

New World Symphony: Dvorak in New York and Boston

Joseph Horowitz

Independent scholar and Eastman School of Music

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The American decades between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century are called the “Gilded Age.” The term is pejorative; it evokes materialism, philistinism, and political chicanery. Concomitantly, high culture of the Gilded Age is stereotyped as a feeble footnote to the exploits of Morgan, Carnegie, and the Vanderbilts, a futile resistance movement stressing the moral function of art.

The intellectual life of the late Gilded Age is said to exemplify a “genteel tradition” -- another pejorative term, coined George Santayana. Santayana disdained genteel custodians of culture as deluded Germanic idealists, “grandmotherly in that sedate, spectacled wonder with which [they] gazed at this terrible world and said how beautiful and how interesting it all was.” The ostensible voice of gentility is pretentiously noble, prudish, and pure. It pretends not to notice the flophouse and the slum. It serenades an audience of housewives, ministers, and effete professors.

Genteel intellectuals regarded music as “queen of the arts.” They took pride in the concert life of such cities as Boston, Chicago, and New York, and in the achievements of American musicians. This endorsement proved poisonous after World War I. Surveying their would-be precursors, American composers

saw complacent clones of German teachers. Virgil Thomson called the music of John Knowles Paine, George Chadwick, Amy Beach and other prominent turn-of-the-century Americans “a pale copy” of “Continental models” and reckoned their scale of achievement “a sort of adolescence.” Leonard Bernstein termed this “the kindergarten period of American music,” whose “fine, academic imitations” of European masters were actually intended to sound like Brahms and Liszt: “the more they did, the better.”

The larger picture into which these evaluations fit was limned by the music historian Charles Hamm in 1991 when, surveying the whole of America’s late nineteenth century musical high culture, he found a “mystifying ritual of dress, behavior, and repertory” prized by an elite determined to maintain class privilege. Outside music, such scholars as Paul DiMaggio, Helen Horowitz, and Lawrence Levine have stressed the role of “native-born elites” – of WASP wealth – in the creation of the Boston and Chicago Symphonies, of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago. Their picture is one of philanthropists shackled by conservative taste and psychological need, of influential citizens whose notions of cultural uplift revealed anxious disapproval of restless immigrant masses.

But this perspective distorts as well as illuminates. America’s musical high culture peaked a century ago. Classical music was in its heyday. Absent radio and recordings, symphonies and operas in live performance generated a thrilling sense of occasion. And a vital repertoire of new and recent works – by Brahms, Bruckner, Wagner, Debussy, Richard Strauss – was avidly purveyed and

assessed. The complexity of American musical life was such that New York and Boston – its two hubs – are a study in contrasts, clarifying larger differences distinguishing two cultural communities. A remarkable window on these differences is the response to the visiting Bohemian composer Antonin Dvorak, and to his *New World* Symphony, composed in New York in 1892-93 – a response essentially supportive in the younger city, fractious in the older, vibrantly articulate in both.

1.

It would be idle to deny the many truths contained in condemnations of late Gilded Age art, music, and literature. Resisting modernism, the vast majority of cultivated Americans were meliorists, endorsing spiritual uplift through high culture. They snobbishly disdained the popular arts. In Chicago, the orchestra had, in Theodore Thomas, a conductor who called his concerts “sermons in tones.” It also had an orchestra board that kept ticket prices high, did not advertise in the German-language press, and did not offer complimentary tickets to German critics. When the *Freie Presse* complained, Charles Norman Fay, a leader among orchestra’s trustees, replied that “Germans who have contributed to the support of the Orchestra, either in the purchase of tickets or by direct donation, [have been] few in number, and their donations have been . . . small in amount.”

Boston’s settled intellectual habits were personified by John Sullivan Dwight, who as editor of *Dwight’s Journal of Music* from 1852 to 1881 was a prominent national arbiter of taste. Devoted to the Germanic masters of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Dwight viewed Wagner with suspicion

and incomprehension. He instinctively mistrusted opera as a variant of the theater. Transplanting sacred music from the church to the concert hall, he argued that music is most “religious” unfettered by text, that Beethoven’s symphonies conveyed the highest type of moral instruction.

