

# Mark O'Connor Manifesto



## A Reemerging American Classical Music

By Mark O'Connor  
With Forrest O'Connor

Fluent in both American classical and traditional styles of music, Grammy Award-winner Mark O'Connor is widely considered one of the most prominent composers and violinists in the world. His creative journey began at the feet of two musical giants, innovative folk fiddler Benny Thomasson and jazz violinist extraordinaire Stephane Grappelli. For nearly four decades, O'Connor has channeled the mastery of Thomasson and Grappelli, pushing the violin to new extremes in both composition and performance in a variety of musical realms, including classical, jazz, and country. Now, at age 49, he is leveraging his deep knowledge of indigenous American musical styles to reinvent American classical music.

A dedicated teacher, O'Connor directs the Mark O'Connor String Camps, which have hosted and trained many of the world's top string musicians over the last 18 years. He also recently released the O'Connor Method for violin and stringed instruments, by which students learn how to play using American, rather than strictly European, musical materials.

O'Connor has performed and composed with and for many of the world's most influential musicians and ensembles. John Williams, Christoph Eschenbach, and Marin Alsop have conducted his orchestral works; Yo-Yo Ma, Jaime Laredo, and Ida Kavafian have performed and recorded his chamber music; Wynton Marsalis, Michael Brecker, and Béla Fleck have performed and recorded his jazz music; Natalie MacMaster, Chris Thile, and Jerry Douglas have performed and recorded his folk music; and Johnny Cash, Renée Fleming, and Glorïae Dei Cantores have performed and recorded his vocal music.

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In 1853, American composer William Henry Fry issued a bold call to his fellows and successors:

The American composer should not allow the name of Beethoven or Handel or Mozart to prove an eternal bugbear to him, nor should he pay them reverence; he should only reverence his Art, and strike out manfully and independently into untrodden realms.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not Fry's target audience actually shunned the European masters, many American composers did strike out manfully into untrodden American musical realms. Luminaries like George Chadwick, Edward MacDowell, Arthur Farwell, Charles Ives, William Grant Still, George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein incorporated elements of African American, Appalachian, and Native American music

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Irving Lowens, *Music and Musicians in Early America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 217-18.

into their compositions in an attempt to develop a distinctly American strain of classical music.

But the old European bugbear never stopped haunting the American scene. In 1941 – nearly 80 years after Fry’s death – Copland wrote,

Very often I get the impression that audiences seem to think that the endless repetition of a small body of entrenched masterworks is all that is required for a ripe musical culture. Needless to say, I have no quarrel with masterpieces. I think I revere and enjoy them as well as the next fellow. But when they are used, unwittingly perhaps, to stifle contemporary effort in our own country, then I am almost tempted to take the most extreme view and say that we should be better off without them!<sup>2</sup>

Copland’s concern was with audiences, while Fry’s was with composers. But both men feared the same result: the stifling of contemporary efforts in American composition.

I don’t need to recount the great works American composers have produced. I don’t need to describe the monumental impact they have had on classical, stage, and film music worldwide. But I do need to emphasize that American classical composers never found common cause, largely because too few of them were dedicated enough to harnessing the colors, textures, melodies, and rhythms of this country. A widespread affinity for musical structures and philosophies developed by Europeans, coupled with skepticism of the value of America’s own musical heritage, thwarted the establishment of an American classical idiom.

I also have no quarrel with masterpieces from Europe, but we are not Europe’s musical colony. Our own musical resources are too vast and too rich for so many serious American composers to continue to reject.

Allow me, then, to describe my solution to our identity problem. I began implementing this solution nearly two decades ago, and although you may have witnessed its effects, you must understand its core:

Conservatory instructors and other music educators nationwide must incorporate traditional American musical styles into their curricula. This much is obvious.

Furthermore, composers must themselves be musicians well versed in the styles upon which they wish to base their music. The musical materials they harness must flow not only through their ears but also *through their veins*. To reach this level of familiarity, composers must acquaint themselves with, even learn how to play, the violin. Why the violin? Because the heritage of our country is musically encapsulated in it. Native Americans, African Americans, European Americans, and immigrants from elsewhere in the world have favored it in manifold musical styles for centuries. The violin – or fiddle, if you prefer – bridges the gap between traditional American music and classical music, for it is the most prevalent instrument in both domains. Only by becoming familiar with this instrument and delving into America’s artistic traditions will our composers usher in a cohesive style of American classical music that, I believe, will have an enduring impact in the wider world of classical music.

