

American Music and Impressionism

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The relatively short-lived period known as Impressionism (ranging approximately from the eighth decade of the nineteenth century through the second decade of the twentieth century), though concentrated heavily in France, found practitioners, supporters, and admirers in Europe and the United States. In France the movement found a welcome home in the worlds of painting (e.g., Monet, Manet, Renoir, and Pissarro), literature (e.g., Mallarmé, Baudelaire, and Verlaine), and music (e.g., Fauré, Debussy, Dukas, and Ravel). This essay discusses the careers of six composers active in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who incorporated Impressionistic elements in their music: Frederick Delius, Edward MacDowell, Arthur Farwell, Charles Wakefield Cadman, Charles Griffes, and George Whitfield Chadwick.

Impressionism became a significant movement in French music wherein certain compositional traits rose to the fore, among them the use of medieval ecclesiastical modes with emphasis on fourths, fifths, and octaves often in parallel motion, creating an aura of archaism; whole-tone and pentatonic scales, invoking an exotic or Eastern musical atmosphere; unprepared and unresolved chords often moving in parallel motion, thus departing markedly from the traditional harmony of the eighteenth century; added intervals, often seconds and sevenths, to blur tonalities (e.g. adding a D-flat to a C major chord); and special treatment of the pedals on the piano to not only blur tonalities but also to create unusual textures and to convey an unclear impression of the subject matter or to create tonal ambiguity.

The grand rhetoric of the late Romantic era changed from a realistic treatment of the subject in the early nineteenth century to a conveyance of an individual impression of the subject at a given moment in time. In orchestral works, for example, special coloristic effects might be conveyed by the employment of mutes on brass instruments, and the percussion section was enlarged to include the celesta, the piano, the glockenspiel, and the triangle. Instead of the customary “crashing” cymbals, that noble instrument might now receive a gentle brushstroke by means of a drumstick. Nuance, subtlety, and a penchant for unexpected rhythms were the aesthetic currency. The subject matter of nature--such as the various manifestations of water--held particular attraction for the French masters (e.g., Debussy’s orchestral masterpiece, *La Mer*, and Ravel’s magical piano work, *Jeux d’eau*). While Debussy eschewed the term “impressionism,” much of his music accepted it. But Impressionism in French music shared its luster with other important “isms,” such as neo-classicism. Jazz influences, too, found their way into French musical aesthetics (e.g., Debussy’s “Golliwogg’s Cake-Walk,” the closing piece in the piano suite *Children’s Corner*; and “Blues,” the second movement of Ravel’s *Sonata for Violin and Piano*). These and other characteristics found their way across the ocean; indeed, in a few important instances, several European composers also

crossed “the pond” and adapted American elements into their Euro-centered compositional styles.

While American-born composers, much like American-born painters, were eager to go to Europe, normally Germany or France, to advance their musical training, Frederick Delius (1862-1934), born in northern England to German parents, was sent by his father to manage an orange plantation on the St. Johns River, near Jacksonville, Florida. In Florida he studied music theory and composition with Thomas F. Ward, a Jacksonville organist, but the music he heard was not that of the conservatory, but rather the African American spirituals sung by waiters in Jacksonville hotels and the songs he heard sung by deckhands on steamships and the workers who toiled in his orange groves. During his six months of study with Ward, Delius was also exposed to his teacher’s wide-ranging repertoire, including works by Bach and Chopin, and the parlor music much beloved in the nineteenth century. In Florida he published his first work, *Zum Carnival*, a polka for piano, in 1892, the same year Debussy began his impressionistic orchestral marvel, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*.

In 1886, Delius entered the Leipzig Conservatory where his teachers included Carl Reinecke, Hans Sitt, and Salomon Jadassohn. During the 1890s he was living in Paris, where he composed the first version of one of his Florida-inspired works, *Appalachia: American Rhapsody*, subtitled *Variations on an Old Slave Song with Final Chorus*. The tunes were largely inspired by those he heard sung by the African Americans who toiled in his orange groves in Florida. They also include “Yankee Doodle” and “Dixie.” The music, whose tempi are generally slow and elegiac, provides the impressions one might imagine by way of association with the atmosphere evoked. Orchestral solos, assigned to such instruments as the English horn, French horn, and harp, are strewn throughout the fourteen variations. Indeed, some influences of Impressionism can be discerned. Other significant “American” works include the four-movement *Florida Suite* and the three-act opera *Koanga*. The latter reveals the composer’s interest in plantation life, racial disharmony, miscegenation, and voodoo-Christian antipathies.