Of the Boston composers, Paine, who had studied in Berlin, crafted a First Symphony in C minor echoing Beethoven’s Fifth. At the premiere of his Second Symphony in 1880 men shouted and ladies waved their handkerchiefs; Dwight stood frantically opening and shutting his umbrella as an expression of wild enthusiasm. Just as Russian composers had once adapted Italian models as a rite of passage toward a native idiom, Paine appropriated Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms to establish his composer’s pedigree. His Boston progeny, if less obviously derivative, nonetheless steered clear of the individuality of a Glinka or Mussorgsky. Arthur Foote, a Paine student in the 1870s, later testified: “My influence from the beginning, as well as my predilection, were ultra-conservative.” Foote “formed himself” on the German master who most exemplified genteel decorum and beneficence: Felix Mendelssohn. Horatio Parker, who studied in Munich en route to becoming Battell Professor of Music at Yale, lectured: “New England is the centre from which has radiated thus far a great part of all progress in art, literature, and other intellectual pursuits in America, and it seems perfectly fair to say than an history of Music in New England would practically cover the subject of the history of Music in America.”

But turn-of-the-century New York strikes a cautionary note, resisting these Gilded Age assertions and generalizations. As we belatedly – very belatedly –

exhume the musical life of Manhattan and Brooklyn a century ago, we uncover a picture much different than what we have imagined. New York's leading native-born composer as of 1900, Edward MacDowell, fits certain genteel stereotypes. Notwithstanding some regional touches, his music is not notably "American" in accent; he was not only German-trained, but made his name in Germany years before returning to the United States in 1888. And yet, compared to Paine, Foote, or Parker, MacDowell was less a Classicist than a fullblown Romantic, fired by Liszt and Wagner. Wagnerism, in fact, was the dominant feature of New York's musical high culture in the closing decades of the century. If in Boston ladies waved their handkerchiefs, at New York's Metropolitan Opera they wept and screamed, absorbing the orgasmic shock waves of Lilli Lehmann's *Liebestod*. Olive Fremstad, Lehmann's successor as the company's leading Wagner soprano, was an actress of such blasphemous veracity that in preparing to sing Strauss's *Salome* she visited a morgue to find out what it felt like to carry a severed human head. New York's Wagner cult, moreover, was both formidably religious and formidably intellectual: its combination of uplift, scholarship, and erotic passion – and concomitant rejection of European modernism, decadence, and symbolism – reveals a genteel tradition more dynamic than any Santayana's stereotypes allow.

Wagner's New York emissary was the conductor Anton Seidl, a Romantic *artiste* alongside whom Theodore Thomas (whom he displaced) seemed an anachronistic timebeater. But the city's leading musician was (imagine!) a composer: Antonin Dvorak, whose *New World* Symphony Seidl premiered with the New York Philharmonic in 1893. Dvorak had been lured from Prague by

Jeannette Thurber, whose mission was to create an American music school good enough to keep gifted young musicians from studying abroad. As director of Thurber's National Conservatory, Dvorak espoused "negro melodies" and Native American chants as building blocks for an indigenous American concert idiom. Dvorak, Thurber, and Seidl united in pursuit of a distinctive New World canon of symphonies and operas – a repertoire they believed would anchor American musical life. The damaging fixation on the act of performance – on "great conductors" and "great orchestras" – awaited the interwar decades.

Like the Wagner cult, Dvorak's agenda – "It is to the poor that I turn for musical greatness," he told the New York press; "the poor work hard, they study seriously" --contradicts stereotypes of genteel complacency. In fact, musical New York was in no way dominated by affluent WASPs or any other hegemony of taste. Seidl, Thomas, and Walter Damrosch competed for concert musicians and audiences. At the Met, an alliance of German-Americans and genteel intellectuals fought with the boxholders – Social Register types who loathed Wagner but paid the bills – over whether the house was a Wagner shrine or a showcase for Italian and French vocal glamour. And the Met was both, serving different constituencies, even employing different orchestras for German and non-German fare. At no other time in its history was America's preeminent opera house more fractured, less the instrument of a privileged minority.

If this complexity of turn-of-the-century operatic class and culture has failed to penetrate conventional wisdom, a tide of revisionism is tangible in other sectors. John Higham's landmark 1970 essay summarized the "Reorientation of

American Culture in the 1890s” in terms of a “hunger to break out,” to shatter “the gathering restrictions of a highly industrialized society.” More recently, Jackson Lears, in his influential *No Place of Grace* (1981), documents a craving for “intense experience” beginning around 1880. American Wagnerism fits these perspectives. And such significant creative personalities of the period as John Singer Sargent and William Dean Howells, long disparaged by modernists as superficial and pusillanimous, are being reassessed. Sargent’s portraits of high society are more admired today than at any time since World War I. Howells, the paragon of American letters a century ago, is championed by Gore Vidal as the spiritual father of realism, author of “a half dozen of the Republic’s best novels.” Unfortunately, historians of American politics, art, and literature regularly ignore music. But music historians (as a comparison of the 1987 edition of Gilbert Chase’s *American Music* with the 1955 first edition will suggest) and musicians (as a visit to your local CD emporium will reflect) have begun unburying Chadwick and Beach. And Dvorak’s American sojourn has at last – in the eight years since his East Seventeenth Street New York residence was razed to make way for an AIDS clinic – acquired some degree of prominence in our national memory bank.

