Class 3 : Places in Music

A. Here, there, when, where?

1. Class title 1 (Staffa and Somserset)

Today we'll continue our escapes, going now to different parts of the world. But we'll find, I think, that even to play a musical travelogue is not so simple a proposition. So let me start by raising some questions that do not have clear answers. As you watch the short title video, I want you to ask: what kind of music is this, and how does it fit into its setting?

2. Section title A (Fela Sowande: *Akinla*)

Your handout will not be very helpful here. I deliberately did not include the composers or titles of the first few pieces played because I wanted your unprompted reactions; I'll put out a full version after class. So what was that music? Classical or popular? European, American, or something else? It is in fact a popular Nigerian song, used by composer **Fela Sowande** (1905–87) as the finale of his *African Suite* (1945), further arranged for Piano Quintet—a classic medium of European chamber music—played in a London church by a group of expatriate South African musicians calling themseves the Ubuntu Ensemble—*ubuntu* being a Bantu term meaning connection with others. Hence this group of apparently mostly White musicians are playing to preach the gospel of racial tolerance. I said it was complicated, but I love the cultural disconnect between that Anglican Church and the African music.

3. The Estonian conductor Paavo Järvi

I am going to play you three versions of a somewhat well-known piece that describes a certain region of the world. First, the first 2 minutes as played by the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by this man, **Paavo Järvi**. Then the same 2 minutes, though with a different conductor, combined with images in a video I happened to find online, then the whole 4-minute work with different images in yet another video. I think you'll find that the images tend to influence the way you hear the piece in each case. But my questions remain the same in each case: Is the composer depicting his *immediate* surroundings? And if not, does his description involve a shift in space, time, or both? For example, if I were to show you a depiction of **Columbia today**, it would be one thing; if I were to show you a picture of the hills of **Pennsylvania**, it would be something else; and if my picture represented the **Battle of Gettysburg**, it would be something else again. [By the way, if you actually *know* this piece, do not answer!] Anyway, here's the music; listen especially to how it begins.

4. Sibelius: *Intermezzo* from the *Karelia Suite*, Munich Symphony Orchestra

Did you hear how that opened? It seems like the composer is conjuring something out of the distance, but the question is whether this is literal distance, or distance in time?

5. Sibelius: *Intermezzo* from the *Karelia Suite*, landscape video

So which is it, distance or time? The images here would suggest geographical distance, some remote part of a beautiful country with lakes and forests in the North somewhere. Now try again:

6. Sibelius: *Intermezzo* from the *Karelia Suite*, castle video
7. Two views of Karelia

And which is it now? The work is the *Intermezzo* from the *Karelia Suite* (1893) by Finnish composer **Jean Sibelius** (1865–1957); **Karelia** is a remote region in the northeast of Finland, straddling the border with Russia. If you saw the first version of my syllabus, you would remember that I originally programmed this for the second class, on escapes in **time**. For it seems clear that that march tune is evoking a past age of heroism, as represented by the castles in the last video; the music was originally written for an historical play. But I did not have time for it last week, and it occurred to me that it might equally well be taken as describing Karelia the **place**. For many of the pieces I shall play today, we shall find that place and time cannot easily be separated; geographical escapes they may be, but most of them also represent the place at some distant historical time.

B. From Eastern Lands

8. Section title B (Bartok: *Romanian Folk Dances*)

The fact that this was played by the *Norwegian* Chamber Orchestra is an oddity, but irrelevant. The music comes from the opposite corner of Europe: **Romania**. It is the last of a series of *Romanian Folk Dances* collected by Hungarian composer **Béla Bartók** (1881–1945). All the music I shall play in the rest of this hour comes from Eastern Europe. Indeed, you might say that picture-postcard music is virtually an Eastern European invention, as composers from the hitherto-neglected fringes in search of recognition turned to the folk music—and increasingly the landcapes—of their own countries.

9. Chopin and Liszt

Western European interest in the music of Eastern Europe really began with the arrival of these two *émigrés* in Paris in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, the Hungarian **Ferencz (Franz) Liszt** (1811–86) in the twenties and the Pole **Fryderyk Chopin** (1810–49) in 1831. Both were piano virtuosos; both were strikingly handsome, as you see; and Chopin at least was fleeing the collapse of his native land. So *salon* audiences were eager to hear as it were the musical autobiographies of each. Chopin was shyer, and more of an absolute composer, so he did not splash his Polish heritage around. But Liszt, who was a showoff by nature, was keen to oblige, writing for instance a series of *Hungarian Rhapsodies,* albeit later in his career. These were actually very close to actual Hungarian musical tradition, especially the grand gestures of the free rhapsodic slower music alternating with fast dance rhythms; much of our ideas of Hungarian music come because we have heard Liszt. So hearing them ought to take us at once on a flight of the imagination to Budapest. Only it doesn't—partly because relatively few of us have a clear

idea of Hungary, but mainly because these are so thoroughly virtuoso pieces that it is impossible to think of anything other than the technical skill of the player. As you will hear with **Valentina Lisitsa** playing the second half of the famous *Hungarian Rhapsody #2*. Although I have only time for the fast section, note the return of slow rhapsodic music near the end; this is the true Hungarian style.