Delius increased awareness of racial issues in the United States while, at the same time, producing music that revealed a unique commingling of diverse styles to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. American-born composers, however, trod a very different path. Edward MacDowell (1860-1908), for example, was born into a Quaker family in New York City’s Lower East Side. Following studies at the Paris Conservatoire, he moved to Germany. In 1879 he entered the Frankfurt Hoch Conservatory, where he thrived under the tutelage of his composition professor, Joachim Raff. His acquaintanceship with Franz Liszt, for whom he played his *Piano Concerto No. 1 in A minor*, a work modeled upon the German Romantic style then in vogue, and the Hungarian master’s glowing assessment of Delius’s talent led to the publication of his *First Modern Suite*, a work also admired by Liszt. By 1888, with financial difficulties marring his life in Germany, MacDowell returned to America, where, owing to his Germanic training and a certain degree of fame, he established himself as a teacher in Boston and New York. His activities in New York included the composition of choruses for the Mendelssohn Glee Club, an organization he directed in 1896-1898. Other compositions in the ensuing years established him as an American Romantic; descriptive titles for complete works and individual

movements were common, and subject matter ran the gamut from nature scenes to literary subjects to Native American themes.

MacDowell's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in D minor* (1890) and his *Second Suite* for orchestra (1897) are among his best-known works. The former, akin to the *Piano Concerto No. 1 in A minor*, is a technically brilliant work imbued with lyricism and skilled and colorful orchestration. Like the *First Concerto* it is in the traditional three movements, and, like its predecessor, it begins with the solo piano. The *Second Suite*, known by the descriptive title "Indian" owing to its inclusion of Native American themes, is in five movements, titled "Legend," "Love Song," "In War-time," "Dirge," "Village Festival." The Native American thematic material in comes from Theodore Baker's (1851-1934) Ph.D. dissertation, completed at the University of Leipzig in 1882, based on his field work with the Seneca tribe in New York State. Of the less imposing works, *Woodland Sketches*, with its occasional touches of Impressionism, includes such favorites as "To a Wild Rose," the melody of which derives from the Brotherton tribe of Native Americans; "To a Water Lily"; and "From Uncle Remus," inspired by the well-known stories by Joel Chandler Harris.

Arthur Farwell (1872-1952), a native of St. Paul, Minnesota, took composition lessons from George Whitefield Chadwick in Boston and with Engelbert Humperdinck and Hans Pfitzner in Germany. He also studied counterpoint with Alexandre Guilmant in France. His compositions with Native American material are best known; they include *Impressions of the Wa-Wan Ceremony of the Omahas* and *From Mesa and Plain*, both for piano. The former includes a "Song of Peace" based on a religious pipe ceremony. It contains impressionistic harmonies and a picturesque allusion to Indian life. The tom-tom drum beat often associated with tribal tradition can be found in "Navajo War Dance," a movement in the latter work.

Charles Wakefield Cadman (1881-1946), born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, never completed high school, and his musical education consisted of a brief period of private instruction, yet he gained a position as music critic for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in 1908. An early attachment to Native American music and lore after he read Alice Fletcher's *Indian Story and Song From North America*,¹ led him to begin composing works based on Indian music. On her advice, he paid a visit to the Omaha tribe in Nebraska. After familiarizing himself with their melodies and learning to play native instruments, he adapted their music to a Western compositional style based on the harmonic practices associated with nineteenth-century Romanticism.² Cadman's desire to compose in larger forms, led to his first chamber work in 1914, *Trio in D major, Op. 56* for piano, violin, and cello, a three-movement work in a traditional classical layout. Its third movement, *Vivace energico*, generated considerable attention from critics and the public owing to its ragtime features--one of the first times in an American chamber work that this African American style had appeared.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920) may well have been the American Impressionist composer par excellence. Born in Elmira, New York, he studied with hometown teachers before going to Berlin for a four-year period of training in composition with Engelbert Humperdinck. His earliest works betray a linkage to the Liszt-Wagner School. A rather striking change occurred

once he returned to America, where his music underwent a tilt to the French Impressionist aesthetic. Yet it retained a dose of Germanic chromaticism along with a diversity of style features inspired by such composers as Skryabin, Schönberg, Stravinsky, Busoni, Prokofiev, and the French masters, Debussy, Ravel, and the more modernist Milhaud.