2.

The great event of the 1893-94 New York concert season was the premiere of Dvorak’s *New World* Symphony by the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall under Anton Seidl. After the second movement, the packed house erupted in applause. Seidl turned to gesture toward Dvorak’s box. “Every neck was craned

so that it might be discovered to whom he was motioning so energetically,” reported the *Herald*.

Whoever it was, he seemed modestly to wish to remain at the back of the box on the second tier.

At last a broad shouldered individual of medium height, and as straight as one of the pines in the forests of which his music whispered so eloquently, is descried by the eager watchers. A murmur sweeps through the hall. “Dvorak! Dvorak!” is the word that passes from mouth to mouth....

With hands trembling with emotion Dr. Dvorak waves an acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Anton Seidl, to the orchestra, to the audience, and then disappears into the background while the remainder of the work goes on. . . . At its close the composer was loudly called for. Again and again he bowed his acknowledgements, and again and again the applause burst forth.

Even after he had left his box and was walking about in the corridor the applause continued. And finally he returned to the gallery railing, and then what a reception he received! The musicians, led by Mr. Seidl, applauded until the place rang again.

The critic -- presumably Albert Steinberg -- called the work itself “a great one” and distinctively American in flavor. Henry Krehbiel, in the *Tribune*, decreed it “a lovely triumph” and wrote of the new symphony’s indebtedness to African-American song. But the most remarkable review the morning of December 17 was William J. Henderson’s in the *New York Times*. Its length -- 3,000 words -- and subject matter would confound any present-day newspaper reader. Henderson’s only topic is a single 45-minute work -- not its performance (the usual subject matter of today’s musical press) but the music itself, described in fastidious and eloquent detail. In fact, Henderson’s review remains one of the most informative, vivid, and sympathetic descriptions of Dvorak’s symphony ever written. Shrewdly and precisely, he builds a case for the symphony’s special

importance, taking for granted the curiosity and literacy [footnote: mus ex in glove and hek] of his audience. Here is a specimen:

The work opens with a slow, solemn, mysterious introduction, which may be accepted as beautifully indicative of the strangeness and vastness of the New World. This leads us into the allegro of the first movement. The first subject, announced by the horn, proclaims at once the fountain of the composer's inspiration. . . . It has the so-called Scotch snap, as used by the negro, and it is pentatonic. A subsidiary melody is intoned in the lowest register of the flute, and here again the rhythm is one familiar to many an old-time "walk-around" and the melodic characteristic is the F natural in the scale of G minor – the flat seventh. This is a peculiarity of many kinds of folk song, and is beyond question a result of the influence of the old Greek scales. The second principal theme of the movement is also introduced by the flute, and is one of the most delightfully African melodies in the whole work. . . . In the development of these themes, if any picture is conjured up in the mind it must be one of ebony hue. The whole movement throbs with activity, flexibility of emotion, and energy. The energetic spirit is rather that of the American people at large than of the Ethiopian. No doubt Dr. Dvorak has conceived the movement as one who should say: "Here is the music that grows from your soil, that delights your ears, and finds these melodies gently, perhaps even timidly, as they came from their makers. But afterward you may hear yourselves singing them with your overwhelming energy."

Dvorak had been in New York since September 1892. A cultural nationalist for whom art music was rooted in peasant song and dance, he made it his business to investigate America's folk music. He was intoxicated by "plantation song" – the songs of sorrow we now call spirituals. Like many Europeans of his generation, he was also fascinated by the Native American. Quoted in the *New York Herald* (May 21, 1893) he pronounced "negro melodies" the "real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States."

When I first came here last year I was impressed with this idea and it has developed into a settled conviction. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American.

In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. 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. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source. The American musician understands these tunes and they move sentiment in him....

Elsewhere in the New York press, Dvorak (who spoke English) testified to his enthusiasm for *The Song of Hiawatha*; the middle movements of the new symphony, he said, were inspired by Longfellow's epic poem.

