Aspects of US-American Music

Marianne Betz (Leipzig)

Introduction

Music of the United States between 1890 and 1940 reflects American history and politics in an extraordinary way. Various ethnic voices, which increasingly found their way into America’s musical mainstream, contributed to defining cultural identity in a multi-cultural country. Different styles of classical and vernacular music document the cultural heterogeneity of this “melting pot”.

The famous expression “melting-pot” has for many become a synonym for the particular co-existence of various ethnicities and cultures which marks the demographical structure of the United States. The history of the term “melting-pot” can be led back to Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s (1735–1813) use of the metaphor for his impression of and hopes for the New World as articulated in 1782: “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”¹ Decades later, in 1845, Ralph Waldo Emerson emphatically described the process of amalgamation of American culture, to which all parts contribute in the same way:²

Well, as in the old burning of the Temple at Corinth, by the melting and intermixture of silver and gold and other metals a new compound more precious than any, called Corinthian brass, was formed; so in this continent – asylum of all nations – the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes – of the Africans, and of the Polynesians – will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting-pot of the Dark Ages.

During the 19th century scores of immigrants arrived in the United States, driven by the urgent desire to escape the poverty, political oppression, or religious prosecution in their homelands. At the same time, the country expanded to the West, a process which was declared as finished by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Elaborating on the idea of the frontier as »line of most rapid and effective Americanization«, he described this process as follows: »In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics.« Americanness according to Turner was the result of a composite nationality.

However, the numerous groups of native Americans, African Americans, Jewish, Chinese, Irish, Italians, Poles, Germans, and white Anglo-Saxons had each of them their own ethnic voice and cultural heritage. The enormous influx of people arriving at the turn of the century, many of them from countries regarded as inferior, provoked irritations, prejudices, and discriminations, on top of existing racial controversies. They caused clashes of »sameness« and »otherness«.

The term »melting-pot« gained a more specific connotation, when in 1908 it was used as title of a play by Israel Zangwill, in which the assimilation of immigrants from different origins was portrayed:

America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries, but you won’t be long like that brothers, for these are the fires of God you’ve come to – these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas. German and Frenchman, Irishman, and Englishman, Jew and Russian – into the crucible with you all! God is making the American. [...] The real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the crucible, I tell you – he will be the fusion of all the races, the coming superman.

The play was dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States from 1901 until 1909. He himself had expressed his contempt for »hyphenated Americanism«, defining Americanism as »matter of the spirit and the soul«. In the political climate of the Roosevelt era »Americanization« implied assimilation to Anglo-American mainstream culture, a so-to-speak »English Americanization«. Besides the fact that this ideal was built on dubious evaluations of the superiority and inferiority of different ethnicities, the processes of acculturation were much too complex to be solved by simple education programs.

4 Ibid., p. 23.
6 Cited from: America, the Melting Pot. Fact and Fiction, ed. by Peter Bischoff (= Texts for English and American Studies 3), Paderborn 1978, p. 35.
7 Cited from: Bischoff and Mania, »Melting Pot«., p. 526.
The idea of the ›melting-pot‹ revealed itself to be a myth. On the contrary, reality was cultural pluralism, where a multitude of ethnic groups lived cheek by jowl in dense urban areas. Voices opposing the wish for a homogeneous society claimed a federation of cultures, arguing that it was neither possible nor desirable to lose one’s identity. The philosopher Horace M. Kallen, an eminent representative of this movement, argued in his essay »Democracy versus the Melting Pot« (1915) that »what is inalienable in the life of mankind is its intrinsic positive quality – its psychophysical inheritance« and compared his vision of the ideal »Federal republic« to an orchestra:  

8 Horace M. Kallen, »Democracy versus the Melting Pot«, in: The Nation 100 (1915), p. 219 – 220; cited from Bischoff, America, the Melting Pot, p. 37 – 39.

A multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization.

In contrast to Europe, which was united by a long reaching common history, by the influential cultural traditions of the Greek-Roman antiquity, and by Christianity,9 the many groups living in the United States lacked such powerful common foundations. Each ethnic entity embodied the twofold potential of its own culture: first, the collective memory of a heritage of cultural achievements, and, second, the capacity for creative productiveness.10 Yet, how could a homogeneous cultural entity emerge from a radically heterogeneous society? Was there an ideal of who and what should be American? How would ›American-ness‹ be defined?

In an extraordinary way music reflects this dialectic of unity and diversity, which marks the history of American society in these crucial years. Various ethnic voices contributed to the definitions of identity. Their musical repertoires document the confrontations in sound, which accompanied the ›clash‹ of cultures. Their different styles of classical and vernacular music encompass multi-faceted issues of gender, race and ethnicity. Furthermore, the development of a variety of repertoires and styles demonstrates how in manifold ways identities could be constructed and deconstructed, using music as a powerful cultural utterance.

The following studies elaborate on various aspects of American music and music history during this period of population growth and societal development. They focus on both the development of musical organizations and the reception of American music in and outside the United States, particularly in Germany, as one of the countries highly influential in music. The chosen topics emphasize musical styles that refer to high art culture as well as to popular entertainment. Our analytical examinations of ›historical episodes‹ touching music education, composition, performance, and reception history seek an understanding of the representations of identity, of ›sameness‹ and ›otherness‹ in music.

10 Ibid., p. 40.