Griffes's descriptive piano pieces best illuminate his impressionistic leanings. Among them are *Three Tone Pictures, Op. 5* ("The Lake at Evening," "The Vale of Dreams," "The Night Winds"), 1910-1914; and *Roman Sketches, Op. 7* ("The White Peacock," "Nightfall," "The Fountain of Acqua Paola," "Clouds"), 1915-1916. On the other hand, his large-scale three-movement *Piano Sonata*, 1917-1918, reveals Griffes to be more than a masterful miniaturist. Discarding any element of the programmatic, this work illustrates his remarkable ability to handle the large forms and to incorporate effective use of what were then called exoticisms--pentatonic and whole-tone scales as well as references to such diverse cultures as those of the Far East and the Native American. The symphonic poem *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*, of 1917, based on the unfinished poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, began its life as a piano work but found its place, at least for a while, in the orchestral repertory (the Boston Symphony Orchestra, directed by Pierre Monteux, introduced it to the world in 1919). It, too, reveals a stylistic allegiance to the French Impressionists, and its orchestral color and technical mastery announced to the world that Griffes, a year prior to his death, was an important composer. George Whitefield Chadwick (1854-1931) also contributed to the Impressionistic piano literature with such works as *Le Ruisseau (The Rill)* and *Le Crepuscule (The Gloaming)*. Importantly, he was a friend of the American Impressionist painter, Childe Hassam (1859-1935).

American music during the Impressionistic period reveals a high degree of eclecticism, with Impressionism as an aesthetic imperative relatively low on the spectrum of stylistic features that attracted serious attention. American nationalism, symphonic jazz, and African American themes are among the other prominent areas that attracted the attention of American composers during the period. Representative examples include Charles Ives³ (1874-1954), Scott Joplin⁴ (1867-1917), George Gershwin⁵ (1898-1937), and Aaron Copland⁶ (1900-1990). American composers, whether trained abroad or at home, were, however, interested in seeking paths that would distinguish them from the strong European traditions which often served as a starting point for what ultimately emerged as a multifaceted and yet uniquely American manner of approaching the muse.⁷

Notes

1. Alice C. Fletcher, *Indian Story and Song, from North America* (Boston: Small Maynard and Company, 1900).

2. The music for Cadman's Native American works may be found in Fletcher's monograph, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

3. Ives's nationally themed works include such now iconic orchestral repertory gems as *Three Places in New England* ("The 'St. Gaudens' in Boston Common," "Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut," and "The Housatonic at Stockbridge"), 1903-1914; *Central Park in the*

Dark, 1898-1907); and *New England Holidays* ("Washington's Birthday," "Decoration Day," "The Fourth of July," and "Thanksgiving and Forefathers' Day"), 1904-1913). Ives's many songs include "General William Booth Enters into Heaven" (text by Vachel Lindsay), whose subject matter focuses on the founder of the Salvation Army, General William Booth. The use of patriotic and hymn tunes in Ives's music did much to ameliorate the early negativity with which it was met due to such "advanced" technical features as bitonality, polytonality, and complex rhythms. The *Symphony No. 3* of 1911 was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947.

4. Scott Joplin, one of the earliest African American composers to achieve national fame, is best remembered for his many best-selling rags, among them "Maple Leaf Rag" of 1899 and "The Entertainer" of 1902. A desire to broaden his musical sphere resulted in his folk opera *Treemonisha*. First heard in a concert performance in 1915, it did not receive its first complete performance (orchestration by T. J. Anderson) until January 28, 1972, in Atlanta. With Joplin's rags, most notably "The Entertainer," permeating the Hollywood film *The Sting*, in 1973, the composer was catapulted to instant universal fame.

5. George Gershwin, born in Brooklyn, New York, began as a song plugger on Tin Pan Alley and achieved a spectacular reputation as a composer of Broadway musicals. His desire to create a classical style that incorporated jazz and popular music led to the ground-breaking *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, followed in quick succession by the *Concerto in F* for piano and orchestra, 1925, *An American in Paris*, 1928, and the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*, 1935, a work based on a book by DuBose Heyward and featuring an African American cast of characters.

6. Copland had a long and successful career with many twists and turns in terms of stylistic features. His contributions to symphonic jazz include *Music for the Theater*, 1925, and a *Piano Concerto*, 1926. Well after the Impressionistic period, he wrote such ballets on American themes as *Billy the Kid*, 1938, *Rodeo*, 1942, and *Appalachian Spring*, 1944.

7. The following are representative books that deal broadly with the subject of this essay: Gilbert Chase, *America's Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton, 2001); H. Wiley Hitchcock with Kyle Gann, *Music in the United States* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2000); Elizabeth M. Montgomery, *American Impressionists* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007); and Christopher Palmer, *Impressionism in Music* (New York: Scribner, 1973).

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