Dvorak's acquaintance with African-Americans and Native Americans was anything but casual. At the National Conservatory, many of his students were African Americans on full scholarship. In New York, he attended Buffalo Bill's Wild West; in Iowa, during the summer of 1893, he spent three weeks observing and conversing with the professional Native American entertainers of the Kickapoo Medicine Show. And, with the help of such New York critics as Krehbiel and James Gibbons Huneker, he collected, in transcription, African American folk songs and Native American chants.

Dvorak's American agenda was well-known and much discussed in New York. Opinions differed as to its likely application by Dvorak himself. Henderson's *New York Times* review observed:

The composers, the critics, and the musical public all labored under the delusion that Dr. Dvorak was going to take a pinch of "Bell da Ring," "Marching Through Georgia," and "Way Down Upon the Suanee Ribber" and try to make a symphony with unsymphonic and inflexible melodies. The American composer had tried such tunes and – if we may be pardoned the word – they would not symphonize. The gentlemen might have known that they were dealing with a man to the symphonic manner born. . . .

...Dr. Dvorak has shown his thorough mastership of symphonic writing by avoiding the pitfall which has invariably entrapped the American composer. He has not made any use whatever . . . of extant melodies. What he has done is to saturate himself with the spirit of negro music and then to invent his own themes....

The result, as represented by Henderson, was an amalgam of impressions of New World energy and bustle, of an imagined American West (which Dvorak had yet to visit when he composed the work), of “negro melodies” and *Hiawatha*.

The question of the *New World* Symphony’s “American accent” has bedevilled commentators ever since. No one could claim that it sounds altogether “American” – its technique and construction are plainly Germanic, and Dvorak’s own signature remains Bohemian. But he is here a Bohemian rapidly and eagerly schooled in Americana – otherwise, the Largo could never have been turned into the ersatz spiritual “Goin’ Home.” And the opening of the Scherzo, with its pentatonic starkness, spare chording, and relentless tom-tom beat, is quite obviously “Indian” music. In fact, Dvorak told the *New York Herald* (December 15, 1893) that it represented “the scene at the feast in Hiawatha where the Indians dance” – which could only be the Dance of Pau-Puk Keewis at Hiawatha’s wedding:

First he danced a solemn measure
Treading softly like a panther
Then more swiftly and still swifter,
Whirling, spinning round in circles,
Leaping o’er the guests assembled,
Eddying round and round the wigwam,
Till the leaves went whirling with him,
Stamped upon the sand and tossed it
Wildly in the air around him;
Till the wind became a whirlwind
Till the sand was blown and sifted
Like the great snowdrifts o’er the landscape.

The possible programmatic content of the *New World* Symphony has been exhaustively explored by the musicologist Michael Beckerman. Beckerman's conclusion – that the symphony is a “musical landscape” whose subject is America as “painted” by a Czech – is powerfully substantiated. Willa Cather, in her novel *The Song of the Lark* (1915), hears in the *New World* Symphony – presumably, the Largo – “the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands.” But no one has more precisely characterized the American complexion of this famous slow movement, with its plaintive mixture of African-American and Native American resonances, than Henderson when he wrote:

It is an idealized slave song made to fit the impressive quiet of night on the prairie. When the star of empire took its way over those mighty Western plains blood and sweat and agony and bleaching human bones marked its course. Something of this awful buried sorrow of the prairie must have forced itself upon Dr. Dvorak 's mind....

Finally, addressing the question “Is the symphony American?”, Henderson had this to say:

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.

Notwithstanding a prominent dissent from Huneker [footnote here], Henderson's endorsement of Dvorak's American accent predominated in New

York. In Boston, however, the notion of an “American” symphony influenced by “negroes” and “Indians” inflicted confounding and troubling impressions. And these impressions lingered. In a 1910 program note for the Boston Symphony, Philip Hale – as influential a music critic as Boston produced between John Sullivan Dwight and World War I – cited the New York view that Dvorak had successfully struck an American national style based in part on negro melodies.

He then continued:

It is said by some in answer to these statements that, while the negro is undoubtedly fond of music, he is not inherently musical, that this has been observed by all careful observers of the negro in Africa . . . ; that the American negro, peculiarly mimetic, founded his “folk-songs” on sentimental ballads sung by the white women of the plantation, or on camp-meeting tunes; that he brought no primitive melodies with him from Africa, and that the “originality” of his “folk-songs” was misunderstanding or perversion of the tunes he imitated; that, even if the negro brought tunes from Africa, they could hardly, even after long usage, be called “American folk-songs,” any more than the tunes of the aboriginal indians or Creole ditties can be called justly “American folk-songs”; that it would be absurd to characterize a school of music based on such a foundation as an “American school.” ...

