

Approaching Different Nationalities Musically - “The Musical Journey”

Chris Green

MMus Composition For Screen

Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Concept of Nationalism	1
Nationalism in Music	2
<i>Finlandia</i> - The National Song of Finland.....	3
<i>Má Vlast</i> – Bohemian Fatherland.....	3
Conclusion	4
Bibliography.....	5
Discography	6

Introduction

The intention of the following paper is to provide and discuss an approach for representing different nationalities in musical terms. The first sections will concern themselves with the concept of Nationalism and then relate this to Nationalism in music. These concepts will then be explored further through the discussion of two well regarded Nationalistic works, *Finlandia* Op. 26, a symphonic poem by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius and *Má Vlast*, a set of six symphonic poems composed by the Bohemian (Czech) composer Bedřich Smetana. The conclusion will then serve as a summary of the above sections resulting in an overview of how to approach nationalities musically, thus completing “The Musical Journey”.

The Concept of Nationalism

In order to understand the notion of Nationalism it is first paramount to comprehend what a Nation is. Benedict Anderson, one of the most highly regarded scholars in the area of Nationalism [Hechter, 2000] defines a Nation as,

“...an imagined political community... and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”.

Benedict Anderson, 1983

Richard Handler further expands this perception in the text, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, in which he states,

“Nationalism is an ideology about individuated being. It is an ideology concerned with boundedness, continuity, and homogeneity encompassing diversity. It is an ideology in which social reality, conceived in terms of nationhood, is endowed with the reality of natural things”.

Richard Handler, 1988

The important aspect to note in both of these theories is the idea of a Nation not as a fixed, solid entity (such as a Country, which incidentally Nation is commonly used as a synonym for) but as a virtual, ‘imagined’ social community. The consequence of this is that the impression of a Nation is based on the members’ opinion of a ‘common bond’ and not actual interaction and social engagement.

It is widely accepted that a Nation cannot be created artificially, but is a body formed from a long history of characteristics [Gellner, 1983]. These characteristics can contain but are not limited to; language, culture, religion, folklore, symbols and music [Smith, 1998]. The social psychology of a Nation is thought to stem from the sense of a National pride and National identity, which manifests as a self-association with group accomplishments and sensation of encapsulation within a group, respectively [Hechter, 1987].

In the proceeding section, the above research will be related specifically to the field of music. For additional information on the complex and far-reaching subject of Nationalism, the reader is directed to the bibliography for further literature.

Nationalism in Music

As briefly mentioned in the above section, the notion of Nationalism can also be seen strongly in certain music. It is thought to have surfaced as a musical phenomenon in the mid Romantic era (1830-1850) and was heavily tied into the social Romantic Movement, which also held Nationalism as a central theme [Dahlhaus, 1989]. The key elements of Romanticism were expression and meaning, both which link to the Nationalistic psychology of pride and identity, as discussed earlier. This led to a focus on folklore and national languages, as well as an increase in the importance of local customs and traditions [Gellner, 2003]. It comes as no surprise to this author, that the main aspects of Nationalistic music stem from these same facets; folk tunes (or National musical traditions), programmatic use of folklore and National musical language/colours (instruments). It is very interesting to note though, that the colours used in some 'National' folk tunes are actually not characteristic to the country of origin [Newman, 1954]. Again, this relates back to the idea that Nationalism is a sense "based on the members' opinion of a 'common bond'" and sometimes not a genuine link.

Music of this time can be seen to be littered with examples of Nationalistic tendencies, such as Antonín Dvořák's 'New World Symphony', which is reminiscent of Bohemian traditional harmonies [Longyear, 1988], and 'The Five' or 'Mighty Handful', whose aim was one of constructing a specifically Russian style of art music [Grout, 1960]. It is believed the patriotic need to write such music came from a desire to break away from the German-Austrian 'Classical' musical techniques and create a musical style specific to a single Nation [Dahlhaus, 1989]. This again was rooted in the human aspiration to have a "sensation of encapsulation within a group".

In the next sections, the two pieces of *Finlandia* Op. 26 by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius and *Má Vlast* by Bohemian (Czech) composer Bedřich Smetana will be briefly discussed. These two pieces were chosen because they clearly show the approaches highlighted in the previous text.

Finlandia - The National Song of Finland

Written in 1899 for the Press Celebrations, a covert demonstration against escalating censorship from Russia, this piece became a symbol of Finnish nationalism [*Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2008*]. Sibelius composed this symphonic poem to accompany a series of tableaux illustrating episodes and stories in Finland's past [*Pekkilä, 1994*]. The music can be seen as very programmatic, the introduction begins with a brief but energetic theme in the brasses, responded by the woodwinds, representing the national struggle of the Finnish people. This is followed by a more joyful theme developed in the strings and pursued by the woodwinds playing the second subject. Finally the piece culminates with the stirring, patriotic finale, 'Finland awakes' [*Sibelius, Polygram Records, 1984*].

It is a beautiful example of Nationalistic music, evoking the feelings and emotions of the Finnish people at the time while referencing National folklore and history. It also went further, becoming Finnish folklore in its own right and the pure musical icon of Finland [*Lyle, 1927*].

