. Where Foote succeeds is that his music does not have a Germanic flavour. He became the organist of the First Unitarian Church in Boston from 1876-1910 and was for a time president of the American Guild of Organists. He never left America and so his style remains consistent. He was interested in literature and wrote some fine choral pieces many based on the works of Longfellow. He also wrote musical text books on harmony and the fugue. His unequalled understanding of instruments and the orchestra resulted in a fine Cello Concerto and all his expertise can be seen in his cantata The Farewell of Hiawatha. I have performed in both his excellent Piano Trios.

George Chadwick wrote three symphonies although it appears that the first remains in manuscript. He was born in Lowell, Mass in 1854. In his early twenties he went to Berlin and to Leipzig to study. He returned to Boston in 1880 and two years later joined the staff at the New England Conservatory

becoming admired as a teacher, organist and choral conductor. He composed five string quartets, of which the Fourth in F minor is best known, and opera Judith (1900), choral music and three symphonies as well as a tight-knit Sinfonietta in D. Both the Symphony no. 2 in B flat Op 21 of 1888 and the Symphony no 3 in F of 1896 have been recorded and are examples of a skilled and experienced hand. They are attractive works.

A composer who has had some limited popularity is Edward MacDowell who was born in New York on 18 December 1860 although some reference books say 1861. The piece To a Wild Rose is well known but his weakness, if it is a weakness, is that he wrote tons of piano miniatures, as did Grieg for example, and thus claimed as a miniaturist. He has, in fact, been called the American Grieg, another one of those stupid comparisons but if comparisons have to be made he is the American Raff and, of course MacDowell studied with Raff in Germany and it was his music that inspired him. MacDowell was an accomplished pianist admired by Liszt with whom he had a close friendship. MacDowell's final years (from 1888 onwards) back in America were unhappy. He was a professor at the newly founded Columbia University in New York and eventually suffered a mental breakdown from which he did not recover. He died in 1908.

However, there are scores of MacDowell that are worth hearing. There is the gentle serenity of the Symphonic poem: Hamlet and Ophelia, Op 22 inspired by MacDowell's honeymoon in England. There is another lovelorn symphonic poem, Lancelot and Elaine, Opus 25, and the third has also an English connection. It is called Lamia, Op 29 after Keats. Here MacDowell over-stretches himself and tries to emulate Wagner. Heterosexual relationships play an important part in his oeuvre as in The Lovely Alda, an idyll describing the beauty of Alda and the loss of her lover.

A composer of more substance was Horatio Parker who was born at Auburndale, Mass in 1863. He started musical studies rather later than normal and this was with a brief study with Chadwick before going to Germany in 1882 with the view to studying with Raff but his untimely death put paid to that and so Parker went to Munich and studied under Rheinberger. On his return to the states he was associated with the National Conservatory in New York at a time when Dvořák was teaching there. Later he became the organist of Trinity Church in Boston shortly after which he was appointed professor at Yale. He composed excellent cantatas and oratorios. Of particular note is his Hora Novissima, Op30 of 1893 and two symphonic poems - A Northern Ballad, Op 30 and Vathek, Op 56. My great uncle, Sir Ivor Atkins introduced some of Parker's music to the Three Choirs Festival much to the anger of Elgar.

Parker is known for his sublime hymn tune Deep Harmony.

Sir Thomas Beecham hated women composers and so he would have disliked Mrs H H A Beach who was born Amy Cheney in New Hampshire in 1867. She was a brilliant pianist and played the G minor Concerto of Moscheles when she was sixteen. She was active in music until she met a Boston surgeon whom she married and thereafter was always known as Mrs Beach. On the death of her husband in 1910 she returned to music and undertook an extensive tour of Germany. She wrote a lot of piano music, and music including the piano, notably a concerto in G sharp minor. Some believe her finest chamber work is the Piano Quintet in F sharp minor, Op 67 and others speak well of her Gaelic Symphony set in C minor. Another absurd comparison has arisen stating that she was the counterpart of Ethel Smyth.

Like Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, Mrs Beach's music is tame, predictable and has nothing new to say.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes was born in Elmira, New York in 1884. He studied in Berlin with Humperdinck and, on returning to America, taught in a boys school at Tarrytown, New York from 1908 to his death in 1920. His most popular work is The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan of 1919 but

his interest in the exotic and oriental music is shown in his most interesting work, Shojo, a Japanese dance pantomime of 1917. His work is original using polymetric and polytonal features not understood at the times and probably not appreciated even now.

There is a lot of music highlighted in this article that deserves to be heard and you are recommended to pursue such opportunities.

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