Hale proceeded to maintain that Bohemians that had been consulted, including Dvorak’s own sons, testified that Dvorak had quoted no “negro airs” (although this was never claimed by Henderson and other New York advocates of the composer), and that Dvorak had never “shown himself a more genuine Czech” than in his *New World* Symphony. “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. . . .”

Seventeen years prior to his program note, Hale reviewed the Boston premiere of Dvorak's symphony and pronounced (1) that it did not sound any more American than it did Scotch or Scandinavian, or "anything you please"; and (2) that it would "undoubtedly be popular, and deservedly popular." His grudging enthusiasm for the work compelled him to deny the pertinence of its ostensible American sources, of which he disapproved. Other Boston critics followed suit. If they conceded that – as Hale put it – "negro airs" might "tint slightly two or three passages of the symphony without injury to its Czech character," they condemned these and other "primitive" inflections. The Social Darwinist underpinnings of their disapproval became explicit in a *Boston Transcript* review by William F. Apthorp reading in part:

The general melodic and rhythmic character of the German, Italian and French songs stamps them as examples of a higher stage in musical evolution. . . .

. . . The great bane of the present Slavic and Scandinavian schools is and has been the attempt to make civilized music by civilized methods out of essentially barbaric material. The result has in general been a mere apotheosis of ugliness, distorted forms, and barbarous expression....

...Our American Negro music has every element of barbarism to be found in the Slavic or Scandinavian folk-songs; it is essentially barbarous music. What is more, it sounds terribly like any other barbarous music....

Soon after, Boston heard Dvorak's *American* String Quartet and E-flat String Quintet – works also composed in America. The local critics worried that Dvorak's influence would prove baneful: "One can see how monotonous this material might become in the hands of a less talented composer. It is to be hoped that mediocrity will not deluge our programmes in consequence of this innovation." "We are getting heartily tired of the uncivilized in chamber and

symphonic music. . . .When the man who belongs to what the geographies used to call the ‘civilized and enlightened’ part of humankind voluntarily returns to barbarism, one cannot help a suspicion that effete-ness of some sort has had a good deal to do with it.” Even Dvorak’s Requiem, conducted in Boston by the composer himself on November 28, 1892, was found to possess – in reviews by different writers – “barbaric modulations” and “barbaric musical means.” When Boston’s George Chadwick composed a string quartet seemingly influenced by Dvorak’s quartet, Hale decried Chadwick’s susceptibility to “Dvorak the negrophile.”

A subtext of these critiques was criticism of New York – whose immigrant melee was unfavorably contrasted with New England enclaves of mature intellectual repose. Assessing Dvorak’s Boston debut – the 1892 performance of his Requiem – the *Boston News* opined: “After his visit to Boston Dr. Dvorak will probably find it even harder still to take up his residence permanently in New York.” When Hale declared Dvorak “homesick” in America and “stupefied by the din and bustle of a new life,” it was New York’s din and bustle that he impugned. In fact, Dvorak became the subject matter of a journalistic feud between Hale and the acknowledged “dean” of New York’s critics, the pompous yet dauntingly learned Krehbiel. “Mr. Krehbiel is now inclined to believe that at last we really have a great national piece of music,” Hale taunted in a *Boston Journal* article ridiculing New York’s Dvorak enthusiasts. First, he assailed a piece in the *New York Herald* about Dvorak’s studies of “native music” in New York:

Unfortunately for the future historians, we are not told how he studied it, or whether he disguised himself in his exploration so that the music would

not become suspicious, frightened, and then escape. It would be a pleasure to read of his wanderings in the jungles of the Bowery and in the deserts of Central Park. It would be interesting to know precisely his first thought on seeing the Harlem goat, an animal now rare. The composer is a modest man, and he has not even hinted at his perilous trips on the elevated railway or the Belt line.

Then, citing Krehbiel's claims for the *New World* Symphony in the *New York Tribune* of December 15, Hale continued:

Mr. Krehbiel finds an American tune in a phrase of four measures announced by the horn in the first allegro. It is "American," because it has a rhythmical construction "characteristic of the music which has a popular charm in this country;" and this rhythmical construction is what? Why, the Scot's snap, "a device common in Scottish music," and "it is found in Hungarian music, too." Therefore, it is American. . . .

