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Douglas W. Shadle, *Orchestrating the Nation: The Nineteenth-Century American Symphonic Enterprise*

New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, 344 p.

Kristen M. Turner



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- 1 Music by nineteenth-century American art music composers has long been a sadly neglected area of musicological study with only a few scholars, such as Douglas Bomberger and Nicholas Tawa, devoting their careers to the subject. Happily, a new generation of musicologists have entered the field recently, and Douglas W. Shadle's monograph *Orchestrating the Nation: The Nineteenth-Century American Symphonic Enterprise* is a major contribution to the scholarship of this time period. Taking as his subject a body of music that even late-nineteenth-century American critics refused to acknowledge, Shadle unearths, analyzes, and advocates for a repertoire that has been erased almost completely from the historical and performance record. Indeed, the manner of that forgetting is at the heart of this book as his topic is "the very processes through which listeners confer value upon composers, pieces of music, and the act of composition itself." (p. 3)
- 2 Shadle begins *Orchestrating the Nation* by noting that over fifty American composers wrote symphonies during the nineteenth century, although few of those compositions received more than one or two performances and none have remained in the symphonic repertoire. Throughout the book, he follows three intertwined threads of inquiry, all of which seem to be prompted by the concerns of critics, musicians, and audiences at the

time. First, Shadle investigates the role of transnational musical exchange between Europe and the United States in creating both American musical culture and the canon of symphonic music. Second, he explains the process by which American musical institutions suppressed American music. And, finally, he provides an analysis of the reception of these symphonies by critics and other gatekeepers; a reception that was grounded in competing ideologies of musical nationalism and universalism. Along the way, the author debunks or nuances some of the most common narratives in musicological historiography on American music.

- 3 Taking a chronological approach, Shadle divides the book in half. The first half focuses on antebellum America and the development of cultural institutions primarily in the large, northeastern cities of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. The second part centers on the last half of the century during which these institutions matured, and authors with more varied and cohesive ideologies entered the critical discourse about music and art. Each chapter circles around one main idea with one or two composers serving as the exemplars. While the names of some of the later composers (particularly Amy Beach and Louis Moreau Gottschalk) might be familiar, many of the artists Shadle discusses (such as Ellsworth C. Phelps or Anthony Philip Heinrich) have been virtually forgotten.
- 4 Composers and audiences continually complained that American musicians simply would not play American pieces, while critics and conductors countered that there was no American music worthy of performance. John Sullivan Dwight, one of the most influential American music critics of the epoch, spoke for many when he insisted that great works of art would be recognized as such no matter the kind of support they did or did not receive. Shadle seems to have taken as one of his challenges proving this assertion wrong. He demonstrates that American composers were rejected and their works buried under a mountain of European music. At the beginning of the century, American orchestras were dominated by German-born and trained musicians, who sometimes openly mocked the idea that an American piece could compare to the quality of the German symphonic repertoire. American critics, influenced by the stance taken by most European writers, argued that German music held universal appeal and could be the basis for musical and cultural uplift in the United States. Tensions between German immigrants and American citizens, which already dominated the political landscape, spilled over into musical programming and criticism. In addition, American musical institutions, such as the New York Philharmonic, were still developing. Thus, orchestras from Europe, particularly Germany, performed much of the symphonic music heard in American cities. Later in the century, amid a growing call for nationalist music, American authors were strongly influenced by Wagner's ideas of German musical supremacy and an almost spiritual reverence for art music. Writers constructed an ever-moving critical framework that could be manipulated to lift up even mediocre European compositions—while dismissing American ones. Critics condemned American symphonic music for being too derivative (and thus not American enough), for sullyng art music with influences from American popular music, for being too programmatic and descriptive, or for not being descriptive enough. There was always a reason that American compositions did not measure up to their European counterparts.
- 5 It would have been easy for Shadle to content himself with the trenchant cultural and social observations he makes, but he does not take that route. Instead, the heart of each chapter is occupied by compelling musical analyses of important pieces that Shadle uses as case studies to illustrate his main arguments. The author balances contemporary