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron Copland, *Our New Music* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1941), 238. Quoted in Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 263.

This much, I have discovered, is not so obvious.

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American music sprang from the mountains of Appalachia, the plantations of the South, traveling minstrel shows, tent shows, fiddle competitions, dance halls, wagon trains, and mining camps. Its practitioners comprised European whites and Native Americans, Africans and Latinos, Middle Easterners, Asians, Gypsies, and tri-racial isolates<sup>3</sup> like the Melungeons of Tennessee and Virginia, the Lumbees of North Carolina, and the Redbones of Louisiana. Members of these communities, especially those linked by oppression or penury, perpetuated centuries-old musical traditions born in various corners of the earth, though they adapted them to their new environments, channeling and reflecting on new adversities and opportunities. They also exchanged musical knowledge and, in doing so, developed distinct American musical styles.

At the core of all this music was the sound of the violin. Anglo-Celts, Acadians, Turks, and Gypsies brought the instrument to our land, and African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics adopted it.<sup>4</sup> By no means were white European immigrants the only fiddlers around, and in fact, fiddle music gave rise to more styles among more peoples than you might have imagined. For example:

The banjo, flute, violin, triangle, drum, quills, and sticks (bones) were ubiquitous in slave culture. It is not surprising to find that this combination of instruments is perfectly suited to the realization of the heterogeneous sound ideal...this ideal sound played a critical role in determining the nature of blues, ragtime, jazz, gospel, R&B and all of the other African American genres...In the early years of the nineteenth century, white to black and black to white musical influences were widespread.<sup>5</sup>

The fiddle served as a gateway instrument between cultures. And so, fiddlers abounded in all geographic regions, on the plains, among the hills, on the streets, in saloons – and even in the chambers of the political elite. Founding Fathers Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson all fiddled, and a number of noteworthy politicians, recognizing the fiddle's cultural appeal, won seats in government by campaigning with the instrument.<sup>6</sup> As historian David Nicholls observes, “no other instrument [was] more important or more ubiquitous” in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American music than the fiddle.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> i.e., those with mixed European, African, Native American, and, in some cases, Turkish and Middle Eastern ancestry.

<sup>4</sup> Dale Cockrell, E-mail message to author, 23 Sep. 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 56.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, statesman “Fiddling Bob” Taylor (1850-1912) became governor and later senator of Tennessee largely because he fiddled so well on the campaign trail. Francis O’Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2009), 361.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Broyles, “Immigrant, Folk, and Regional Musics in the Nineteenth Century,” in David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 141.

On the fiddle, as well as on other stringed and percussion instruments, American musicians developed a unique and improvisatory music, a music wreathed in both individualism and egalitarianism, a music that conveyed both hope and sorrow, humor and militarism, vulgarity and virtue.<sup>8</sup> Like frontiersman and fiddler Davy Crockett, the music refused education but was remarkably sophisticated; it roamed the land “with that buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom.”<sup>9</sup>

And the music was racially, politically, and regionally charged. Take plantation songs, syncopated songs that slaves sang as they toiled in the fields. Plantation songs collectively served as one of the chief musical resources for minstrel shows, forms of musical theater in which both whites and blacks dressed up in blackface and portrayed blacks as happy-go-lucky dullards.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, the rise of minstrelsy provided opportunities for blacks to become professional entertainers; thus, minstrelsy offered, as Dale Cockrell puts it, “fleeting moments of political and social disequilibria, where change was possible to imagine.”<sup>11</sup> Then came Stephen Foster, the “father of American music,” who grew up listening to and composing minstrel songs, eventually penning works like “Old Folks at Home” (1851), which actually bestowed some dignity on black subjects for a change.<sup>12</sup> Then came Will Marion Cook, whose landmark musical *In Dahomey* – which was structured like a minstrel show – won the composer great fame and represented a major social step forward for blacks.

Our music has not just reflected social structures in our country. It has remedied ills inherent in them. It has subverted them.

