

## Nationalist Composers and Fiddle Music: A Reflection of Removal from Traditional Culture, with Specific Attention to Copland and Grieg

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The late Romantic period of classical music was characterized by a new enthusiasm for the inclusion of folk music in classical composition. Edvard Grieg and Aaron Copland are two composers who characterize this period, and both used traditional fiddle tunes from their respective countries in their Nationalist compositions. This essay explores the extent to which folk traditions were honored and exploited in each composer's music. The author concludes that while Grieg was more successful in authentically portraying the fiddle music of his nation, Copland's comparable work became a much more popular Nationalist symbol.

"The right peasant music is most perfect and varied in its forms. Its expressive power is amazing, and at the same time it is devoid of all sentimentality and superfluous ornaments. It is simple, sometimes primitive, but never silly"

-Bela Bartok

The second half of the nineteenth century saw dramatic political turbulence and an intense spirit of cultural pride and freedom. As European ethnic groups such as the Norwegians, the Poles and the Czechs fought for national independence, the need for cultural recognition spread to the arts. Consequently, the late Romantic period of classical music was characterized by a new enthusiasm for the inclusion of folk music in classical composition. Bela Bartok was one of the many Romantic composers who recognized the complexity of traditional music and its importance to a country's spirit during this time period. Besides Bartok, notable composers such as Jean Sibelius, Manuel de Falla, Aaron Copland and Edvard Grieg all incorporated folk melodies or motifs into their composition. Copland, of the United States and Grieg, of Norway, both hailed from countries in which folk traditions were profoundly influenced by fiddle music. In America, the fiddle has been an essential part of traditional music and the preferred instrument for square dances and barn dances since the country was colonized. In Norway, the Hardanger fiddle, a close relative of the violin, containing four or five extra "drone" strings as well as traditional ornate carving and inlay was the traditional solo instrument for Norwegian regional dances called "bygdedans" throughout the Western and Southern-central areas of Norway (Golber 1993). It is therefore not surprising that both Copland and Grieg wrote compositions that dealt explicitly with fiddle tunes. In fact, Copland's "Hoe-down" from *Rodeo* and Grieg's *Norwegian*

*Peasant Dances*, Op. 72 (Slatter), are both reinterpretations of whole fiddle tunes, based on single field recordings. The results of their work, however, show very different degrees of understanding in terms of their respective fiddle and dance traditions. While Copland was somewhat successful in melodically portraying one version of a single American fiddle tune through a work for full orchestra, Grieg's interpretation of multiple Norwegian fiddle tunes for solo piano reflects a more wholistic interpretation, and a more appropriate portrayal, of the Hardanger fiddle tradition and thus, a greater understanding of his country's folk music and cultural spirit.

Although both Copland and Grieg based their pieces on field recordings of fiddle tunes, the inspiration for doing so, as well as their method of acquisition and portrayal was very different. In 1942, Copland was contacted about writing music for a new ballet, choreographed by Agnes de Mille. Her piece was set in Texas circa 1900, and her instructions to Copland were very specific. She presented him with a "time-plot" which read, "Hoe-Down, 4 minutes...Pause and silence for about 4 counts...Dance begins on walk—hit a fiddle tune hard." (Wade 2000). With these no-nonsense directions, Copland set out to find an appropriate fiddle tune for the piece. He found what he was looking for in the Lomaxes' *Our Singing Country*. The volume, published in 1941 contained transcriptions of the Lomaxes' field work by commended musicologist Ruth Crawford Seeger. Seeger was particularly known for her attention to, and ability to notate, the particular version of a performer when transcribing field recordings. She found this to be an essential aspect of the tradition and believed that "the choice of every note involves an act of will" (Wade 2000). Her notation of "Bonaparte's

Retreat”, which Copland selected for use in the ballet, was of a recording done by Kentucky fiddler William Stepp in 1937. The incredibly detailed transcription of the recording (which still exists) can only be faulted by Crawford’s footnote that “the bowing...could not be determined with sufficient accuracy to allow its notation”(Wade 2000). And even in this detail, she can be commended for realizing the bowing’s importance to the sound of the recording.

Copland’s concern, however, was not with the specific techniques used by Stepp but rather with the basic melody transcribed by Seeger. He is quoted as saying “Give me a book of tunes, and I’ll immediately know what tune attracts me and what one doesn’t.” (Wade 2000) Copland’s disregard for the aural aspect of a tradition that had--for decades in the United States, and for hundreds of years before that in Europe--been passed from one generation to the next by ear rather than notation gives insight into the result of his work. It is nearly impossible to perfectly notate a type of music that has never been transferred in that way. Even Seeger, who attempted to write out every drone that was heard in Stepp’s open-tuning playing found it impossible to correctly dictate the bowings. Additionally, any transcription of a fiddle tune, no matter how well done, will lose some of the variation that goes into a traditional playing style. For example, while Seeger has notated the first line of Bonaparte’s Retreat to be repeated exactly, in Stepp’s actual recording he uses much less of the lower drone string on the second time through. This is not to say that the transcription is badly done but rather to point out that Copland, who believed that he could ascertain what he needed simply by looking at transcriptions, was really only concerned with one aspect of traditional American music, the bare-bones melodies.

