America’s Special Relationship to German Musical Culture

Jessica Gienow-Hecht’s new study of German-American relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries makes a strong claim for the unique status of music as a significant bearer and mediator of international relations between these two emergent, if still insecure world powers. Gienow-Hecht traces what she terms the “emotional elective affinity” (p. 8) between German arts, especially music, and the production and contestation of American national culture. She suggests that Germans and Americans chose to ally themselves with each other over the medium of German music and that the alliance formed during these years created connections between the two nations which have lasted into the present.

Through written as a history of international relations, the study eschews investigation of more formal, top-down initiatives from the state and concentrates instead on the actions of “informal ambassadors,” who are defined as individuals “acting—often unwittingly—in the name or the interest of the state” and “whose actions—even though they were not directly inspired by state policy—achieved a desired political effect” (p. 4). On the German side, this initiative included touring and immigrant musicians, conductors and composers, as well as the overall cachet of German high culture, or Kultur as it is referred to by Gienow-Hecht. On the American side, this program included not only aspiring musicians studying music in Germany or musical tourists making the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, but also patrons of the arts and, according to Gienow-Hecht, the surprisingly variegated, in terms of class, race, and educational background, American audiences for serious, or “classical,” music.

Central to her argument are her thoughts on music and emotion. Music provided both Germans and Americans with a prism through which to project their special relationship; yet each side entered the relationship with differing political needs and stakes vis-à-vis music. Relying on the pioneering work of Celia Applegate on the role of music within the development of German national identity, Gienow-Hecht shows how Romantic musical theory generated an equation by which German music, above all absolute music, was figured as both quintessentially German and universal.[1] Understood thusly, music could act as a means through which Germanness and German values could be exported internationally under the guise of world culture. Americans, by contrast, saw in absolute music a means of elevating their own culture to the level of the Europeans and Germans. Significantly, because of its association with emotion in American discourse, music was an especially open field in the American cultural landscape. It was an area of the arts which elite, male Americans had hitherto refrained from entering and which Germans therefore could enter unopposed and, with the help of Romantic ideology, eventually dominate.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for German dominance of the field of music through a discussion of European cultural diplomacy in the nineteenth century. Following the Civil
War, America became a battleground for European powers like France, Great Britain, and Germany, who sought to influence American allegiances and policy. In this age of colonial expansion, Gienow-Hecht argues that America was “one of the foremost targets of the European competition for cultural preponderance” (p. 22). At the same time, Gienow-Hecht shows how the newly unified German state was in a poor position to compete successfully in America, compared either to Great Britain with its shared language and political culture, or to France with its dominance of the visual arts and powerful organizations like the Alliance Française. Unsurprisingly, German governmental attempts at entering the cultural battle for determining American culture proved themselves to be unmitigated failures. Enter Gienow-Hecht’s “informal ambassadors” who covertly brought with them notions of German culture and succeeded where the government had failed.

Explicating the notion of culture, and with it music’s special role in the minds of the American public, is the subject of chapter 2, “Music, Magic, and Emotions.” Gienow-Hecht’s take on music here is quite broad, encompassing more familiar discussions of music as a universal language, but also ideas imbuing music with medicinal (and social) healing powers. Crucial for understanding this section, though a point not always made clear, is that Gienow-Hecht is rarely concerned with German developments in the theorization of music (e.g., anti-Romantic theorists like Eduard Hanslick). Instead, she is primarily concerned with how Americans like John S. Dwight, founder of Dwight’s Journal of Music in 1859, came to understand serious music through the terms of Romanticism. For Dwight and others, music was a secret art filled with religiosity and wonder, and its Mecca was Germany. As Gienow-Hecht writes: “German conservatories and private instructors became the gatekeepers to the shrine of musical culture in the American perception. Passenger lists of steamers heading to Europe during the summers were filled with the names of middle-class Americans searching for Kultur and inner soul cleansing” (p. 55). More than five thousand Americans studied at Germany’s conservatories and many more traveled to the continent in hope of a meeting with Franz Liszt in Weimar or Richard Wagner in Bayreuth.

