

Musical Escapes



3. Places in Music

November 11, 2025

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MUSICAL LANDSCAPE PAINTING BECAME A STOCK-IN-TRADE OF LATER ROMANTIC COMPOSERS. Many depicted the lands in which they lived: think of Smetana in Bohemia or Sibelius in Finland. Others sent musical dispatches home from other places: Mendelssohn from Scotland, Dvorak from America, Gershwin from Paris.

But music alone is seldom sufficient to tie a work to a specific place; it needs a title, or some other clue that will point listeners elsewhere. Often this is a reference to the folk music or dance of another region. This was how Copland got away from his native Brooklyn and into the Wild West world of *Billy the Kid*. It was how English composers of the early 20th century such as Holst and Vaughan Williams found the key to revitalizing English music as a living force. But since many of the traditional folk songs that they unearthed would be lost when the last generation that knew them passed away, their portrayal of contemporary England was also a memorial to a life that was quickly slipping into the past.

Unless specifically marked “complete,” all the examples are excerpts. *rb.*

A. Here, there, when. where?

A series of pieces from other places, offered to provoke discussion about the depiction of location and time. While many of you will know them, I’m keeping a few anonymous for those that don’t.

Fela Sowande: *Akinla*, from *Africa Suite*, arranged for piano quintet (Ubuntu Ensemble, London)

Sibelius: *Intermezzo* from the *Karelia Suite* (Munich PO, Paavo Järvi; + two videos)

B. From Eastern lands

Romantic composers from Eastern Europe, looking to create a national music of their own, turned to the forests, rivers, and dances of their own countries. Russian composers did much the same—but if they really wanted their imagination to flow, they often looked still farther East.

Bartok: *Romanian Folk Dances* (1917; Norwegian Chamber Orch.)

Liszt: *Hungarian Rhapsody #2* (1851), allegro (Valentina Lisitsa)

Janacek: *The Danube* (1928), first movement

Smetana: *Ma Vlast* (my Homeland): *Vltava* (the Moldau, 1875)

After Borodin: *Kismet* (1953); “Stranger in Paradise”

Borodin: *Prince Igor: Polovtsian Dances* (1880s; Paris Opera)

Borodin: *In the Steppes of Central Asia* (1880), complete, video

C. North, West, and back again East

Everything in this hour will be connected 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 writing a musical postcard. But towards the end, we will return to the theme with which we began: what happens when the musical portrayal is not merely of a place but also of a vanishing time.

1. SCOTLAND:

Mendelssohn: *Hebrides Overture*, video excerpt with JMW Turner’s *Fingal’s Cave* (both 1830)

Mendelssohn: *Symphony #3 (Scottish, 1842)*, *Scherzo* (Frankfurt Radio Orch; Andres Orozco-Estrada)

2. AMERICA:

Dvorak: *Symphony #9 (From the New World, 1896)*, 2 excerpts (Frankfurt Radio Orch.; Andres Orozco-Estrada)

Copland: *Billy the Kid* (1939), 2 mvts (NYO2, Giancarlo Guerrero)

3. TRANSATLANTIC:

Cole Porter: *Anything Goes* (1934), “There’s no cure like travel” (Barbican Theatre, London, 2021)

Gershwin: *An American in Paris* (1930), excerpts (Frankfurt Radio Orch; Giedrė Šlekytė)

4. ENGLAND:

Vaughan-Williams: *English Folk Song Suite* (1923): 1, *Folk Songs from Somerset*, video excerpt

Holst: *Somerset Rhapsody* (1907), RB video excerpt

Housman: *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), “Is my team ploughing?” (read by Peter Brown)

Butterworth: *Rhapsody: a Shropshire Lad* (1913), two linked videos

Béla **Bartók** (1881–1945, *Hungarian composer*), Alexander **Borodin** (1833–87, *Russian composer*), George **Butterworth** (1885–1916, *English composer*), Aaron **Copland** (1900–90, *American composer*), Antonin **Dvorak** (1841–1904, *Czech composer*), George **Gershwin** (1898–1937, *American composer*), Gustav **Holst** (1874–1934, *English composer*), AE (Alfred Edward) **Housman** (1859–1936, *English poet and scholar*), Leos **Janacek** (1854–1928, *Czech composer*), Ferencz (Franz) **Liszt** (1811–86, *Hungarian composer*), Felix **Mendelssohn** (1809–47, *German composer*), Cole **Porter** (1893–1964, *American composer and lyricist*), Jean **Sibelius** (1865–1957, *Finnish composer*), Bedrich **Smetana** (1824–84, *Czech composer*), Fela **Sowande** (1905–87, *Nigerian composer*), Ralph **Vaughan-Williams** (1872–1958, *English composer*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/MusicalEscapes
I will always respond to mail at rogerbrunyate@gmail.com

Want Still More?

Check out the above website a few hours after class. I have added some further thoughts I have been pondering since I wrote it, some material on Copland’s use of cowboy songs, and a couple of additional clips to fill out context.