Some believed our music was highly qualified source material for a distinct school of American classical music. Jeannette Thurber, founder of New York’s National Conservatory, paid a Czech fellow named Antonín Dvořák \$15,000 USD per year (at least \$350,000 USD in 2010) to figure out how to “rescue American [classical] music from European parents.”<sup>13</sup> Dvořák, who had employed the folk music of Moravia and Bohemia in his art music compositions, understood the gravity of his task. “The Americans expect great things of me,” he wrote to a Bohemian couple in 1892. “The main thing is, so they say, to show them to the promised land and kingdom of a new and independent art, in short, to create a national music.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> William Brooks, “Music in America: An Overview (Part 1),” in David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> My friend Wynton Marsalis describes the origin of minstrelsy: random black folks on the plantations imitated white folks; white entertainers dressed up in “blackface” and imitated these blacks in plantation skits; plantation owners then recruited talented slaves to imitate these white entertainers on stage. So: black folks imitated white folks who were imitating black folks imitating white folks. Wynton Marsalis, “The Ballad of the American Arts” (lecture, 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts & Public Policy, Washington, DC, March 30, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Dale Cockrell, “Minstrelsy, Stephen Foster, and Dvořák’s ‘Music of the People,’” in *Dvořák and America: A Dvořák Centenary Celebration* (Nashville: Nashville Symphony Orchestra, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions About Stephen Foster,” The Center for American Music at the University of Pittsburgh, 16 Nov. 2010, <<http://www.pitt.edu/~amerimus/FosterFAQ.html#racism>>.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Horowitz, “Dvořák and the New World: A Concentrated Moment,” quoted in Michael Beckerman, *Dvořák and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 93.

<sup>14</sup> Antonín Dvořák, “To Mr. and Mrs. Josef Hlávka,” 27 November, 1892, quoted in Josiah Fisk, *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writings* (Boston: Northeastern University, 1997), 160.

Dvořák sojourned in America from 1892-1895, and during that time, he fell in love with our music. Particularly “Negro” and Native American songs. Songs that Dvořák categorized together because they sounded “practically identical” and shared underlying instrumentations. Songs that Dvořák deemed manifestations of a shared American musical experience.<sup>15</sup> Among Dvořák’s favorites were the spirituals “Deep River,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and “Goin’ Home,”<sup>16</sup> whose peculiarly American melodies arched smoothly like the Appalachian foothills. These were songs that Americans, composing under the influence of German music, had largely overlooked.<sup>17</sup> “I am now satisfied,” he told the *New York Herald* in 1893, “that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States.” Subsequently, Dvořák composed one of the most monumental works in the history of Western music, Symphony No. 9 “From the New World.” Although structured like a traditional European symphony, “From the New World” nonetheless offered listeners a sonic glimpse into the undeveloped realm of American classical music.

Another European giant, Maurice Ravel, concurred with Dvořák. For three months in 1928, Ravel toured North America, attending numerous performances of his own works by major orchestras and, in some cases, conducting them himself. He spent several days with George Gershwin in Harlem listening to jazz, which he had harnessed in his opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (1920-25) and which he would thereafter employ in both of his piano concertos. In a highly publicized lecture at Rice University, he implored:

May this national American music of yours embody a great deal of the rich and diverting rhythm of your jazz, a great deal of the emotional expression in your blues, and a great deal of the sentiment and spirit characteristic of your popular melodies and songs, worthily deriving from, and in turn contributing to, a noble heritage in music.<sup>18</sup>

Ravel was convinced that Americans would develop a school of American music as different from European music as Americans were themselves different from Europeans.<sup>19</sup>

Dvořák and Ravel thus offered American composers a “cure for the Teutonic virus.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dvořák, “An Interesting Talk about ‘From the New World Symphony,’” *New York Herald*, December 15, 1893. Quoted in J. Heywood Alexander, *To Stretch Our Ears: A Documentary History of America’s Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 261.

<sup>16</sup> The origin of this spiritual is uncertain. It is either a traditional spiritual (composed before Dvořák’s arrival in the United States) or a composition by Dvořák’s student, Harry T. Burleigh, and associate, William Arms Fisher. Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 765.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Chase, *America’s Music From the Pilgrims to the Present* (New York: McGraw Hill Publishing, 1955), 386-387.