10. Liszt: *Hungarian Rhapsody #2*, second part
11. Leoš Janáček (1854–1928)

A lot of these musical escapes only work if we have some other information to give it context. Musical description can sometimes operate in a generic sense—we'd recognize a storm at sea or a babbling brook—but it is hard to be more specific in music alone. Let's try a test. I'm going to play a 3½-minute piece—actually his final composition, from 1928—by an Eastern European composer who has become a favorite of mine in recent years: **Leoš Janáček** (1854–1928). It is descriptive, but I won't say of what. I'll put a number of postcards from roughly the same date on the screen, showing each twice. One of them fits the title, which I'll tell you when this is all over; can you guess which? It doesn't matter if you can't.

12. Janáček: *Danube,* first movement

Let's vote on that: A, B, C, or D? Actually it is C; the piece is called ***Danube***. But here's the point: I don't see how you could have known. Perhaps we can rule out the city with the streetcars, but all the others seem equally likely.

13. Brechler: *The Vltava*

It happens that there is another musical depiction of an Eastern European river that is a great deal more precise. This is *The Moldau,* or in Czech the **Vltava**, the second part of the six-movement set of tone-poems by **Bedrich Smetana** (1824–84) called *Ma Vlast,* or "My Native Land." He described his intent in a program note, which you see here; the different sections are clearly marked in the score; I'll play you the first four of them. There are a number of videos out there, but I thought it would be more helpful to show a single still with each of the sections. In particular I want you to think how specific or generic each section of the music is: is it descriptive in a general way, and is there anything to think of it as describing this particular river in Bohemia?

14. Smetana: *Vltava*, opening

I hope you will have seen that while some of the sections—the opening especially—do indeed paint watery pictures in a general way, it is not until we get to the wedding celebration that we can pin it down specifically to a *Czech* river. And we can only do that if we have heard dances like this before, for example in **Dvorak's** *Slavonic Dances* or the opening of Smetana's own *Bartered Bride.* Still, we generally know the title of what we are going to hear before we hear it, so our imagination has a goal.

15. Alexander Borodin

Later-nineteeth-century Russian composers spent even more time exploring the traditions of their own land; they were emerging from over 100 years of being a wholly-owned subsidiary of Western European culture; until at least mid-century, the language of the upper classes was French. But if they looked

abroad, it was generally to the east. The last two works I shall play before we break are by this man, **Alexander Borodin** (1833–87). His day job was as a Professor of Chemistry, but the compositions he managed in his spare time have a unique flavor, much of which was due to his exraordinary gift for melody. So much so that in 1953 **Charles Lederer** and **Luther Davis** put together a musical, *Kismet*, that was based almost entirely on Borodin's themes. Here is a song that I imagine you all know:

16. Borodin (more or less): *Kismet,* "Stranger in Paradise"

Kismet was billed as "An Arabian Night," and Borodin's music gives a touch of Middle Eastern exoticism. Except that Borodin himself was looking still further East. The theme you have just heard comes from Borodin's opera ***Prince Igor***, about a twelfth-century Russian prince fighting to save his country against the Polovtsians from Asia. He gets captured, but the Polovtsian Khan treats him like an equal, and his daughter falls in love with him. Here are three of the *Polovtsian Dances* that the Khan puts on to entertain his guest. The subtitles are in French, but so what? The first dance features slave women singing of their homeland; the other two are praise to the Khan. This is Borodin taking inspiration from non-Russia sources to recreate a wild and fascinating alien culture.

17. Borodin: *Prince Igor,* Polovtsian Dances (Paris)

Borodin set the two cultures side by side in his most famous tone poem, ***In the Steppes of Central Asia***. He explains the concept of a caravan of horses and camels slowly crossing the vast steppes. The music begins with a theme he describes as Russian. Then the Asian one is heard against it. The two combine in a climax before the Asian music dies away, and only the Russian theme is heard. I llke this video because it doesn't bother to reenact the story, so much as create the atmosphere in which the encounter of the two cultures can take place in our minds.

