

BOOK REVIEWS

The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape. By Denise Von Glahn. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003; paperback edition, 2009.

Many listeners have probably been intrigued by ways in which composers evoke place. After all, any number of musical works explicitly attempt to do so, such as *Pines of Rome*, *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, *El salón México*, and other chestnuts. To be sure, such music is sometimes rather disparagingly labeled “travel music” or “picture-postcard music.” Tainted by the travel industry, with its attendant connotations of commodification, these works presumably lack the transcendence of “absolute” music, said to shun extramusical references. Also interwoven into many musicological reflections on place is nationalism—Richard Taruskin has referred to it as “tourist nationalism”—and its attendant polemics over central and peripheral countries.¹ Another common trope is exoticism, as found in operas such as François-Adrien Boieldieu’s *Le calife de Bagdad* (1800), reflecting Orientalist fantasies. Place music may also be associated with memory—philosopher Edward S. Casey has even identified the phenomenon of “place memory.”² Long a topic of interest in ethnomusicology, memory has recently begun to engage historical musicologists;³ indeed, given the growing proximity of the two disciplines, it is perhaps not surprising that place has been explored from both perspectives, as in Martin Stokes’s *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, which treats subjects as diverse as Chopin and national anthems, Australian aboriginal traditions, and the “Liverpool” sound in relation to place.⁴

In one way or another, these perspectives call forth a few fundamental questions. Can we dismiss extramusical references (geographical or otherwise situating) that more often than not constitute the very essence of these place-conscious works? Are at least some of these works implicitly nationalistic? What do place pieces prompt us to remember, thus influencing our understanding of music and memory? How should we confront the question of representation, one that has dogged composers and critics at various points in the history of music and that has found its way into the theoretical framework of much recent musicology? All these matters present themselves, directly or indirectly, to the reader of Denise Von Glahn’s *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape*.

¹ Carl Dahlhaus, “Nationalism and Music,” in *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 89; Richard Taruskin, “Nationalism,” in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/50846>.

² Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 181–215.

³ See, for example, Elaine Sisman, “Memory and Invention at the Threshold of Beethoven’s Late Style,” in *Beethoven and His World*, ed. Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 51–87.

⁴ Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

Of the several virtues of Von Glahn's book, I will limit myself to three: (1) the author's discussion of noncanonical works, (2) her place-oriented gloss on some of the more familiar aspects of musical historiography and "the American cultural landscape," and (3) the book's pioneering spirit, which will surely inspire others to explore place. With regard to noncanonical works, many listeners will likely be unfamiliar with George Frederick Bristow, for example, many of whose compositions remain in manuscript but are well worth hearing. Although Von Glahn confines herself to instrumental concert music (some works discussed have "a limited vocal presence") by U.S. or naturalized citizens, the repertory she chooses—and the places conjured up—are many and varied. Von Glahn's composers depict Niagara Falls (Anthony Philip Heinrich, William Henry Fry, Bristow, Ferde Grofé); Manhattan (Aaron Copland, Charles Ives, Duke Ellington, Steve Reich); and the campus of a Midwestern land-grant university (Ellen Taaffe Zwilich). Of course, "out West," which inspired many a U.S. composer, can hardly be omitted in the "American cultural landscape" and is represented here by Roy Harris's *Cimarron*, a 1941 symphonic overture for band.