<sup>18</sup> Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover, 1991), 97.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Chase, *America’s Music*, 390.

But only some embraced it.

Arthur Farwell<sup>21</sup>, the Indianist, wrought Native American chant as well as Hispanic and cowboy songs into classical “music of new types and colors,” but his work, which many have deemed naïve and culturally exploitative, never achieved any popularity.<sup>22</sup> George Chadwick<sup>23</sup>, the first symphonic nationalist, set out to compose classical music that was both popular and stylistically American, but his work was regarded too playful and informal for the dignified concert hall.<sup>24</sup> William Grant Still<sup>25</sup>, the ray of hope for black composers in this country, composed works influenced by African American music (listen in particular to his Symphony No. 1 “Afro-American”), and he became the first African American composer both to conduct a major orchestra and to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra. However, Still left his legacy in the film world, not in classical music.

Charles Ives<sup>26</sup>, the “father of indigenous American art-music,” breathed the music of America.<sup>27</sup> As a youth, his parents adopted a black orphan; his father, a New England bandmaster, served as his principal teacher; and he learned ragtime from black performers at the Chicago World’s Fair Exhibition in 1893.<sup>28</sup> However, although he harnessed traditional American musical materials in his pieces (listen to his early String Quartet No. 1 for some beautiful settings of gospel themes), Ives’s musical output had little impact during his lifetime, and it is the experimentalism of his middle and mature periods – not his use of indigenous American materials – that influenced later American composers.<sup>29</sup>

George Gershwin<sup>30</sup>, the “American who mattered,” and Aaron Copland<sup>31</sup>, the “synthetic populist,” were perhaps the foremost architects of what should have become an American classical tradition.<sup>32</sup> Gershwin drew from jazz and other African American musics to compose *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, and *Porgy and Bess*, all of which fascinated Ravel and Igor Stravinsky, among other major critics and composers. Copland captured the American spirit in ballets like *Appalachian Spring*, which quotes and develops the Shaker melody “Simple Gifts,” and “Hoe-Down” in *Rodeo*, a lushly orchestrated setting of fiddler William Stepp’s 1937 recording of a reworked “Bonaparte’s Retreat.” Moreover, Copland, like Gershwin, embraced jazz, incorporating it into pieces like *Music for the Theatre* (1925) and his Piano Concerto (1926). Yet neither Gershwin nor Copland won enough converts among the elite with this music. Gershwin’s detractors accused him of composing “circus music” and stereotyping blacks,

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<sup>21</sup> (1872-1952).

<sup>22</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 258-9.

<sup>23</sup> (1854-1931). Listen to *Symphonic Sketches*.

<sup>24</sup> Victor Fell Yellin, *Chadwick, Yankee Composer* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 107, quoted in Horowitz, *Classical Music*; Richard Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton, 2001), 362-363.

<sup>25</sup> (1895-1978).

<sup>26</sup> (1874-1954).

<sup>27</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 458.

<sup>28</sup> Kyle Gann, E-mail message to author, 23 Sep. 2010.

<sup>29</sup> William Brooks, “Music in America: An Overview (Part 2),” in Nicholls (1998), 272.

<sup>30</sup> (1898-1937).

<sup>31</sup> (1900-1990).

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Horowitz, E-mail message to author, 3 Oct. 2010; Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 464.

and Gershwin died too young (age 38) to silence his doubters. Copland's American classical music influenced film composition, but his legitimacy – that is, his reputation in academia, which functioned as the postwar classical “mainstream” – stemmed from his modernist compositions of both his earlier and later years. Very few classical composers tipped their hats to *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo*.

Leonard Bernstein, the “most American of classical musicians,” was also perhaps the most optimistic of them all.<sup>33</sup> He aspired to marry high and low in the classical sphere by legitimizing American musical theater. His conductorship at the New York Philharmonic, coupled with the success of his masterpiece, *West Side Story* (1957), positioned him well to realize his vision. But he never did. Bernstein did not bring Broadway to Carnegie Hall. Discouraged by the trajectory of classical music, American popular music, and Broadway alike, he lamented the demise of tonality and predicted that orchestras would become extinct.<sup>34</sup> So, he spent much of his last two decades in Europe.