The next specimen of Americanism discovered by Mr. Krehbiel is in the larghetto where, to use his language, "we are estopped from seeking forms that are native and thrown wholly upon a study of the spirit. It is Dr. Dvorak's proclamation of the mood which he found in the story of Hiawatha's wooing, as set form in Longfellow's poem." Hiawatha was an Indian. Therefore the symphony is American. . . .

Krehbiel retorted in the *New York Tribune* that, if the *New World* Symphony was less successful in Boston than New York, "an explanation might be found in the circumstance that it was not so well played" as by Seidl and the New York Philharmonic. The Boston Symphony's Emil Paur (with whose performance the Boston critics had found no fault) "had evidently taken ample pains in studying it with his band, but he misconceived the tempo of every movement so completely that the work was robbed of half its charm. It reminded one of the dinner at which everything was cold except the ice-cream." As for denials of the symphony's "right to be called American," Krehbiel echoed Henderson:

The sarcastic and scintillant Mr. Philip Hale of "The Boston Journal," in particular makes merry of the term and thinks it wondrously amusing that

anything should be called American which has attributes or elements that are also found among the peoples of the Old World. Much of this talk is mere quibbling. Mr. Hale does not deny that Dr. Dvorak's melodies reflect the characteristics of the songs of the negroes in the South, and that the symphony is beautifully and consistently made. If so, why should it not be called American? Those songs, though they contain intervallic and rhythmic peculiarities of African origin, are the product of American institutions: of the social, political and geographical environment within which the black slave was placed here; of the influences to which he was subjected here; of the joys and sorrows which fell to his lot here. The crude material may be foreign; the product is native.

As it happens, Krehbiel was New York's leading authority on a topic of central significance to late nineteenth century culture-bearers: music and race. He wrote a 155-page book on "African American folksongs." Applying "scientific observation" to the relationship of folksong to national schools of composition, he also researched and wrote about the music of Magyars, Slavs, Scandinavians, Russians, Orientals, Jews, and American Indians. His views were essentially those of Dvorak, with whom he shared his knowledge of "negro" and "Indian" tunes. Both believed that music reflects national characteristics and an almost intangible message of locale. Both considered African-Americans innately musical. Neither proclaimed a hierarchy of races. This was not Boston's view. For one thing, Dwight and his intellectual progeny disdained popular music as a contaminant. For another, the anthropological research emanating from Harvard's Peabody Museum was shaded by Social Darwinism.

Boston's composers provide a final New England perspective on Dvorak. When Dvorak endorsed negro melodies, John Knowles Paine – aligning himself with the "German masters;" dismissing Dvorak, Smetana, and other nationalists – responded in part:

The time is past when composers are to be classed according to geographical limits. It is not a question of nationality, but individuality, and individuality of style is not the result of imitation – whether of folk songs, negro melodies, the tunes of the heathen Chinese or Digger indians, but of personal character and inborn originality. . . . It is incomprehensible to me how any thoroughly cultivated musician or musical critic can have such limited and erroneous views of the true functions of American composers.

George Chadwick's response, also solicited, read in full: "I am not sufficiently familiar with the real negro melodies to be able to offer any opinion of the subject. Such negro melodies as I have heard, however, I should be sorry to see become the basis of an American school of musical composition." Amy Beach commented: "Without the slightest desire to question the beauty of the negro melodies of which [Dvorak] speaks so highly, or to disparage them on account of their source, I cannot help feeling justified in the belief that they are not fully typical of our country. The African population of the United States is far too small for its songs to be considered 'American.'" New York opened its doors to Dvorak. Boston closed ranks.

Whatever one makes of Beach's commentary, or of Chadwick's, Dvorak was perceived in Boston as a threat. Behind the aplomb of Philip Hale, behind John Knowles Paine's lofty repose, lay New England traditions still young – traditions whose air of ripeness was premature.

3.

Post-Dvorak, Boston's composers were more prone to draw on Scottish and Irish tunes. This, it has been suggested, represented Yankee backlash: an act of retrenchment by an endangered elite. But Beach, whose folk song-inspired *Gaelic Symphony* followed on the heels of Dvorak's *New World*, also turned to

Eskimo and Native American sources; Dvorak, it could be argued, helped her to break out of the Brahmin drawing rooms in which she was kept. And Chadwick had already acquired an American accent before Dvorak turned up – an American accent, moreover, strikingly resembling Dvorak’s own.