Wisely, Von Glahn devotes an entire chapter to Ives, addressing not only the familiar Ives of New England ("The Housatonic at Stockbridge" from *Three Places in New England*), but also a work centered in New York, which the composer knew well. That New York work, "From Hanover Square North, At the End of a Tragic Day, The Voice of the People Again Arose" (the third movement of his *Second Orchestral Set*), is associated not solely with place but also with memory, of the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, which helped prod the United States out of isolationism to enter the Great War two years later. Historical memory retrieves these basic facts, which Von Glahn enhances with a fascinating visual of the Hanover Square Station itself. In addition, however, musical memory will take hold as well, just as it did for Ives, who, in his program for the work (cited on pp. 92–93), remembers those New Yorkers on the platform singing the hymn "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." For Protestant America, hymns are redolent with spiritual, national, and personal meanings and, as such, are subject to rich associations, which each reader familiar with this genre will tease out according to his or her experience. (Listeners to "Hanover Square North" will surely recollect spontaneous singing in the aftermath of 9–11.) Within the urban train station, moreover, Ives expands our sense of place, using a "main orchestra" and a "distant choir" to represent paradise, which listeners may or may not consider a real place. Thus Von Glahn makes good on her promise to explore not only "what . . . musical commemorations of place tell us" but also the relationship between U.S. composers' evocation of place and "a changing nation" (2), in this case, a nation about to enter onto the world stage as a military power.

As for Von Glahn's interweaving of familiar aspects of musical historiography into her reflections on place, the "Urban Places" chapter represents her approach. To launch it, she spotlights Copland's early admiration for Ives (whose aesthetic was very different from his own) and links the two composers' evocation of New York, in Copland's case, *Quiet City* and *Music for a Great City*. By considering Copland in an urban place, Von Glahn confers new status on the composer's famous "wide spacings," much associated with "the idea of the expansive American continent" and "the nation's natural landscape" (116), linking them instead to the

urban environment Copland knew quite a bit more intimately. Her idea of Copland situating *himself* in the urban landscape (118) is also compelling, given that he cared so deeply about the musical potential of place.

Von Glahn considers Edgard Varèse's *Amériques* in terms of space, power, perspective, movement, and control. She also speculates on the meaning of the title, including its plural form. I would like to think that Varèse, who based his *Ecuadorial* of 1934 on *Popul Vuh*, the ancient Mayan text (also associated with important Latin Americans such as Heitor Villa-Lobos, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Alejo Carpentier), would have conceived of "America(s)" in the broad sense of North, South, and Central, rather than just the United States. Might he also have found distasteful the now largely discredited term "New World"? As Gary Tomlinson and others have observed, it prompts the question "New to whom?"⁵ Neither the music nor Varèse sheds much light on these questions. Nor does Alejo Carpentier, whom Von Glahn cites at some length (132). The Cuban polymath explicitly associates *Amériques* with the "vastness and extent" of *North America*. Yet in the same passage, he exults over the ease with which visitors can "cast an absent-minded glance from the window of a railroad train at the largest waterfalls on earth." One is hard pressed to know where these falls are. Certainly they cannot be Niagara, because Iguazu Falls, on the border separating Brazil and Argentina, are both taller and wider. Maybe *Amériques* is about Greater America after all.

"Newness," a leitmotif in American political discourse, frequently appears in discussions of place, and Von Glahn points to related themes, such as Edenic "promise" and "uniqueness" (19). In this context, she also addresses the less savory aspects of newness, namely, Manifest Destiny, whose adherents celebrated "virgin territory" as if it were there for the taking. Von Glahn balances this bleaker dimension of U.S. history with the chapter "Return to Nature," which treats, among other works, Symphony No. 4, subtitled "The Gardens," by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. A plea for environmental stewardship, "The Gardens" stands up to the jingoism and often exploitative practices of settlers, industrial magnates—and average citizens—pursuing Manifest Destiny, in both its initial and latter-day versions. In fact, the gardens that inspired Zwilich's symphony were established long before Earth Day, for the William James Beal Botanical Garden at Michigan State University was conceived in 1873 as a laboratory display garden. It is also a site of repose, as I know quite well given that the College of Music where I teach is just across the street. What a pleasure it was to test Von Glahn's observations while wandering there, *The Sounds of Place* in hand and listening to the "Garden" on my iPod. Zwilich has shown with this work how history and values can meet in a given place. I can only concur with Von Glahn that Professor Beal never could have imagined such rich consequences for his pet project. Likewise, musicology is richer for Von Glahn's explorations of the potent topic of music and place.

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⁵ Gary Tomlinson, *The Singing of the New World: Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Contact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.