Only for the sake of brevity does my sample exclude the likes of Anthony Philip Heinrich, George Bristow, John Philip Sousa, Louis Gottschalk, Charles Griffes, Ferde Grofé, Henry Cowell, Roy Harris, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Duke Ellington, Samuel Barber, Carlisle Floyd, and other Americanists.

Investigate the lives of these composers, though, and look at the contemporary classical soundscape. You will find similar results. No American composer ever managed to spearhead a lasting American classical idiom imbued with America's own musical heritage.

They were simply outnumbered and overpowered by their opponents.

Why?

Perhaps these opponents did not appreciate foreigners like Dvořák and Ravel telling them what to do.

More likely, they did not know what to make of their own country's traditional music. Unsurprisingly, racism and classism fueled their uncertainty. The New England school of composers, in particular, dubbed Dvořák a “negrophile” for extolling African American music. “Masquerading in the so-called nationalism of Negro clothes cut in Bohemia,” Edward MacDowell proclaimed, “will not help us.”<sup>35</sup> Some, like composer Amy Beach, thought it foolish to privilege African American plantation songs over English, Scottish, and Irish songs. Others, like critic John Sullivan Dwight, were offended that the music of whom he called “simple children” should be held in any esteem whatsoever. Moreover, upper-middle-class white northerners – the demographic into which so many prominent American composers fell – often shunned African American people and vernacular music, both almost exclusively working class (or lower). In fact, Philip Hale regarded plantation songs as much white as black, believing that they “contaminated high art in any event.”<sup>36</sup> For the Dwights and the Hales, it was not just about segregating white from black, it was about segregating high from low.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 483.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>35</sup> Apparently, MacDowell was influenced by Native American music, though there is no evidence he ever had any contact with Native Americans. Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 385.

<sup>36</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 226.

<sup>37</sup> Classism intensified with the establishment of American orchestras beginning in the mid-1800s.

In any case, the most influential keepers of the ivory tower were skeptical of the agenda to develop a “nationalistic” brand of classical music. Some, like MacDowell, adopted the approach of a “cosmopolitan German: he admitted local color, be it American, ‘Nordic,’ or ‘Keltic,’ but disavowed conscious efforts to create an American style.”<sup>38</sup> MacDowell believed, rather, that new American music should arise from American idealism: he called upon his fellows to compose in a way that reflected “the youthful optimistic vitality and the undaunted tenacity of spirit that characterizes the American Man.”<sup>39</sup> John Knowles Paine simply disagreed with Dvořák over the influence traditional music should have on high musical art. To defend his perspective, he called attention to European classical music. “In the case of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and other German masters,” he wrote, “the old folk-songs have been used to a limited extent as motives,” but rarely were movements founded on such themes.<sup>40</sup> Expatriate Swiss composer Ernest Bloch agreed that the influence of folk music on European classical music had been “vastly exaggerated.”<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps you would concur that MacDowell’s criticism is uncomfortably vague, and that Paine’s and Bloch’s observations are ironically irrelevant.

Nevertheless, it is true that, around the turn of the century, classical nationalism lost some steam. Nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism came into question as critics and composers alike investigated the meaning of “national” music. Clear relationships between art and indigenous music became harder to identify.<sup>42</sup> Composers harnessed nationalism to form musical “categories”<sup>43</sup> and profit off the appeal of those categories.<sup>44</sup> To many, the importance of creating “national” music faded as composers began to push the boundaries of tonality and explore other compositional approaches and techniques.

Moreover, no matter what transpired in the wider world of classical music, numerous American composers simply did not understand – and therefore feared – the music of our people. Consider popular perception of jazz. You may know of Henry Ford’s notorious articles in the *Dearborn Independent*, in one of which he describes jazz as “monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts and squeaks and gasps suggestive of cave love.”<sup>45</sup> Numerous high-society critics, composers, conductors, and musicians – in America more than anywhere else – shared this sentiment.<sup>46</sup> I speculate that some composers eschewed jazz in part because so many modern European composers, like Béla Bartok, Darius Milhaud, Ravel, and Stravinsky, embraced it. Many other composers, notes Derek Bermel, “found the whole nature of jazz counterpoint, harmony, and technique to be

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<sup>38</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 222.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> In Judith Tick and Paul E. Beaudoin, *Music in the USA: A Documentary Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 313.