An insurance salesman’s son, George Whitefield Chadwick was raised in unfashionable Lawrence, Massachusetts, and later taught in far-flung Michigan. He was considered a greater talent than his German classmates at the Leipzig Conservatory. He was director of Boston’s New England Conservatory from 1897 until his death in 1931. Though his First String Quartet, composed in Leipzig in 1878, already features a theme – the first movement’s second subject – evoking something like Stephen Foster, it was Chadwick’s opinion that he found his voice with an Allegretto Scherzando that became the second movement of his Second Symphony. At its premiere in 1884, this six-minute scherzo proved the first music to be encoed by the Boston Symphony. Its breeziness is a Chadwick trademark: it makes the orchestra giggle and guffaw. The main tune is steeped in Anglo-American song. The methodology of this music may be Germanic, but its composer is plainly American.

“Jubilee” (1895), from the *Symphonic Sketches*, is a work that fully embodies Chadwick’s metier. Its Yankee exuberance and heartwarming nostalgia evoke something like Mark Twain’s America. It shouts or sings lovingly of hearth and home. The big tune begs for an Oscar Hammerstein lyric. Another *Symphonic Sketch*, “A Vagrom Ballad” (1896), portrays an encampment of inebriated hoboos whose exaggerated dignity is suggested by a fragment of Bach’s “Little” G minor

Fugue played on a xylophone. Such musical portraiture, as Chadwick's biographer Victor Fall Yellin has remarked, connects to Currier & Ives, to the Ashcan School painters, and to the realism of Stephen Crane. Elsewhere, Chadwick's American voice is steeped in the vernacular of cracker-barrel humor, fiddle tunes, and minstrel song. Unjustly neglected (though the neglect is diminishing), he is in fact America's first important nationalist composer, predating Charles Ives and Aaron Copland. One could go further and call him the "American Dvorak." Chadwick and Dvorak esteemed one another's music. Both were warm-hearted Romantic symphonists of Germanic persuasion; both infused their symphonies with vernacular accents flavored by folkish pentatonic tunes, yet resisted actual quotations of folk song. More than one American musicologist has proposed that Dvorak's American-period compositions betray the influence of Chadwick – in particular, of his Second Symphony, composed before Dvorak set sail for New York.

In a 1966 study, *The Problem of Boston*, the literary historian Martin Green attempted to explain how a city that so humanistically valued and supported its writers could have failed to produce more memorable writing. The problem, he decided, was that turn-of-the-century Boston treated its writers *too* well – that they were crippled by an absence of critical distance. This indictment is the more powerful for steering clear of Santayana-style stereotypes; Green compassionately scans the exquisite urbanity, vigorous camaraderie, and farsighted democratic cultural philanthropies practiced by Boston's community of artists and intellectuals. But literary Boston fatally spurned impolite Romantic

self-scrutiny: “Boston excluded from its literature the telling of deeply personal truths; those truths that reveal the non-social self . . . Personal truths Boston decorum forbade, and thereby it forbade significant writing.” A comparable study of Boston’s composers would be richly rewarding. It might impugn Amy Beach, whose bottled demons and borrowed musical clothes pre-empted a sustained personal voice. But George Chadwick might emerge, in such a study, as one who capitalized on his frictionless creative environment – who, notwithstanding his forays in naturalism, accepted and pursued his essential equanimity.

If Chadwick doesn’t fit the paradigm of genteel culture-bearer, neither, surprisingly, does Henry Lee Higginson, who founded the Boston Symphony in 1881. A financier, he is described by his biographer, Bliss Perry, as “soldierly” and “erect.” His speech was “abrupt” and “vigorous.” He bore a “sabre-scar across his finely modelled face.” At the same time, Higginson detested banking and craved music. He not only secured a symphony orchestra for Boston, but one that would “offer the best music at low prices.” Scholarly accounts of Higginson’s philanthropy tend to emphasize the Gilded Age plutocrat rather than the cultural democrat. Martin Green writes: “His stiff-backed autocracy and social frigidity seemed the epitome of the old Boston manner.” Paul DiMaggio stresses that the Boston Symphony was a creation “of Brahmins alone,” “cultural Capitalists” for whom high culture, which they defined and segregated, represented a “refuge from the slings and arrows of the troubled world around them.” Lawrence Levine emphasizes Higginson’s “paternalistic rule” -- his high-handed manner, his

intolerance of unions, his insistence that his worker/musicians not “playing for dancing,” his intrusion into artistic affairs.