If traveling to Germany signified an almost religious experience for Americans, time in America meant something very different to those German musicians and composers who came in ever-greater numbers after the revolutionary upheavals of 1848, the subject of chapter 3. Though money and fame were often factors motivating the trip across the Atlantic, for many more, like Anton Seidl and Theodore Thomas, the transfer of German music to the New World was an act of proselytization; they saw themselves as prophets (and were often perceived as such), bringing the gospel of absolute music to non-musical America. Though they could ally themselves to the United States as a political entity, their inner selves remained bound to German culture. Indeed, their status as strangers in their adopted land was fundamental to the success of their mission. Through them an image of the German as obsessed with Kultur and music was created, further entrenching the Romantic equation of German music and universality. In the American context, then, “German” came to signify “not a territorial entity but a universal idea” (p. 95). For example, it was important that musicians who were not actually from areas encompassed by the Germany formed in 1871 to claim German patrimony, either through education at a German conservatory or by adopting mannerisms associated with the “German” musician. In part, this reification of Romantic ideology served purposes unique to the American context. It ideologically fused two things foreworn to the white Anglo-American male: musicality and a masculinity in sync with emotionality. This combination created an uncomfortable situation for these purveyors of universality and Germanness, one in which they were idolized as sex symbols and attacked by throngs of female admirers. Indeed, Gienow-Hecht compares some of the touring musicians to figures from today’s popular music scene, e.g., boy groups and Bono. While she is keen on upholding the study of serious music as central to the development of American national culture, her arguments would have been strengthened with more theorization of the impact on divisions between popular and high culture through the confrontation between European elite culture and American culture at large.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Gienow-Hecht turns to the development of American musical culture, primarily the founding of symphony orchestras in the Northeast and Midwest. One of the more interesting results to come from this section is that despite German works dominating the repertoire, the German-American immigrant community had very little to do with the founding of these orchestras, even those founded after 1900—like the Minneapolis or Philadelphia symphony orchestras. Instead, the Anglo-American elite supported the creation and then staffing of these orchestras with German conductors and German-trained musicians. She writes that the “celebration of German high culture, and German music in particular, never connected with the actual
German community in the United States, but remained firmly grounded in central European culture” (p. 149). As a cultural rather than capitalist enterprise, the symphony orchestra in America was never primarily profit-driven (there were, for example, few attempts at collaboration between such institutions and affiliated industries like instrument makers), and time and again orchestras registered losses. This situation forced some orchestras to close down. For American cities, having a symphony orchestra meant “to have local pride, to strive, to progress” (p. 119). More than this, the symphony orchestra hall was, as Gienow-Hecht shows in her analysis of the audience, often a means of disciplining an unruly public by creating a listening audience schooled in the art of experiencing the German symphony. The public that attended these performances did not homogeneously belong to the elite. Though there are few extant resources through which to reconstruct the audience, she makes a strong case that it consisted not only of vast numbers of (elite) women, but also of the middle class, working class, and some African Americans. Much more conclusive are her thoughts on the repertoire. To be sure there was much non-German fare and indeed much non-symphonic music (here I would have liked to have seen her engage a bit more with the increasing popularity of the Gesamtkunstwerk of Wagnerian opera in opposition to the pure musicality of absolute music), but it was still German music that held a hegemonic position within the American music scene. A telling statistic in this regard comes from the debut season (1881-82) of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in which seventy-four (80 percent) of the ninety-two works performed were of German origin.

Chapters 7 and 8 recount the downfall of the ideology of the Romantics through the rise of cultural nationalism in America. In chapter 7, “Musical Patriotism and the Fear of Europe,” Gienow-Hecht describes not only increased American resistance to modern German music (e.g., Johannes Brahms, Richard Wagner, Johann Strauss) but also attempts to create a unique American music, free of German characteristics. This process started between 1880 and 1920 and took two paths. The first, and more concrete, consisted of efforts to “Americanize” the musicians. The foremost actor here was the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), which, with the help of the Alien Contract Labor Bill (1885), made it increasingly difficult for foreign musicians to find and maintain their positions. Beyond this, there was an ideological battle over the future of American music. Having adopted the German view of music as the nation’s soul, the rising nation set out to look for the American composer who would write American music at a level on par with its imagined destiny of greatness. “American music critics,” writes Gienow-Hecht, “believed that the American genius would express itself in American musical composition, written by a composer who was clearly American and, thus, could give a voice to the American experience” (p. 159).

Though the search for the American composer continued, as the next chapter, “Facing the Music in World War I,” shows, in the years between 1914 and 1918 German music and musicians paid dearly for their earlier success. Concert programs featuring German composers were censored, guest appearances cancelled, and the “Star Spangled Banner” became a mainstay of performances, “a must for every orchestra and soloist” (p. 185). Such revision of the canon in favor of non-German and American compositions peaked after the entry of the United States into the war in 1917. Perhaps most fatally for Gienow-Hecht’s “informal ambassadors,” the qualities that had once endeared them to the American public (such as their preference for and belief in the superiority of German culture) now became severe disadvantages. The most important case of such a reversal of fortune can be seen in the fate of conductor Karl Muck, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra between 1912 and 1918. The scandal began with Muck’s assertion that asking a symphony orchestra “to play The Star Spangled Banner is embarrassing... It is almost an insult. Such an attempt would be destructive of the very thing the Symphony stands for—musical art” (p. 197). That Muck, who was Swiss, and not a German citizen, was eventually deported for this and other ill-advised statements reveals the uniqueness of the American response. In England and France, by contrast, German music continued to be performed throughout the war. The measures against German music during the war were thus not the knee-jerk reaction of a public seized by jingoistic hypernationalism. The atmosphere generated by the war, rather, offered Americans a pretext to achieve what many had been advocating since the 1880s. As she writes, the war presented them with “an opportunity to end the universalism of German music on American concert stages” (p. 197). For Gienow-Hecht, the overly sensitive reaction of Americans to musicians like Muck is explainable only in light of the special relationship between German and American culture that had been forged through German music. The reaction to German music during World War I was so severe because it was so essential to the formation of American musical culture.

Overall, Gienow-Hecht’s cultural and informal ap-
proach to international relations provides new insight into how the German-American relationship was shaped more by deep structures of thought than by immediate state actions. She successfully demonstrates that the German-American relationship was special long before the Second World War. This work will be especially useful for scholars interested in new models for thinking through the complexity of transatlantic relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as for those concerned with the international implications of the complex interweaving of music and national identity in German culture.

Notes