<sup>41</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 447.

<sup>42</sup> Leon Plantinga, “Dvořák and the Meaning of Nationalism in Music,” in David R. Beveridge, *Rethinking Dvořák: Views From Five Countries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121-122.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Beckerman, “The Master’s Little Joke: Antonín Dvořák and the Mask of Nation,” in Michael Beckerman, *Dvořák and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 150.

<sup>45</sup> In Kathleen Morgan Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 204.

<sup>46</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 462.

intimidating.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, Bermel explains, they “chose to forgo learning about it, closing the door to a rich world of possibilities.”<sup>48</sup>

Suffice it to say that these composers might not have forgone learning about jazz were it not for an unfortunate development in music pedagogy.

Most nineteenth-century music professors were trained in Europe, and so they implemented a European curriculum that became the conservatory standard.<sup>49</sup> After World War I, concertgoers in a democratizing public also chose Europe over America.<sup>50</sup> Yet the European educative methods these academics imported were flawed. In attempting to churn out new Bachs, Mozarts, Beethovens, Brahmses, and Mendelssohns, they forgot an important fact:

*The European masters were not only brilliant composers – they were also adept performers.*

“Specialization” became the new paradigm in the classical music industry. Academics, record companies, arts management companies, and impresarios shoved a wedge in between composers and performers. For Europe, it did not matter too much. They already had centuries’ worth of masterworks to boast to the classical music world. We did not. Nevertheless, too many of our composers stopped learning how to perform. And because the “American psyche adored heroic individualism,” performers did not have time to compose: their chief obligation was to dazzle audiences.<sup>51</sup>

And so, Eduard Hanslick wrote: “America was truly the promised land, if not of music, at least of the musician.”<sup>52</sup>

The situation could have been different. The composer-performer could have been nurtured in this country, as he had been in Europe for centuries. The powers that were could have realized that, as Cleveland Institute of Music President Joel Smirnoff eloquently puts it, “the passionate player whose subconscious is being put to good use musically is the real visionary of serious art music.”<sup>53</sup> For, Smirnoff says, “Visionary...[is] inclusive of the subconscious. That is the reality. And the obligation of communicating to an audience relies heavily upon that subconscious for its consummation.”

Our grand error, then, was to ignore the significance of that subconscious. In the endeavor to develop American art music based on indigenous music, we should have fostered an environment in which composer-performers assimilated indigenous American

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<sup>47</sup> Derek Bermel, Personal interview with author, 19 Dec. 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Dale Cockrell, E-mail message to author, 23 Sep. 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 332. It turns out that violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz, who was “turned into a circus celebrity by the American marketplace,” was a skilled composer himself (see his *Selections for Violin and Piano from Porgy and Bess*). Heifetz also wanted Gershwin to compose a concerto for him, but alas, Gershwin died too young. Imagine the impact that concerto would have had on American classical music! Joseph Horowitz, E-mail message to author, 19 Dec. 2010.

<sup>52</sup> In Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 332.

<sup>53</sup> Joel Smirnoff, e-mail message to author, 4 Sep. 2010.

musical styles by learning to play them. And we should have exposed them to such styles at an early age, during their critical period of learning.

And then we should have given them fiddles.

Consider the cultural role of the violin for a moment. I have already expounded on its centrality in traditional American music. It is prevalent in numerous styles played by a variety of peoples who have inhabited this country.

It is also prevalent and held in the utmost regard in art music. I do not need to support this claim, but I will anyway. Thus reads the *Grove Dictionary of Music*:

The violin is one of the most perfect instruments acoustically and has extraordinary musical versatility. In beauty and emotional appeal its tone rivals that of its model, the human voice, but at the same time the violin is capable of particular agility and brilliant figuration, making possible in one instrument the expression of moods and effects that may range, depending on the will and skill of the player, from the lyric and tender to the brilliant and dramatic. Possibly no other instrument can boast a larger and musically more distinguished repertory, if one takes into account all forms of solo and ensemble music in which the violin has been assigned a part.<sup>54</sup>

And who contributed to that large and musically distinguished repertory? Who pushed the violin to new heights in expressivity and technique? Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Dvořák – all accomplished violinists/violists – certainly did. So did composer-violinists Antonio Vivaldi, Giuseppe Tartini, Francesco Geminiani, Pietro Locatelli, Joseph Haydn, Niccolò Paganini, Rodolphe Kreutzer, Louis Spohr, Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst, Henri Vieuxtemps, Pablo de Sarasate, John Philip Sousa, Maud Powell, Joseph Joachim, Henryk Wieniawski, Jen Hubay, Eugène Ysaÿe, George Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, and Jascha Heifetz.