This is unduly harsh. Higginson’s orchestra offered “workingmen’s concerts” and reserved inexpensive “rush seats” for non-subscribers; it also invented the Boston Pops. Both DiMaggio and Levine write as if Higginson’s dance music prohibition was absolute; in fact, it applied only Wednesdays through Saturdays – the days the orchestra rehearsed and performed. Also, had Higginson permitted the players to unionize, Wilhelm Gericke, their first important conductor, could never have imported the many European instrumentalists he needed to insure a premium ensemble. And it must be born in mind that Higginson was no dabbler in music: he had studied at the Vienna Conservatory and dreamed of becoming a concert pianist. Finally: though a member of one of New England’s oldest and most distinguished families, Higginson was born in New York, not Boston. He did not grow up in an atmosphere of wealth and privilege. As the music historian Steven Ledbetter has argued:

[Higginson] did not consider himself as having a particular “position” in Boston society beyond the one that diligent, hard, honest work could afford. There was in him no element of *noblesse oblige*. Recent studies of Boston’s cultural life . . . portray Higginson as a Brahmin imposing his own values on Boston society at large. But in fact he was caught in the grip of a powerful enthusiasm for music – the kind that makes one a proselytizer, eager to spread as widely as possible the pleasures that he himself felt in the art. Power for its own sake, even such as comes to a leader in cultural circles, was less important to him than making available the wherewithal for the kind of musical experiences that had so delighted him in his youth. . . .

Ledbetter adds that

It is worth recalling that Higginson was never so wealthy that he could simply pay the orchestra's deficit without concern for his own financial condition. He continued to work as a partner at Lee, Higginson, and Co. until his death, and found himself more than once on the brink of bankruptcy owing to his determination to sustain a first-rate symphony orchestra in Boston. His life stands as a model for what informed enthusiasm can accomplish.

In fact, the elusive balance in Higginson of autocrat and aesthete, elitist and democrat broaches a larger Boston riddle, equally applicable to John Sullivan Dwight and other influential culture-bearers. "Boston cared more about quality than about equality," writes Martin Green, summarizing a Yankee idealism shadowed by the massive influx of Irish beginning in the 1840s. This was a mindset inimical to New York audiences and critics who welcomed Dvorak – a butcher's son – and applauded his egalitarian instincts. Paul DiMaggio adds:

New York elites . . . were less successful than Boston's in reproducing their status intergenerationally and in controlling positions of influence. . . . although New York's population was larger, wealthier, and included more artists than Boston's, the greater cohesion of Boston's upper class facilitated cultural entrepreneurship, while the size and fragmentation of New York's elite impeded it...

Whatever, ultimately, one makes of musical Boston a century ago – of Chadwick and Higginson, of Hale, Apthorp and the response to Dvorak – what Arthur Foote called a "a golden time" maps a world of feeling and experience that cannot be dismissed as a vapid preamble to musical times greater and more productive. In fact, its neglect – the amnesia that shrouds it – is a phenomenon notable in itself. As for musical New York of Dvorak's time, its liberality and diversity, as disclosed by Dvorak's presence, are more salient than evidence of snobbism or social control.

Obviously, these revisionist assessments ignore popular music and the attitudes it evoked. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Stephen Foster songs and “negro melodies” Dvorak adored made way for cakewalk and ragtime. Dvorak probably heard ragtime in New York or Chicago; he absorbed cakewalk in such American-period works as the *American Suite*, Op. 98, and the *Humoresques*, Op. 101. The nationalist operatic genre he envisioned American composers creating is well typified by the most popular of all American operas: George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. But, while wonderfully prescient in assessing the protean potential of African-American song, Dvorak could not have foreseen jazz.

Such Dvorak champions as Henderson and Krehbiel heard “jazz” – by which they meant ragtime and other turn-of-the-century precursors of Ellington and Armstrong – and condemned it as morally debased. Though this judgment was not a racial or class slur (both writers, as we have seen, endorsed plantation song as an eloquent American folk music), it contributed to the growing insularity of Gilded Age culture-bearers after World War I. And, though their disapproval was often astutely argued, Krehbiel and Henderson also rejected “modernism” – Debussy, and Richard Strauss, Schoenberg and Stravinsky – during their embattled late careers.

Crucially, the world of music they embodied, and which Boston and New York had epitomized, was – like Dvorak’s symphonies – essentially Germanic. During the Great War, *Kultur* became a dirty word and Wagner was banned by certain orchestras and opera companies. In music, the new postwar tastemakers

were modernist Francophiles like Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland, who vastly preferred Stravinsky to Brahms, Wagner, or Dvorak. America's Germanic genteel tradition, with its emphasis on uplift, seemed musty and vague, anything but “American.” In no European nation was the continuity of musical culture fractured by a schism of such magnitude.