Má Vlast – Bohemian Fatherland

Composed between 1874 and 1879, Má Vlast forms a set of six symphonic poems depicting aspects of the countryside, legends, or history of Bohemia (now known as Czech Republic). Smetana felt that "if we are gifted, it is our duty to work for the glory of our nation" and became known as one of his nation's leading composers, pianists, and conductors [*Apel, 1968*].

These six pieces incorporate many of the aspects reviewed in the earlier sections of this paper. Šárka acts as a programmatic portrayal of the ancient Czech legend about Maidens' War [*Beckerman, 1986*]. Vyšehrad describes the Bohemian royal court overlooking Prague, which had thrived in the eighth century under Queen Libuše [*Beckerman, 1986*]. While Vltava, which is regarded as the most famous work out of the six, contains a folk song adaptation, as well as many programmatic elements.

It is highly recommended the reader take the time to listen to the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra performing at the opening of the 1990 Prague Festival [*Smetana, Supraphon, 1998*]. This performance, signifying the end of Communist rule, conveys an intense emotion and touching symbolism that shows the patriotic effect and impact these compositions still have on the Czech people of today [*Gutmann, 2008*].

Conclusion

As touched on in the above sections, Nationalism is a social phenomenon that can only be perceived and hinted at, rather than a strict set of rules to follow. It is an 'imagined' human feeling or consciousness and therefore its representation within music is a very personal one, not limited to time or context. Consequently, the approach to representing Nationalities in musical terms, like the subject, must be an ambiguous and fluid one, open to changing public awareness and overall Nationalistic trends.

Such an example can be seen in the pieces *Finlandia* and *Má Vlast*, researched above. They introduced and changed their respective Nation's musical 'identity', giving the composer considering these Nationalities an equally modified set of compositional tools and musical terms.

Further to this, the target audience of which the composition is aimed at must be considered. For example, while Smetana's *Má Vlast* may conjure strong patriotic sentiment in its home of Bohemia (or the Czech Republic), it may leave more passive listeners (such as some film or television viewers, in the paradigm of screen music) guessing at the Nation portrayed.

It is easy to see from the above summary those approaching and illustrating different nationalities in musical terms have to choose carefully which National influences and stereotypes to employ. With the strongest guiding factor being the Nationalistic knowledge and social thought of the intended demographic.

Bibliography

- B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991)
- W. Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Boston, 1968)
- J. Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, 1982)
- M. Beckerman, "In Search of Czechness in Music", *19th-Century Music* (Berkeley, 1986), 61-73
- C. Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism* (Berkeley, 1989)
- E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (London, 1983)
- E. Gellner, "Nationalism, development and integration", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (Cambridge, 2003), 623 – 646
- D. Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York, 1960)
- P. Gutmann, Bedřich Smetana, *Má Vlast* [<http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics/vlast.html>] (Accessed November 30th 2008)
- R. Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Wisconsin, 1988)
- M. Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley, 1987)
- M. Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford, 2000)
- M. Longyear, *Nineteenth-Century Romanticism in Music* (New York, 1988)
- W. Lyle, "The "Nationalism" of Sibelius", *The Musical Quarterly* (Oxford, 1927), 617-629
- Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, *Finlandia by Jean Sibelius* [<http://virtual.finland.fi/netcomm/news/showarticle.asp?intNWSAID=26989>] (Accessed November 29th 2008)
- E. Newman, "National Frontiers in Music", *Tempo* (Cambridge, 1954), 27-29
- E. Pekkilä, "Nationalism, Regionalism, Leftism, and Individualism", *Ethnomusicology* (London, 1994), 405-408
- A. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (New York, 1998)
- F. Toye, "Music and Nationalism", *The Musical Times* (London, 1915), 96
- Unknown, "Nationalism in Music", *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* (London, 1887)
- E. Zuelow, *The Nationalism Project*, [<http://www.nationalismproject.org>] (Accessed November 26th 2008)

Discography

B. Smetana, *Má Vlast*, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Rafael Kubelik (Deutsche Grammophon Imports, 2008) CD B000024577

B. Smetana, *Má Vlast*, Orchestr Česká Filharmonie, Rafael Kubelik (Supraphon, 1998) CD B00000DFMX

B. Smetana, *Má Vlast*, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, James Levine (Deutsche Grammophon, 1992) CD B000001GEN

J. Sibelius, *Finlandia*, Berliner Philharmoniker, Herbert von Karajan (Polygram Records, 1984) CD B00000E2WH

J. Sibelius, *Finlandia*, Cleveland Orchestra, Yoel Levi (Telarc, 1990) CD B000003CT9

J. Sibelius, *Finlandia*, Philharmonia Orchestra of London, Paavo Berglund (EMI Classics, 2000) CD B00004TV9I

Various, *The Seraphim Guide to the Classics: Vol. 7: The Spirit of Nationalism*, Various (Seraphim, 1970) LP B001L117FO

Various, *Songs & Dances: Nationalism in Music*, Various (Sony, 1999) CD B00000J2QK