As for the few exceptions, like Brahms and Tchaikovsky? They relied heavily on virtuoso violinists (Brahms on the inimitable Joachim, Tchaikovsky on Josef Kotek) to edit their violin compositions. “How lovingly [Kotek] is busying himself with my concerto!” wrote Tchaikovsky while composing his notoriously challenging Violin Concerto. “It goes without saying that I would have been able to do nothing without him.”<sup>55</sup>

As far as I can tell, the violin was more adversely affected than any other instrument with the advent of the specialization paradigm. With fewer capable violinists composing for the violin, the number of new, great, innovative works for the instrument plummeted. Look in particular at the postwar repertory.

I am convinced that the failure to develop a lasting American classical idiom informed by indigenous American musical styles is linked to the demise of the composer-violinist.

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<sup>54</sup> David D. Boyden and Peter Walls, “Violin,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, 15 Nov. 2010, <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41161pg1>>.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: The Crisis Years, 1874-1878* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 261.

But that is confusing, you say. The two developments seem unrelated – one concerns an entire body of music, while the other concerns a single instrument.

You must realize, however, that that single instrument would have served as the cornerstone of that body of music. If composer-*performers* had spearheaded American classical music, they could have assimilated the styles upon which they wanted to base their compositions. Of all types of composer-performer, composer-*violinists* would have had by far the most immediate access to indigenous American styles because the violin is so prevalent in these styles. Composer-violinists could have learned this music until it permeated their subconsciouses. They could have unleashed the musical forces in their subconsciouses into each American classical phrase, into each American classical movement, into each American classical opus. They could have reached audiences either by channeling their own subconsciouses on stage or by enlisting virtuoso performers, especially those whose imaginations harmonized with their own, to do so for them. And thus they could have constructed a world of American classical music that resonated with other composers, popular music adherents, classical connoisseurs, academics, and recording companies alike.

This is not to say I long for what could have been. I do not need to long for anything, because what could have been still can be. Actually, the opportunity is riper now than ever before. The Internet provides access to recordings and samples of musical styles once inaccessible to all but a few. Up-and-coming classical composers are beginning to investigate, learn, and harness these styles. Performances of works by Gershwin, Copland, and Bernstein are becoming standard. And interest in new music is growing, both in conservatories and among the concertgoing public.

Regrettably, too many art music composers and performers still see so little depth in indigenous American music. They tell me that they have “too much training to grasp and appreciate American music,” even though, paradoxically, most of them are unfamiliar with it. How can they judge something they have not studied or performed? Their problem is not overtraining – it is *underexposure*. These composers and performers would not have appreciated Baroque music without playing it or listening to it on recordings and in concert hundreds of times. It follows that they will not appreciate the complex emotionality of the blues, the sophisticated minimalism of Appalachian rhythm, the virtuosity inherent in the performance of bluegrass and Texas fiddle repertoire, or the intellectual power behind jazz improvisation until they play or listen to this music equally as frequently. Then the truth will strike them: They have been overlooking the vastest treasury of art music source material in the world.

So, for the last two decades, I have worked tirelessly to spearhead a movement toward what I call a reemergence of American classical music – and it is working. When I signed with Sony Classical and Columbia Artists Management in the mid-1990s, my espousal of the American vernacular – and, thus, tonality – was rare, to say the least. More than a few derided me for it. It was not until my solo violin caprices (which introduced new techniques to violin playing), my Fiddle Concerto (which established American fiddling as a basis for long-form orchestral works), and my composition “Appalachia Waltz” (featuring Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer) gained real traction that contemporary classical composers, musicians, and industry leaders began to embrace terms like “fiddle” and “bluegrass” as well as the concept of improvisation.

