

BOSTON'S MISSING GENERATION

By Steven Ledbetter

From roughly the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I, Boston was the breeding ground and the home of a remarkable group of composers, the first “school” of American composers to establish itself as fully professional in the same terms as any in Europe, showing the ability to create substantial works in genres ranging from the album leaf for the parlor piano to string quartets, symphonies, and operas. Most of these composers studied at the same German conservatories as their coevals, cherished similar artistic ideals, faced the same struggles for recognition. Once they returned home from their studies, they became established as active participants in Boston’s musical life—as teachers, instrumentalists, conductors, and, of course composers.

John Knowles Paine was the father figure in this group and was the teacher to many of them during his many years on the Harvard faculty. Born in 1839, he was more than a decade older than the next group, which included Arthur Foote and George W. Chadwick as its most distinguished members, and when Paine’s Symphony No. 1 was performed in 1876, he immediately became the symbol of American aspirations for musical advancement. Chadwick realized that an American could write a worthy symphony and decided to aim for such a career himself. Foote studied with Paine at Harvard and became the first significant American composer of concert music to receive all his training in this country. For his part, Chadwick—after studies in Leipzig and Munich—was a central figure in Boston’s music life as composer, conductor, teacher, and innovative director the New England Conservatory from 1897 to 1930.

The Harvard Musical Association had encouraged the highest standards—which meant, in those days, European standards—of musical idealism for years before the founding of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1881. Both organizations, and many others in the country throughout the century, looked to Beethoven as a model. His example as a man struggling with the vicissitudes of a fate that had left him deaf at the height of his powers gave to his work a moral power in the eyes of many. For the first time in European music, purely instrumental music came to be seen as ethically significant, not merely entertaining. This view greatly appealed to New Englanders, who retained many of the thought patterns of their Puritan ancestors. The banner of Beethoven was raised over many musical movements in the 19th century. Indeed, no doubt one of the reasons Paine’s First Symphony received such acclaim was that it was, in the modern description of Gunther Schuller, “the greatest Beethoven symphony that Beethoven didn’t write.”

This focus on Beethoven as the supreme model naturally directed attention to Germany (here meaning all German-speaking regions, especially including Vienna) as the homeland of great music. That was where the finest training could be obtained, and it was to Berlin, Leipzig, Stuttgart, Munich, and Vienna that almost every American composer or serious performer who could afford it went to study. This “German” tradition lasted until the end of the century. The number of Americans studying at the conservatory founded by Mendelssohn in Leipzig, for example, was a strong minority percentage of the student body until about 1900, after which it dropped precipitately—not coincidentally just after Chadwick assumed the directorship of NEC and restructured that institution along the lines of the modern German schools of music.

Between about 1875 until about 1920, Paine (who died in 1906), Chadwick, Foote, and younger composers like Horatio Parker, Howard Brockway, Amy Beach, Margaret Ruthven Lang, and Edward MacDowell (something of an outlier in this group, since he spent only eight years in Boston after returning from studies in Germany), were among the leading American composers, who crafted piano works of all types, songs, chamber music (especially string quartets for the Boston-based Kneisel Quartet), choral compositions ranging from hearty male-chorus numbers about bold Vikings to sacred motets and full-scale Mass and oratorio settings, concertos (especially for piano), and orchestral works, including symphonies as the most highly regarded form of all—precisely the types of works that were part and parcel of the German tradition.

The energetic, prolific compositional output of these and other composers was a constant presence in Boston's musical life, and, to a slightly lesser degree, elsewhere in the country. In 1893, for instance, Paine and Chadwick were commissioned to write the major choral and orchestral compositions that would open the great 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Their names were nationally recognized, and cities that had their own orchestras by the turn of the century included their music along with that of what had become the standard repertory of the day, though not so frequently as in Boston.

So what happened?

For most of the 20th century after, say, 1930, even passionate music lovers—and for that matter, professional musicians—suddenly no longer recognized the names of these 19th-century worthies, and certainly did not know their music. The development of serious musical study of our own national musical history in the last several decades has begun to bring some of these composers back into occasional performance and public consciousness. But the question remains: Why did they disappear so suddenly and so completely?

I believe there are at least five explanations, which overlapped in the first quarter of the 20th century to create a “perfect storm” of historical oblivion:

First, although German music (again including Vienna in this term) had dominated the orchestral tradition in Europe from the last quarter of 18th century, French composers began a concerted effort to build their own important body of symphonic work after the Franco-Prussian war of 1872. Previously the most important French symphony had been Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* of 1830, but few composers had been interested in symphonic work at the time; they preferred to write operas, where the financial rewards for success were much greater.

Several leading Boston figures played important roles in introducing this new “modern” music to Boston. Charles Martin Loeffler had studied in Paris and knew many of the leading French musicians. He and B.J. Lang (father of Margaret Ruthven Lang and one of the busiest teachers, conductors, and organizers of musical events) brought French composers (including d'Indy) and their music to town. Chadwick introduced a good deal of the newer French music with the New England Conservatory orchestra. So the stage was set for a change.