assessments with historical interpretation, revealing his deep knowledge of European Romantic music as well as American musical, cultural, and political history. Most importantly, Shadle analyzes the symphonies within the context of the music that was important at the time of composition. Rather than focusing just on the music of Beethoven, Brahms, or Liszt, he brings in composers such as Joachim Raff and Louis Spohr who were widely played and known at the time. Therefore, Shadle gives these symphonies the kind of deep critical reading that nineteenth-century American authors were unwilling and even incapable of writing.

- 6 Shadle takes on two cherished myths in musicological literature in the last half of the book. The first is the legend that Theodore Thomas, arguably the most significant conductor in the United States, was an ardent supporter of American music. Shadle shows that while Thomas programmed American works, he rarely gave them a second performance, allowed other conductors to lead his orchestra during concerts of American music even for world premieres, and often turned down American compositions. For example, Thomas bypassed American composers to pay Richard Wagner \$5,000 for the “American Centennial Overture” to celebrate the nation’s anniversary, and then proceeded to play the potboiler twenty times in a year. Shadle’s observations simply confirm the complaints of musicians and critics at the time—complaints that were lost to history since they were ignored by Thomas’s wife in her memoir and downplayed by his biographer.
- 7 The myth that Antonin Dvorák led the way to an American nationalist style is the other narrative that Shadle elegantly disproves. The famous Czech composer arrived in New York in 1892, lured by Jeanette Thurber’s offer of a large salary to lead the National Conservatory. The musical establishment generally embraced Dvorák’s idea that composers could achieve an American musical style by incorporating tunes reminiscent of African American or Native American music as exemplified in his Symphony No. 9, *From the New World*. Dvorak was far from being the first person to suggest and implement this strategy, however. Shadle demonstrates that American composers and critics had been preoccupied with establishing a national style since the early nineteenth century. Indeed, several composers had written symphonies using Dvorak’s approach long before his arrival in New York. Yet, late nineteenth-century critics acted as if these pieces did not exist, and, in fact, they had been so thoroughly erased, that Shadle believes many writers did not even know the works had been composed.
- 8 The companion website to *Orchestrating the Nation* hosts audio files for the musical examples in each chapter when there is a recording available. Sometimes only a few seconds long, these clips serve to spark the curiosity of readers who probably have never heard any of the pieces Shadle analyzes, as well as adds a sonic layer to the musical notation in the book. It is a shame, but also proves his point, that many compositions have no aural examples.
- 9 The scope of the book, despite its long chronological reach, remains admirably focused. There are many strands that Shadle leaves largely unexplored that invite further scholarly inquiry. How did the reception of opera, another popular European art form in America, play into the responses to symphonic music? Shadle gives some clues but does not elaborate. He offers tantalizing evidence of highly gendered language in nineteenth-century reviews, but does little more than note its existence. Although there is some biographical information on the composers, Shadle leaves it to others to delve deeply into their lives. The list of American symphonists in the monograph’s introduction makes

clear that there are more composers and music still to be examined. This is not meant to be a capstone book with such a kaleidoscopic view of the subject that it all but closes down other research; rather it is a study that opens up the field. Shadle provides the kind of expansive coverage that gives other scholars a solid base of facts and analyses, but hints at lacunae yet to be filled.

- 10 Well written with a dry wit that enlivens the prose, *Orchestrating the Nation* is an important contribution to the study of the symphony in the nineteenth century.

AUTHORS

KRISTEN M. TURNER

Kristen M. Turner received her doctorate in musicology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where her dissertation, "Opera in English: Class and Culture in America, 1880-1910," received the Glen Haydon Award for an Outstanding Dissertation in Musicology. Her work on American musical culture at the turn of the twentieth century has been published in the *Journal of the Society for American Music* and the *Journal of Musicological Research*.