But I have not focused solely on influencing industry leaders; I have also long striven to educate young, up-and-coming classical performers and composers. Eighteen years ago, I inaugurated a series of string camps, the first series of its kind to feature both classical and non-classical instruction. More than 6,000 students have enrolled in these camps in Tennessee, California, New York, and Boston; among them are many of the top young string players in the world. Moreover, I am the first musician to have taught master classes on American fiddling and improvisation at Juilliard, the Curtis Institute, and the Cleveland Institute of Music, and I have conducted residencies on American string music at Harvard, Rice, UCLA, and the University of Miami.<sup>56</sup> Most recently, I released the O'Connor Method for violin, viola, cello, and string orchestra, which draws exclusively on American, Mexican, and Canadian repertoire to teach budding string musicians. My method has been embraced by Suzuki instructors, traditional classical instructors, proponents of El Sistema, and folk music teachers alike.

My work, and the work of those who share my vision, has paid off. Suzuki programs are actually beginning to feature instruction on American fiddling. The Berklee College of Music recently initiated an American Roots Music program. Publishers like Alfred and Hal Leonard are concentrating on educational materials featuring indigenous American repertoire. Publications like *Strings Magazine* and *The Strad* now contain far more content about other styles of string music than they did ten or 15 years ago. And last year – for the first time in its history – the venerable Menuhin Violin Competition required each entrant to perform a two-minute improvisation.

Now, the most accomplished classically trained composers and musicians are taking part in this movement. Of them, five Pulitzer Prize-winners in particular are exerting the most influence. Jennifer Higdon recently composed “Concerto 4-3” (2008), a bluegrass-infused piece dedicated to the rising ensemble Time for Three, whose members are heavily influenced by my music. John Corigliano studied my solo violin pieces before composing a “fiddle” piece commissioned by the Tchaikovsky Violin Competition. My close friend Wynton Marsalis’s first symphony, “Swing Symphony” (2010) which was premiered by the New York and Berlin Philharmonics, was partially inspired by my “Americana Symphony” (2006). Philip Glass’s second violin concerto, “The American Four Seasons” (2010), is a reference not only to Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” but also to my violin concerto, “American Seasons” (2000). And John Adams’s “The Dharma at Big Sur” (2003), an electric violin concerto written for my colleague, Tracy Silverman, exemplifies the trend toward a truly American, string-centric classical sound.

If only Dvořák, Ravel, and Gershwin were alive to witness these changes.

Granted, there is still work to be done. Classical composers are experimenting with the American vernacular, but they must become fluent in it. Classical violinists are looking at transcriptions of fiddle music, but they must learn how to fiddle. And the line of demarcation between composers and performers must become even blurrier.

Yet the gears are turning swiftly now. Educators nationwide are exposing their students, their young Bartoks and Piazzollas, to our country’s 400 year-old musical heritage and teaching them that proficiency on, or at least strong familiarity with, the violin is essential to the foundation of an American classical music based on this heritage.

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<sup>56</sup> It’s hard to believe that my mentor, Stephane Grappelli, was never invited to give a class at any of these institutions.

American classical music itself is harnessing the colors, textures, melodies, and rhythms of Appalachian string music, blues, Cajun, swing, country, folk, jazz, bluegrass, soul, and rhythm and blues. It is reflecting the influence of American legends like Scott Joplin, W.C. Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, Eck Robertson, A.P. and Mother Maybelle Carter, Jimmie Rodgers, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Joe Venuti, Bob Wills, Benny Thomasson, Stuff Smith, Robert Johnson, Bill Monroe, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Earl Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers, who mastered roots styles, pushed the limits of these styles, and invented new styles based on old styles.

Contemporary American composers, like the Romantics and the Impressionists and the Serialists before them, are beginning to espouse a common cause. The enhanced knowledge and understanding of our country's vernacular music is beginning to yield a core American classical repertoire that ensuing generations of composers will want to emulate. Soon, this movement will have accumulated such strength that it will no longer be called a movement.

It will become a culture.

*More information can be found online at [www.markoconnor.com](http://www.markoconnor.com)*

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*Photography - Deanna Rose*

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