The second partial explanation was the event that sped up the change from pro-German to pro-French musical languages: the outbreak of World War I. Once the United States entered the war, it became unpatriotic to perform German music, to sing German songs. In the 1890s and beyond, Wagner's music was so popular that the Boston Pops featured all-Wagner nights in a number of

seasons! Yet in 1918 anti-German hysteria was so strong that the Karl Muck, widely regarded as one of the greatest conductors in the history of the Boston Symphony, was arrested while preparing to conduct Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* during Easter week and was interned in Georgia as an enemy alien for the remainder of the war. His replacements for the next several decades were French: Henri Rabaud for one year, Pierre Monteux for six, and Serge Koussevitzky (a Russian, but one who came to Boston by way of an extended residence in Paris) for twenty-five.

Increasingly the older school seemed outdated and even tarred with the brush of their studies in Germany and the generally Germanic musical style of their work.

A third partial explanation is that the newer generation of composers was enriched by the arrival of many immigrant musicians—Frenchmen hired for the Boston Symphony, composers from all over Europe, particularly central Europe. A very large percentage of the new immigrants were Jewish (among them the parents of Gershwin and Copland, for example). They and others who arrived in the New World in the first two decades of the century proclaimed their eagerness to become Americans, and to write genuine American music. One classic example (which generated an ugly anti-Semitic response from Daniel Gregory Mason, the grandson of Bostonian Lowell Mason and a professor at Columbia University) was an large score, *America: an Epic Rhapsody* by the Swiss Jewish immigrant Ernest Bloch, which won a national prize for the “best work on an American theme by an American composer” (Bloch was a naturalized citizen).

What upset so many of the older composers, including Mason, was the fact that these new composers who trumpeted their nationalism had only been Americans for a decade or less, while the older generation descended from families that arrived in the 17th century. The earliest Chadwicks, for example, came in 1630, and the composer had relatives who had fought at Bunker Hill and in the Union Army of the Civil War. There was no need for them to declare their nationality; it was bred into the core of their being—but after about 1918, that didn't seem to matter any more.

Contemporaneous with the arrival of the immigrants was a fourth consideration: a new, modern, more dissonant musical style was also developing, first of all in Europe, but it was taken up enthusiastically by many of the new immigrant composers. To young modern musicians and audiences, too, the older composers began to sound old-fashioned, imitative. Indeed for most of the period from about 1925 to the Bicentennial in 1976, when determined efforts started being made to reconsider their work, the older Bostonians were generally presented as epigones of Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms, simple copycats with good training and some talent, but without any originality.

Fifth and last, the newer composers were more and more open to elements of American musical life that had seemed unsuited for the kind of music created by the composers in the last half of the 19th century—the music of popular song, of ragtime, and of jazz. Once these demotic traditions came to be included (or at least referenced) in concert music, the result was a sound that many audiences instinctively felt was more “American” than our music had ever been before, and, as a result, the senior composers found it hard to get performances, and when they did, the critics were increasingly patronizing to their work.

This may be natural, as times and generations change, but it overlooks an aspect of musical history that was observed all over Europe in the 19th century; in this instance America can be seen as a European country similar to Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia, Scandinavia, and even England. All of them had adopted a Germanic approach to the music produced there whenever their composers wrote for the concert hall. But a great drive for cultural individuality (allied with the desire, often, for political independence) generated in each of these countries a new passion for its *own* music. And in each case it is possible to discern three stages of development: First, native composers must prove their professional competence by writing in the dominant music style—in this case, German. A second generation could move to another level, introducing native elements such as folk songs and popular dances into their instrumental music and national legends and history into their operas, but still basically writing in the Germanic style with an overlay of local color.

Finally, in a third generation, the composers find ways to create a national musical language from the core elements of native music, as—for example—Bartók did, building on the first generation work of Ferenc Erkel, then the folkish interpolations of Liszt, and finally creating a strikingly Hungarian musical language based on a thorough absorption of native elements.

In the United States, Paine can be seen as representing stage one, Chadwick in particular as stage two, and then, in various ways John Alden Carpenter (his jazzy ballet *Skyscraper*) or Aaron Copland or the symphonies of Roy Harris or William Schuman, as the arrival of the third stage.

But we don't ever need to give up that past that led to this present. The quality and the attractiveness of a large part of the work of our 19th-century forebears become evident whenever we have a chance to hear it again.

I've spoken most here of symphonic work because it makes the greatest and most public impression, but the same sort of case can be made for the smaller forms such as song, piano solo, or chamber music. Much of the repertory of smaller pieces of this period, both American and European, has been belittled as "parlor music," overlooking the fact that the parlor was the place where most people experienced music in those pre-electric days, and that the songs of Schubert, for example, were, in the first instance, performed in someone's parlor. The tradition of vocal recitals developed only gradually, though it was not uncommon to sprinkle a few songs amid the works heard at an orchestral concert—this was particularly true in the first decade of the Boston Symphony, where a song or two, accompanied by piano, would be performed just before intermission!

Now that the cultural wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries are several generations behind us, it is easier to absorb the music of our more distant past with historical understanding and to accept and enjoy music that our grandparents thought outdated, and to recognize its own value and beauty, and the pioneering work of its creators.