In his exclusive focus on the melody, Copland showed a misunderstanding of the tradition he was trying to convey. American fiddle music, more so than many other fiddle and dance traditions including those of Norway, has embraced melodic variation, interpretive tempos and even variation in meter (in terms of adding extra beats or phrases to create “crooked” tunes). In her attention to the specific version of William Stepp, Ruth Crawford Seeger was respectful of this aspect of the tradition, understanding the importance of notating the specific version of the player, as there were sure to be many other, very

different variations out there. In fact, on further examination of Library of Congress recordings of “Bonaparte’s Retreat”, Stepp’s version is actually an anomaly in terms of its fast tempo, and contains melodic variance from the versions of two other well known fiddle players, Tommy Jarrell and Luther Strong, who were his contemporaries (Library of Congress Field Recordings 1937). Alan Jabbour, a well-known old time fiddler and employee of the Library of Congress wrote “‘Bonaparte’s Retreat’ is normally a stately march, but Stepp performed it as a lively hoe-down, an interpretation that remains unique among the many versions currently housed in the Library’s American Folklife Center.” (Jabbour 1999) Accounts from his family members confirm that Stepp’s version was original and unique to his personal playing style. Of the upbeat tempo, his granddaughter said “Now, Bill Stepp hit it at a dog race. I mean he moved along. He fiddled like he meant it. Now, Uncle Clay fiddled slow, but you could tell what he was playing all right. Just had an old style of playing. Never did change from it.” (Wade 2000) According to banjo-player and musicologist Stephen Wade, “The ringing overtones of repeated drone notes, the masterful dexterity of his phrasing, the introduction of triplets on the first beat, the long strings of notes, and graceful changes in bow direction” were all aspects unique to or particularly notable in Stepp’s version and playing style (Wade 2000).

With this in mind, Copland’s use of Stepp’s version of the tune, nearly note for note without credit to Stepp, is a bit unsettling. As can be heard at the beginning of many field recordings in the Library of Congress, it is traditional for fiddle players to credit the fiddle player from which they learned a particular version of a tune. Even if tunes are so old that their composer has been forgotten, the extent of variation and creativity that goes into producing a certain version of the tune is worthy of recognition. For example, at the beginning of Tommy Jarrell’s recording of “Bonaparte’s Retreat” he says “Here’s a tune I heard my wife’s uncle- Logan Lowe play...he got the fiddle and he tuned it like this [he then plucks the strings, tuned in D-A-D-D tuning] and he said ‘I’m gonna play old General Washington’s tune for ya’ this morning” (Library of Congress Field Recordings 1937). This statement of credit, tracing back what he knows of the history of this version of

the tune and the particular tuning, is part of the tradition. Jarrell felt it was important to credit the version of the tune before making a recording with his name on it. However, Copland, in composing for an audience far removed from traditional fiddle and dance culture, as was he, felt no need to credit Stepp for his version of “Bonaparte’s Retreat”. After all, he only saw the one transcription and considered the written melody to be all that he needed for his work.

Considering the purpose of his composition, a ballet which required him to ‘hit a fiddle tune, hard’, he chose his source very appropriately. But in terms of his work as a Nationalist composer in portraying American folk life, he was a bit off track. Rather than emulating a tradition, he created a work based on William Stepp’s fiddle playing. This is not to say that no original composition was at work in Copland’s “Hoe-Down”; The theme from Bonaparte’s Retreat is merely one section of the piece, and Copland orchestrates it in very interesting ways. He believed that in incorporating folk tunes “for an orchestral score, one must expand, contract, rearrange and superimpose the bare tunes themselves, giving them something of one’s own touch. That is what I tried to do.” (Wade 2000) With these goals, he was successful. The piece incorporates the tune, certainly expanding on it in terms of instrumentation and emphasizing certain accents with syncopated rhythmic backing, and still evokes the unique sound of Copland. But in terms of the use of traditional American folk music, the work is dominated by Bill Stepp’s melodic version and displays very little stylistic knowledge of the tradition. Alan Jabbour (1999) describes the piece as “a headlong, pell-mell dance piece following so closely the Seeger transcription of Stepp’s “Bonaparte” – virtually note for note – that it sounds like an orchestral violin section and xylophone trying to imitate master fiddler Bill Stepp.” One particularly well-worded assessment of the piece can be found in a blog post from fiddle-player Alistair Isaac (2008) which reads:

Stepp layers a frantic and ecstatic veneer onto the incessant flight, the chaotic running, of the underlying melodic structure. Yet Copland, in lifting the literal melody from Stepp's performance, lifts this ecstatic veneer without the underlying desperation. The monotony and rhythm of the march is absent from "Hoe-

Down" where the melody, Stepp's idiosyncratic frills and all, is put through the paces of orchestral variation. The lull and swell of dynamics and instrumentation here is not motivated by any particular thematic or aesthetic narrative, but rather exemplifies the standard moves of a large orchestral spectacle

In comparing Copland and Stepp’s versions it is apparent that this description is accurate. Copland takes an exact melody from a solo fiddle and orchestrates it fully to the point of over exaggeration, completely changing the sound and emotionality of the traditional tune into a slap-happy cookie cutter melody, and an eventual commercial soundtrack (“Beef, it’s what’s for Dinner!” 1992). In order to have accurately portrayed Stepp’s sound, Copland would have had to invent a new orchestral style to accommodate traditional fiddle playing sounds. As it is written, Copland essentially “tells” the audience, rather than “show” them, traditional music.

Copland’s work shows a lack of understanding of the truly unique aspects of his American folk culture. Through his use of a single transcription rather than a study of multiple recordings and his coincidental failure to recognize the fiddler from which his work was taken, he displays a disregard for many aspects of the fiddle and folk tradition, excepting, of course, the exact replication of a specific melodic idea, one which was not his own. The resulting work, “Hoe-Down” from *Rodeo*, is not an accurate reflection of folk influences on music, but rather a study on the potential of a fiddle tune melody as compositional motif in classical music.

More than fifty years before Copland was contacted about writing what would become *Rodeo*, an elderly fiddle player in Norway was looking to his country’s own nationalist composer, Edvard Grieg, for help in preserving Norwegian folk music. In 1988, Grieg received a letter from well-known Hardanger fiddle player Knut Dahle expressing his concern that the old dance music of Norway was going to be lost. “I...have carefully learned to play like the good old fiddlers...I have long pondered deeply whether [the old dance tunes] can...be played from [written] notes and not be buried with the artist...” he wrote in his first letter to Grieg (Benestad 1988). It is notable that in this case the desire for transcription was coming from a musician and master of the traditional art

rather than from an outsider who wished to study the music. Furthermore, Dahle's fear was that the "old style" of fiddle playing and the "old dances" would be lost to a generation that was experimenting with international influences and creating new styles fiddle music. As this would indicate, Hardanger fiddle music has less of an emphasis on variation than is found in the American tradition and, according to David Golber (1993) of the *Hardanger Association of America*, "this music has a certain strictness and seriousness that is more akin to "classical" music than to what we usually call "folk" or "pop." The music is handed down aurally, but with great emphasis on exact preservation." With this in mind, Grieg already had an advantage over Copland in his mission to integrate folk and classical music, simply because the fiddle tunes that he was working from were more translatable to classical music than were Copland's sources.

A pianist, Grieg sent his good friend and colleague, violinist Johan Halvorsen to make the transcriptions. From the beginning, both Grieg and Halvorsen showed tremendous respect towards the folk tradition and its incorporation into classical music. In his request for Halvorsen's aid, Grieg wrote "only a violinist with Norwegian emotional makeup... can accomplish the task at hand." (Benestad 1988) In addition to having a Norwegian "emotional makeup", Halvorsen was already familiar with the music of the Hardanger fiddle. In 1894 he had visited local fiddlers during his honeymoon in Hardanger to learn more about the style, and the following year he began to play the Hardanger himself (Dybsand 2009).

Upon receiving Halvorsen's transcriptions, Grieg was impressed, and approached his work transforming the seventeen fiddle tunes into piano pieces with caution and reverence. In a letter to Halvorsen, he wrote:

It is hard to believe that no one among us has taken an interest in the study of our national music when we have such rich sources in our folk music... At the moment it seems to me that it would be a sin to arrange the dance tunes for piano. But a sin I will probably commit sooner than later, It is too tempting... Would you like for me, at the proper time, to try to get Peters to publish both your work and mine? (Benestad 1988)

As it turned out, Grieg not only insisted on having Halvorsen's original transcription's published (with credit to Knut Dahle's playing) "because they were of considerable interest both artistically and scientifically", but he also included Norwegian legends in the preface of the work which, according to Knut Dahle, were associated with three of the tunes (Benestad 1988). The above quote, as well as Grieg's publication demands, show not only the extent to which Grieg understands the challenges of respectfully combining folk and traditional music, but also his desire to credit the musician and the transcriptions from which he was working through the side-by side publication of his composition with Halvorsen's credited field work. This drastic difference in attitude as compared to Copland is apparent in the outcome of a much more appropriate and artistically interesting work.

In Op. 72, *Peasant Dances*, Grieg shows an incredible sensitivity to the Hardanger tradition by preserving exactly what could be translated accurately to the piano and simultaneously concentrating his compositional innovation on those characteristics of the music for which piano actually offered more opportunity for traditional expression than the Hardanger fiddle would technically allow. For example, in *Skuldalsbrura (Skuldal's Bride)*, Grieg preserves almost exactly the Hardanger practice of a small motif being repeated and then gradually varied. In this tune, the first three bars introduce a motif on which the rest of the tune is based. Shorter "submotifs" lasting anywhere from one to three bars follow the introduction creating a unique rhythmic and melodic sensibility (Kleiberg 1996). Additionally the "ornamentation is well preserved... as are the rhythmic asymmetries and characteristic formal devices." According to musicologist Stale Kleiberg's (1996) study of the work, published in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, "What is radically innovative here is the reproduction of such daringly original material so closely." Furthermore, although Grieg does a wonderfully complete job of transferring the unique stylistic, melodic, and rhythmic characteristics of Hardanger fiddle tunes to piano, he does not limit himself to imitation in areas where the piano could more effectively convey the tonality through other means. An example of this is the way in which he incorporates drones. In *Knut Lurasen's*

*Halling Dance no. 2*, Halvorsen's transcription shows the melody played on the A string while the E string is droned. Grieg's version of the tune includes a repeated E, reflecting the original drone, but also includes another pedal point on D. Later in the piece, the D and E "drones" are dropped to G and A notes. These additional pedal points added by Grieg are all on notes that are traditional drone strings on the fiddle (Kleiberg 1996). Although it is impossible for these notes to be played simultaneously on the Hardanger fiddle, one could imagine that if it was possible, a Norwegian fiddle player would probably make use of these additional drone notes, which only add to the familiar dissonance and tonality of the tune. In fact, the Hardanger fiddle's additional underlying "drone" strings often make it possible to hear multiple ringing overtones that cannot be physically played. In Kleiberg's words "Grieg goes beyond the harmonic limitations of the Hardanger fiddle, but on the Hardanger fiddle's own terms."

Though Copland's "hoe-down" and Grieg's *Peasant Dances* were both directly derived from field recordings of fiddle tunes, and both meant to portray a national culture and tradition, the differences in method and understanding of the two composers produced very different results. While Copland's focus on solely the melodic aspect of the American fiddle tradition limits his work to a sort of imitative sound, the result of Grieg's respect and understanding of, as well as his willingness to study in depth all aspects of the Hardanger fiddle tradition, is a piece that truly portrays the spirit and culture of Norwegian traditional music.

On a final note, in comparing Copland and Grieg's work, it is important to recognize the advantages and disadvantages that each composer had in representing their respective country's folk music. First of all, Copland was instructed to portray a fiddle tune in his work, while Grieg was asked to preserve an entire tradition. The differing goals obviously could affect the extent to which each composer was concerned with reflecting their musical culture.

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Secondly, the very nature of the Hardanger fiddle tradition, with its emphasis on exact preservation as tunes were passed down, allowed for it to be more easily incorporated into classical music. With these differences in mind, the public assessment of the two pieces becomes even more interesting.

While both Grieg and Copland have been hailed as great Nationalist composers, treasured for their contributions to their country's culture, the popularity of *Rodeo* within the collection of Copland's works, and its indisputable place in the catalogues of "American" classical music, far exceeds the popularity of Grieg's *Peasant Dances* in comparison to Grieg's other works such as *Peer Gynt*. Kleiberg, who in his research compares *Peasant Dances* with Grieg's earlier works that incorporated folk music states that "Op 72. Is the work where Grieg takes folk music most seriously, but it was not this work which was to become the musical symbol of the Norwegian nation. On the contrary, practically everything by Grieg apart from this work has taken on this kind of national symbolic value." Contrastingly, an abstract on an article about Copland's *Rodeo* by Youngmi Ha (2009), professor of music composition at NYU reads:

The music of Aaron Copland (1900-1990) has long been recognized for its unique "American" sound and distinctive individuality, as well as its great influence on American music. Copland's increasingly conscious and literal American orientation becomes especially apparent in *Rodeo* (1942)

A comparison of Copland's *Rodeo* and Grieg's *Peasant Dances* thus gives not only insight on the methods and attitudes of Copland and Grieg, but also portrays the growing gap in society between a nationalist spirit and a true understanding of traditional culture.

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