

Seminario internazionale a cura di Fiamma Nicolodi e Aloma Bardi
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Myth and Identity in American Music
Synopsis for discussion
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First postulate and one example :

National identity is a construction, and, historically, is constructed either as a conscious act of self or social definition or as a reaction to social, economic, and political conditions. In this, it may be useful to recognize the parallels between such questions in European music and American music as historical processes.

In most discussions of national identity in American music, the question is always posed differently than in regard to European music. The common argument is that while European musics have their own fixed geographical reality, music in the United States is composed of musics of all peoples from “elsewhere”. An amusing and greatly simplified demonstration of this is the famous Bernstein children’s concert broadcast [Feb. 1, 1958], in which the maestro plays excerpts from a Chopin Mazurka, a Tarantella, an Irish jig, Ravel’s Spanish Rhapsody, Brahms Hungarian Dance No. 5, and Tchaikowsky 4th symphony to illustrate the fixed and recognizable character of European musics – the lesson is that American music, referring to all of these nationalities, would of course have some trouble fixing its own special identity, and passed through many stages of growth, like a child, passing from simple imitation of “European music” to maturity in which symphonic composers absorbed some essential American quality that transformed their style. We recognize these caricatures as reductive, and we know that European cultural identities have been historically multiple and heterogeneous, and yet, even in scholarly writing, these basic assumptions and oppositions are often employed.

Curiously, Bernstein maintains – as did many American composers of concert music in the late 19th century - that the Negro music and the Indian music that was of interest to Dvorak and to the later “Indianist” composers was fated to fail as a national music, “since that music was not ‘our’ music.” [It is understood that Bernstein’s intended audience is of “European” origins]. And then, paradoxically, he later affirms that the true American music is Jazz (without reference to Negroes or to any compositions of the jazz repertoire, or with any explanation of why some black music becomes “everyone’s” music and not others). This affirmation, and the positive examples he gives (Gershwin, Harris, Thomson, Copland) deserve further reflection. They are intriguing examples of a kind of cultural appropriation and self-definition that at the same time defines a distinct identity while effacing the traces of its actual origins.

Second postulate and two examples

In general, identity is a function of the definition of “otherness”, and this is as much true in the case of national identity in music. But there is equally a related phenomenon, in which identity is specifically conceived in opposition to an “other”. In this case, the ideological content of identity should not be ignored.

Crawford essay “Cosmopolitan and Provincial: American Musical Historiography” is indispensable reading in this regard. Crawford shows through a historiographical review the heterogeneous nature of American historical narratives. He also shows in what way the historically conditioned perceptions of historians impact on their choices and their arguments, and that from the 19th and 20th centuries. Among more recent histories of American music, Crawford

identifies, on the one hand, those that look for achievements in the domains of “concert” music which validate work in a continuity with European art forms and, on the other, those who value “originality, eclecticism, and an absence of self-consciousness” [Crawford, 7] as a manifestation of particularity as value. It is useful to think of this opposition as existing within the American musical framework instead of across national boundaries: in this way the relatedness to other geographical regions of processes in the creation of musical identity assume deserved relative importance. Throughout, this study of historical narrative suggests that the definition of national identity in music is a function of historical elements that go beyond either the actual musical activity itself or the simple aesthetic considerations of musicians.

In our own time, the example of John Adams is a fascinating reconnection with this traditional use of the “simplicity” trope as an “non-european” or a “non-elitist”. He repeatedly stresses, in interviews and writings, that after his formal education at Harvard he refused the possibility of study in Europe (he refers often to the models of Stockhausen or Boulez) or continued academic education (with his Schoenberg educated teachers and their university values of complexity and inaccessibility) in order to make the symbolic pilgrimage west to California, where he immersed himself first in non-academic avant gardist musics and then, ostensibly refusing all doctrine and obscurantist aesthetics, devoted himself to music than had harmony, melody, and spoke to the emotions. This narrative has a special significance in relation to the career of composers like Copland, who also balanced a desire to write “art music” even as they maintained a populist discourse employing adopted American tropes of “simplicity”, “spaciousness”, “freedom and liberty”, “non-elitism”, and “connectedness to the culture of the people”. Adams adopts precisely this vocabulary: but the relationship that this discourse entertains with the actual music he composes is problematic and ambiguous, and can only be understood in relation to the art music tradition to which he opposes himself – that of Schoenbergian and Boulezien complexity and elitism. But he writes operas – hardly a populist form, especially in the United States – and his writing is of sufficient complexity that it requires of his musicians a technical skill which goes far beyond the fantasy of accessibility of his discourse.

A definition

The notion of myth in relation to music has been treated extensively by Eero Tarasti, in reference to Levy-Strauss among others. The notion of myth can be approached within anthropological, psychological, literary, and/or semiotic frameworks. The semiotic approach makes available tools with help to identify and clarify the existence of musical signs and their modes of signifying. Another definition of myth comes from Barthes, as a way of understanding the way that historically constructed signs become vehicles of ideas which are far removed from their original signification. This is a process which is of great interest to the study of the creation of national musical identity, and although it may be a necessary creative process, it has ambiguous political and social implications.

Barthes *Mythologies* consists of a series of articles which analyze cultural objects and the way they accumulate contemporary cultural meaning which is occasionally and curiously out of synchronisation with appearances. In a concluding essay, Barthes presents a theory of this displacement which he qualifies as *met-language*. To resume, Barthes sees *myth* not as a single object but as a process and a form, in which a recognizable image, word, figure, or symbol are absorbed into a schematic presentation that evacuates its primary meaning and replaces it with another. These secondary meanings are, and this is a key idea, always *historically constructed* and yet are always presented as if they were immemorial, “natural”, and self-evident.

Third postulate and two examples

Following Barthes, the evacuation of some original content in a cultural object is necessary in order to replace it with a coherent and persuasive mythical content. This process is necessary in turn in order to make use of recognizable objects of heterogeneous origins as the vehicle of some other unified vision, information or message. This process has a positive side to it: it also serves an artistic purpose, in that it allows the artist to appropriate disparate elements and make use of them in the framework of a personal and coherent form and style. But there are dangers as well.

The Sound of Music:

This canonic work from Broadway might not seem particularly “American” in the sense that it relates the story of an Austrian musical family, in a musical language which, coming at the end of the long and immensely successful collaboration between Rodgers and Hammerstein, is much closer to operetta than to the highly stylized “Americana” found in *Oklahoma!*

But the fact that the show was conceived as a star vehicle for Mary Martin, an iconic American mid-western Broadway performer, is significant: her casting in the role of Maria von Trapp, along with the fact that the American audience knew that the von Trapp family fled Austria to find success in the United States as refugees from fascism, is a convincing and natural appropriation. In the stage representation, it is the American Mary Martin who brings song, love, joy, recognition of the value of childhood and play, and freedom of expression into the overly rigid and joyless Austrian home of the Captain.

The mythic process described by Barthes could not be clearer: the familiar figure of the von Trapp family is emptied not only of most of its purely biographical content, but most totally of its musical content. [in fact, Rodgers and Hammerstein, originally contacted only to write a few songs for the show, accepted only on condition that they write the *entire* score – this raises the interesting question of different, occasionally opposing kinds of *authenticity*]. The von Trapp family was indeed a musical family: is it not curious that not any of the music which they performed is included? And for a good reason: the von Trapp’s were initially a failure in the United States, precisely because their repertoire (Bach and renaissance motets) and style of performance (serious and austere) were too disconnected from audience expectations.

This kind of musical myth making is obviously part of creative life; but what are its implications? The myths projected through music in this show take on a different dimension in the case of Ronald Reagan’s official reception of the Austrian president in 1984: referring to Maria von Trapp, who was a special invited guest, he spoke warmly of her personification of Austrian “integrity, humor, and charm”. And he referred, quite naturally, to the musical signifier with which all Americans associated her, the song *Edelweiss*, from *The Sound of Music*. This is all very pleasant, but in fact what does it mean if the most significant cultural connection the President may make to both Mrs von Trapp and to Austria – and one can believe that this was done more out of a practical wish to communicate clearly with the American audience than out of simple ignorance – is through a musical fiction with no relation with either? What are its implications for other cultural products, equally persuasive, whose connections with any historical reality are dubious?

Appalachian Spring :

Most are familiar with the music of this ballet, in which the musical figures of ascending fourths and fifths, as well as large registral and timbral contrasts are associated with the “openness” of the American mythical space, and the inclusion of the Shaker hymn “The Gift to be Simple” (which is incidentally saturated motivically with fourths and fifths) is considered a marker of American folk connectedness and is often referred to with a certain reverence as *representative* of deeper American values of purity, devotion, purposefulness, and simplicity, and is even related to

the concept of *liberty* ["It's a gift to be simple, it's a gift to be free"]. The choreography of Martha Graham emphasizes and expands considerably on these tropes: central to the narrative, and omnipresent in the gestural vocabulary, are the tropes of marriage, maternity, faith (constant iteration of the hands clasped in prayer), wide open expanses (outstretched arms, let's spread-out).

But these markers come at the expense of the historical signification of the objects employed, however persuasively they may be arranged. The Shakers, as we know, did not believe in marriage, and did not accept intimate relations between their members: the absence of procreation was one of the reasons for their disappearance. The Shakers did not either approve of the practice of instrumental music, and although they vigorously danced and sang, the practice of art music seems to have been absent. The concept of "liberty" had a particular signification, more in tune with the concept of freedom from material preoccupations and vices – the Shakers led a highly ordered life of communally shared work and prayer – and it requires a bit of a conceptual leap to use them to validate, as does Michael Tilson Thomas, the intense sentiment of patriotic fervor. The Shaker melody, whose text vaunts the trope of "simplicity" with its network of associated values in the American mythological imagination, is, most curiously, employed in a series of orchestral variations – in other words, the technical musical means are in fact at odds with the signification of the hymn. But the construct is an artistic whole, perfectly coherent, and is only cause for worry in the case where it becomes iconic and its historically constructed nature risks disappearing.

Questions

What are other tropes that characterize "americanness" in music? Are they historically constructed or do they seem "natural" and geographically or socially determined?

Are these tropes related, as Tocqueville claimed, to the existence of democratic social structures? In what ways might this be an illusion?

What are other criteria of "authenticity" that need to be questioned in regard to national identity and myth? In what ways are these questions important?

What are other examples of composers trying to create a coherent narrative of their lives as examples of "americanness"? How do they articulate this? At what moment in history does this become an important issue and why?

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