18. Borodin: *In the Steppes of Central Asia*
19. Class title 2

C. North, West, and back again ast

20. Section title C (Posters of Scotland)
21. Map title 1: Scotland

Scottish **folk music**; I want you to get it into your head, since the use of folk music, or a recognizable folk style, will be a major topic of the hour. Plus everything will be connected in some way with an English-speaking country. We will have Brits in Britain and Americans in America—but also a German in Scotland, a Czech in New York, and an American in Paris. Most of it will be concerned with going somewhere and sending a postcard—the physical act of travel itself, and the musical impressions left for posterity. But towards the end we will return to the theme with which we began: what happens when a musical portrait is not merely of a place but also of a vanishing time.

22. Felix Mendelssohn in Scotland, 1829

In 1829, the German composer **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809–47) visited Scotland. At least two works derive from this trip: the *Hebrides Overture* (also called *Fingal's Cave*), which he finished the next year, and the so-called, *Scottish Symphony,* his third, whose themes he sketched while actually in Scotland, but did not complete until 1842. *The Hebrides* was inspired by the 45-minute boat trip to the volcanic island of **Staffa**; it was intended from the beginning as a musical postcard. It is generically descriptive of ocean expanses and surging seas, but there are no references to actual Scottish music. The trip is notoriously rough; I made this video, based on a painting by **JMW Turner** (1775–1851) a year later, when I assumed that Mendelssohn like Turner was beaten back by the sea, but in fact he was able to land; the piece as a whole is rather more placid than this little excerpt might suggest.

23. Mendelssohn/Turner: *Fingal's Cave,* excerpt
24. Ruins of Holyrood Chapel

Mendelssohn jotted down some themes for the *Scotch Symphony* when he saw the ruins of the old chapel **of Holyrood Palace**, where **Mary Queen of Scots** and many other monarchs had been crowned. But by the time he finished it 13 years later, those themes had been develeoped into an abstract work, a symphony; indeed he never called it "Scottish." All the same, there are several places that do reflect Scottish folk music, nowhere more than in the Scherzo, which has all the charactristics you heard in the folk songs: a fast-moving dance, pentatonic scales, and those characteristic rhythms. The performance is by the radio orchestra in **Frankfurt**, conducted by **Andrés Orozco-Estrada**.

25. Mendelssohn: *Symphony #3,* scherzo

26. Map title 2: America

The Czech composer I mentioned was **Antonin Dvorak** (1841–1904), who went to New York City in 1885. But this was not quite like Mendelssohn visiting Scotland. Dvorak had been invited to be the Director of a brand-new Conservatory, and he saw it as part of his duty to help America forge a music of her own, not just imitating European models. So for his Ninth Symphony, *From the New World,* he sought American sources of inspiration. Two in particular: what he would have called **Indian** and **Negro** music—but with mixed results.

27. Dvorak and *Hiawatha*

For example, he learned about Native American culture mainly second-hand by reading *Hiawatha* by **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (1807–82). He said it inspired his scherzo, but the vigorus rhythms have more to do with the poet than the native tribes themselves.

28. Dvorak: *New World Symphony,* scherzo (fragment)
29. Dvorak and Burleigh

On the other hand, he did allow himself to influenced by Spirituals sung him by one of his students, **Harry T. Burleigh**. Dvorak did not quote Burleigh exactly, but imitated his style, for example giving the main theme of the slow movement to the *cor anglais*, which most closely resembled Burleigh's voice.

30. Dvorak: *New World Symphony*, largo (opening)
31. Copland and *Billy the Kid*

So Dvorak didn't use any American folk songs; he just wrote tunes that sounded as though they might be. But with **Aaron Copland** (1900–90), it was a different story. When impresario **Lincoln Kirstein** asked for ballet about **Billy the Kid** in 1939, this young man from Brooklyn had problems. What did he know of the Wild West, let alone the Wild West in the 1870s? So he researched cowboy songs from the period, and incoporated many of them into his music. Here are three short examples of songs he used; I have taken them from a post that I'll put on the web.

32. Folk songs used in *Billy the Kid*

I think even when it was new, the general effect of the score would have been that you have heard it somewhere before. But Copland did not expect his audience to recognize the songs; indeed he changed most of them around. They were simply his way of getting into the material. For some reason, almost all the performances on YouTube are with young people's orchestras. Here is one by a group called **YSO2**, which I think is a national organization performing in Carnegie Hall. I'll give you two sections: *Street in a Frontier Town*, and *Mexican Fiesta*, which ends in a premonition of death. Listen for traces of the songs.

33. Copland: *Billy the Kid*, excerpt

34. Map title 3: Transatlantic

Other than the African piece I played at the very beginning, that was the most recent work in today's playlist. I am now going back in time to earlier in the century, and back across the Atlantic to Europe. This class on Musical Escapes could actually have included a large section on the means of escape itself: trains, cars, boats, and planes. But for now, mainly to lighten the tone, let's make do with one: the boat in *Anything Goes* by **Cole Porter** (1893–1964) setting out for Europe. It is a long scene, as it has to introduce most of the characters, so I have cut from near the beginning to the end.

