
Serena Hoernig
Undergraduate Student, Third Year (Major: Choral Music Education and Mathematics)
Christopher Newport University, Virginia, USA

In his book Orchestrating the Nation: The Nineteenth-Century American Symphonic Enterprise, Douglas W. Shadle investigates the evolution of America’s musical identity through the development of the American symphony. Drawing together the stories of many forgotten nineteenth-century American composers and gathering a wide range of critiques, press releases, and composer-media correspondence, Shadle seeks to unveil the nuances of American symphonic repertoire. Orchestrating the Nation’s narrow focus on the American symphony with specific examples of its progress is a unique contribution to the literature on the development of American music. Twelve chapters preceded by the Introduction, concluded by the Epilogue, and divided in half by an Interlude comprise the 330-page text; each of these chapters addresses either fundamental events involving the American symphony or specific composers whose symphonies and the reception thereof give insight into the fading of the symphony as a popular musical style in the United States.

Shadle opens the Introduction with questions that rose from a pre-concert lecture he gave a few years ago and, from a personal standpoint, expresses the importance of knowing about the American symphonic enterprise, claiming that the “gaping hole in our collective memory, not the music itself, is precisely what makes [the symphonic] repertoire relevant” (4). Of European origin, the newly transatlantic symphony underwent substantial fluctuations in public perception in nineteenth-century America; prevalent in American concerts, the European symphony grew in musical appreciation to mirror the status it held in Europe, thus putting it in high demand in both nations.
However, because the works of European composers such as Beethoven were praised as the pinnacle of symphonic composition, American composers seeking to forge a distinctly American musical style struggled to find orchestras to perform their works. Shadle juxtaposes the parallels and intersections of American and European, particularly German, music as a means to track the interactions of cosmopolitanism and nationalism in the American symphonic enterprise. Delving into the compositional styles, politics, and historical events of the time, Shadle aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how and why the symphony faded from the memory of America’s musical public.

Shadle tackles the extensive overview of the American symphonic enterprise by first listing over fifty nineteenth-century composers in the United States and then highlighting a select few whose “careers had the widest intersection with musical institutions, [such as the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra], that later defined the mainstream” (6). These select composers, including William Henry Fry and Antonín Dvořák, comprise the foundational and chronological timeline throughout into which Shadle weaves three main themes: America’s developing national musical identity, the effect of the German symphonic tradition on the American understanding of the symphony, and the development of American musical institutions. The combination of detailed biographical and historical narratives, score analyses, and thematic diagnoses provides a very specific lens through which Shadle traces the symphonic enterprise that is found nowhere else within literature on nineteenth-century American classical music.

The national musical identity of nineteenth-century America is a somewhat recurring theme throughout Shadle’s writing. Born from European colonization, cultural ties remained between the New World and Europe despite America’s newfound national independence; this in turn led to what Shadle brands America’s national identity crisis. Indeed, cosmopolitanism seemed to be the new identity of America at this time, not only across orchestral music but across a vast array of genres, each genre and its geographical origin reflecting cultures across the globe.1 Within America’s symphonic identity, therefore, Shadle introduces what musicologist Walter Frisch refers to as “the Beethoven problem,” the layers of which Shadle proceeds to dissect. In addition to the cosmopolitan sentiment accompanying America’s struggle to find a musical identity, the ideal Beethoven symphony was the standard against which American composers measured their works, creating a norm that was not only nearly impossible to meet, but also instilled a distinctly German identity in the symphonic enterprise. John Baron, another scholar of nineteenth-century American music, focuses on American concert life specifically in New Orleans. Noting that the Classic Music Society, founded in 1856 by Gustave Collignon concentrated “on the symphonies and overtures of Beethoven and Mendelssohn … Weber, Schubert, Haydn, Gluck, Rossini, Robert Schumann, and others… [aiming] to present the best classical music with as high caliber musicians as [could be assembled],” the concert life of nineteenth-century New Orleans is a prime example of the overwhelmingly German presentation of the

Shadle weaves this idea of the “Beethoven problem” throughout his narrative, broadening his scope to the American symphony as a whole, rather than focusing on one specific area.

Thus the symphonic enterprise in nineteenth-century America did not establish roots strong enough to maintain a healthy base from which an American musical identity could grow. Shadle continues to declare that, nonetheless, the fact that symphonies were being produced by American composers and performed by orchestras, speaks to their place in the development of the American musical identity. A key proponent in the advertisement of the symphony was nineteenth-century music critic John Sullivan Dwight, expressing his critiques of performances, announcing upcoming performances, and reviewing music via his weekly editions of Dwight’s Journal of Music. An avid admirer of Beethoven and German ideals, Dwight consistently characterized American music as not only a result of, but also as inherently inferior to German music. Subsequently, Dwight’s interactions with symphonic composers of nineteenth-century America were less than stellar. Shadle notes multiple disputes in which Dwight was involved, Dwight often arguing that “genius would make itself known through the clear preferences of paying audiences” (87).

Throughout Shadle’s narrative and emphasized by William Gibbons’ study of Anthony Philip Heinrich’s symphonies, however, it is apparent that many factors contributed to the popularity and continuance of any given symphonic work. In the first chapter of his text, Shadle follows the outcomes of Heinrich’s symphonic works, whose performances were often well accepted in Europe only to fall short of success in the United States; incorporating American folk melodies in many of his works, particularly his ornithological symphonies, pleased European audiences who “understood there to be a clear connection between the birds [represented in Heinrich’s symphonies] and the United States.” These same works did not succeed across the Atlantic, as Dwight disparaged Heinrich’s descriptive program music for failing to convey depth of meaning as Beethoven did without the need for extra-musical programming. Thus the patriotic notes of Heinrich’s works were not enough to secure a consistent audience, speaking to the third theme of Shadle’s proposed trifecta: how the landscape of the music industry permeates the American symphony’s development. Due to the praise of German music, the expenses of hiring musicians and securing venues, and “the desire for a folk-derived national style” (242), it was incredibly difficult for composers to find orchestras to perform their works since music industries such as the New York Philharmonic were motivated, as noted by Dwight, by ticket sales, and ticket sales often reflected the promotion of works by local and national critics.

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Shadle’s study of Anthony Philip Heinrich, William Henry Fry, George Frederick Bristow, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, John Knowles Paine, Ellsworth Phelps, and Antonín Dvořák is a testament to the genius behind the American symphony that fell out of memory due to a sequence of unfortunate events. Shadle describes the symphonic enterprise as “an endless winter in which early-blooming perennial flowers, anticipating warmth, broke through the soil only to find that the air was still too cold” (265). This carried over into the twentieth century, in which new and cosmopolitan music was valued over the “American Symphony,” which as an enterprise, according to Shadle, failed to launch.

Divided into two main sections—pre- and post-Civil War—Shadle creates a narrative that is detailed and holistic. Orchestrating the Nation is unique in not only formatting style, but more importantly in the focus that seeks to be simultaneously holistic and specific; most secondary and tertiary texts maintain a European perspective or a broader scope, which Shadle uses in conjunction with primary sources. In this regard, Shadle is successful in his goal of tracking the American symphony; however with such a wealth of information, it can be difficult to follow a steady trajectory without encountering some overlap. The language used is professional and appropriate for readers with an interest in learning about the American symphony with some background in music history, and it is a wonderful resource as it pioneers the focus on the symphonic enterprise in early American music.

For further reading:


