

# Music, folklore, and nationalism (music appreciation)



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Through centuries, composers have looked to the folklore of their lands for inspiration. (Forney and Machlis 276). Often times, that search returned great results, and the world of music was enriched with masterpieces like Smetana's "Moldau" or Stravinsky's "The Firebird". Hungarian composer Bela Bartok, in one of his essays about music in his native country wrote: "The discovery of the values of folklore and folk music excites the national pride... Small nations, especially oppressed ones, find consolation in folklore treasures." (zti. hu)

Musical nationalism as a separate movement emerged in the mid-19th century. Most frequently the movement is linked to Russia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Scandinavian countries, and it is represented in the works of Smetana, Dvorak, Grieg, Sibelius, Glinka and The Five, including Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. (Harvard Dictionary of Music) For the most part, the movement coincided with political changes in Europe of that time and the birth of new nations.

Sometimes, unfortunately, national pride instigated by folklore and music that carries a note of nationalism, led nations on the wrong path. Richard Wagner, one of the greatest German composers, used folklore and history in his work a lot. Among his many admirers was Adolf Hitler. "Richard Wagner was Hitler's favorite composer. During World War I, it is reported, he carried Wagner's music from Tristan in his knapsack. Often Hitler had Wagner's music performed at party rallies and functions." (fcit. usf. edu) Hitler's admiration with Wagner was strengthened with composer's political views and anti-Semitic writings during his life.

When it comes to pointing at what element of music describes the best particular cultures, I believe it is the combination of factors. Folk melodies

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when quoted in classical music pieces have a strong effect. Some cultures rely heavily on specific instruments to express the tradition. Rhythm and harmony are important too. However, I believe that people feel most national pride when listening to folklore music if the music is strong, heroic and grandeur. It is not a coincidence that most national anthems are written in a way that appeals to feelings of belonging and unity. It is not a surprise that Nazi Germany adopted Wagner and his heroic and deeply Teutonic music. Folklore is not limited by boundaries between countries and nations. It travels along with people when they migrate. In that regard, United States, are a great example of how folklore have transcended over thousands of miles and still was practiced in a new land. America is a melting pot indeed, with all the different cultures, musical influences and folkloric treasures. Irish, Italian, Polish, Greek, all these cultures brought a piece of their music here, and enriched in that way, new, American culture. In my family I have ancestors of Irish, German and Welsh origins, and they were upon arriving to America, for years using music from their homelands in family and social gatherings.

Each culture relies on its folklore, not only for musical and artistic expression, but for the system of very core values. Folktales and songs are taught to children from their earliest days, thus instilling in them respect and love, that will, then, be transferred to the next generation, and the next, and the next. As such folk traditions are easily transferable into music and, therefore, used by composers everywhere. As such, also, musical traditions serve as guarantors that identities of nations will continue to exist.

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