35. Gershwin and Porter at Sea

Another popular American composer who made the trip across the Atlantic was **George Gershwin** (1898–1937). Twice actually: once in 1926 and again in 1928. On the latter visit, he wrote *An American in Paris.* This is travel-postcard-music *par excellence*. Gershwin does not use any folk music, but he does quote a can-can by **Offenbach** rather conspicuouly in the trombones. And he is absolutely authentic in capturing Parisian traffic noises, even down to buying a set of taxi-horns that he incorporated into the score. But the heart of the work is not French at all, but American blues music that had reached Europe before him. In this performance by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony conducted by **Giedrė Šlekytė**, I have made a 5-minute cut after the opening to the start of the blues section.

36. Gershwin: *An American in Paris*, opening and blues

37. Map title 4: England
38. Holst and Vaughan Williams

Folk song played an important part in the revival of English music at the start of the Twentieth Century. Following in the steps of Ethnomusicologists like **Cecil Sharp**, who traveled the country transcribing and later recording traditional folk songs before they disappeared from living memory, young composers like **Ralph Vaughan-Williams** (1872–1958) and **Gustav Holst** (1874–1934) begun doing similar research of their own and incoportating their findings into actual compositions. It was hardly surprising that the richest trove of lesser-known songs came from rural counties far from London, such as Somerset in the South-West. Both composers wrote pieces with "Somerset" in the title: *Folk Songs from Somerset* is the title of a movement in Vaughan-Williams' *English Folk Song Suite* (1923), and Holst wrote a 1907 orchestral work called *A Somerset Rhapsody.* Both composers made use of a song transcribed by Sharp, *High Germany.* It is one of my favorites, so I have used it in other contexts too. For now, though, I want you to hear one verse of the song, then compare a short fragment of Vaughan-Williams' treatment of it, and a rather longer one from Holst's *Somerset Rhapsody.* Ideally, you would listen with your eyes closed, but I know you won't, so I am showing both with landscape images: travelogue clips I found onlint for Vaughan-Williams, and some old postcards that I dug up for Holst. But be aware that the choice of these images will inevitably affect how you hear the music. All the same, try.

39. High Germany
40. Vaughan-Williams: *Folk Songs from Somerset*, opening
41. Holst: *Somerset Rhapsody*, excerpt
42. — stills from the above

What did you think? I was intending us to go back to the same discussion as with Sibelius' *Karelia Suite* earlier. **Vaughan-Williams'** music is in-your-face, simply the two folksongs strung together. Without the title, without the pictures, there would be nothing to make you think particularly of Somerset, or indeed of any landscape. The composer could be a lot more subtle, though in this case he chose not to be. But **Holst** gives his themes an orchestral development; they emerge from and return to a texture that is all of a piece, just not here-and-now. None of these songs appear in the sort of song-books you would buy for community singing. They are things that needed to be sought out from old singers in forgotten villages before they sang no more. If anyone knows them now it is because these composers preserved them. So quite apart from being about a place, **Holst's tone-poem is about time**. Not so much as postcard as a **pot-pourri**.

43. Housman, Butterworth, and *A Shropshire Lad*

My last composer, **George Butterworth** (1885–1916, *bottom picture*) is rather different. He too wrote a tone-poem about a Western county of England, *A Shropshire Lad* (1913). Its musical language is very similar to Holst, but he didn't use folk songs. Instead, he developed the melodies of his own setting of the then very popular poetry collection *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) by Cambridge classics professor **AE Housman** (1859–1936). His poems describe rural life in Shropshire, but they have a persistently elegaic tone. Listen to this one, "Is my team ploughing?" It is a conversation between a young man who has died and his friend who is still alive. The reader is **Peter Brown**.

44. Housman: “Is my team ploughing?”
45. Two quotations from Housman

Housman was writing of death from natural causes; life-expectancy was not very high among rural folk. But he lived through the **First World War**, where “the lads that die in their glory” became a terrifying reality. And among the dead was George Butterworth, hailed as “the most promising young composer of his generation,” killed by a sniper on the Somme in 1916. So although *A Shropshire Lad* was intended simply as a tone-poem about a place, the elegaic tone of Housman’s verse and the composer’s early death soon turned it into **a lament for a lost generation** and a never-recaptured time. There are several videos online with pictures of Shropshire; I will start with a few minutes of one of them, then shift to the end of another that makes the WW1 connection explicit. Sorry to end on a downer!

46. Butterworth: *A Shropshire Lad,* beginning and ending
47. Class title 3 (Evening in the West)