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Proof through the Night

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Music and the Great War

GLENN WATKINS

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To the Memory of
My Father, George Earl Watkins (1893–1986),
Peacetime educator who served as an officer
in both World Wars,
and of
My Mother, Orpha Andes (1900–1977),
Who waited for him in the First
and joined him wherever possible in the Second.

The cannon thunders . . . limbs fly in all directions . . .
one can hear the groans of the victims and the howling
of those performing the sacrifice . . . it's Humanity in
search of happiness.

Charles Baudelaire

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>Introduction</i>	1
PROLOGUE	
Chapter 1. In Search of <i>Kultur</i>	13
GREAT BRITAIN	
Chapter 2. Pomp and Circumstance	33
Chapter 3. The Old Lie	47
Chapter 4. The Symphony of the Front	61
FRANCE	
Chapter 5. Mobilization and the Call to History	83
Chapter 6. War and the Children	103
Chapter 7. War Games, 1914–1915	122
Chapter 8. Charades and Masquerades	140
Chapter 9. Church, State, and Schola	157
Chapter 10. Neoclassicism, Aviation, and the Great War	170
ITALY	
Chapter 11. The World of the Future, the Future of the World	199

GERMANY-AUSTRIA

- Chapter 12. "Dance of Death" 213
Chapter 13. "The Last Days of Mankind" 227

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

- Chapter 14. "The Yanks Are Coming" 245
Chapter 15. "Onward Christian Soldiers" 270
Chapter 16. The 100% American 282
Chapter 17. "Proof through the Night" 297
Chapter 18. "On Patrol in No Man's Land" 312
Chapter 19. Coming of Age in America 333

POST-ARMISTICE

- Chapter 20. "Goin' Home" 357
Chapter 21. Ceremonials and the War of Nerves 372
Chapter 22. The Persistence of Memory 386
Chapter 23. Prophecies and Alarms 403

EPILOGUE

- Chapter 24. Unfinished Business 419
Notes 431
Selected Bibliography 541
Index 575
List of CD Contents 597

List of Illustrations

Figures

1. Front page of *The Wipers Times*, 8 September 1917. 70
2. Front page of *The Wipers Times*, 1 November 1917. 70
3. Front page of *The Wipers Times*, 25 December 1917. 71
4. Cover for Jack Judge and Harry Williams's "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary," 1912, which was recast as a war marching song. 75
5. Otto Dix, *Skull*, 1924. 77
6. Poster for a loan subscription drive. 85
7. Cover for Camille Saint-Saëns's "Honneur à l'Amérique," 1917. 96
8. Cover for Claude Debussy's "La troisième pour violon et piano," from *Six sonates pour divers instruments*, 1917. 100
9. Edmund J. Sullivan, "The Gentle German," period cartoon. 105
10. Walter DeMaris, "Have You Room in Your Heart for Us?," propaganda poster from about 1918. 109
11. André Hellé, cover for *Alphabet de la Grande Guerre, 1914–1916 (pour les enfants de nos soldats)*, 1915. 112
12. André Hellé, "Le champ de bataille," illustration from *La boîte à joujoux*, 1918. 113
13. André Hellé, "Les soldats se mettent en rang de bataille," illustration from *La boîte à joujoux*, 1918. 114
14. Cover for Alfredo Casella's *Pagine di guerra*, 1915. 128

15. Sketch page for Igor Stravinsky, "Marche," from <i>Trois pièces faciles</i> , 1914.	130
16. Gino Severini, <i>Cannon in Action</i> , 1915.	131
17. Aristarkh Lentulov, <i>A Victorious Battle</i> , 1914.	133
18. Raoul Dufy, <i>La fin de la Grande Guerre</i> , 1915.	146
19. Jules Abel Faivre, "For France Pour Out Your Money," poster for a loan subscription drive, about 1915.	147
20. Mikhail Larionov, "Fox Disguised as Nun," 1922. Costume design for Stravinsky's <i>Renard</i> .	150
21. Fokker airplane poster, about 1914–1917.	179
22. Lucien Hector-Jonas, <i>Les héros de l'air ne meurent pas</i> , 1918.	180
23. Cover page for Henry Deutsch de la Meurthe's "En dirigeable," 1908.	182
24. Natalia Goncharova, <i>Angels and Aeroplanes</i> , 1914.	186
25. Erik Satie, "Dirigeable en cuivre 'Le rapide,'" undated.	187
26. Cover with funerary urn for Maurice Ravel's <i>Tombeau de Couperin</i> , 1918.	191
27. Jean Cocteau, <i>Dante on Our Side</i> , cover for <i>Le mot</i> , 15 June 1915.	206
28. Umberto Boccioni, <i>Maestro Busoni</i> , 1916.	208
29. H. R. Hopps, "Destroy This Mad Brute," propaganda poster, 1916.	248
30. Cover for "Good-Bye Broadway, Hello France," 1917.	254
31. Cover for George W. Meyer and Howard Johnson's "Just Like Washington Crossed the Delaware, General Pershing Will Cross the Rhine," 1918.	257
32. Poster for <i>Pershing's Crusaders</i> , 1918.	258
33. Cover for George M. Cohan's "Over There," 1917.	260
34. Geraldine Farrar in a Liberty Loan Drive Pageant.	295
35. 369th Regiment "Hellfighters" with damaged instruments.	318
36. Cover for Lili Boulanger's <i>Pour les funérailles d'un soldat</i> .	327

37. Nadia Boulanger and Walter Damrosch viewing the ruins at Rheims, 1919.	330
38. The coffin of the Unknown Warrior, lying in state in Westminster Abbey during the Armistice Day service of 11 November 1920.	373
39. The U.S. Marine Band performing at the burial of the World War I Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, 11 November 1921.	376
40. Pablo Picasso, <i>Portrait of Riccioto Canudo in Uniform</i> , 1918.	388
41. Paul Hindemith playing first violin in an army string quartet.	404
42. Matthias Grünewald, Crucifixion section of the Isenheim Altarpiece, 1515.	406
43. Otto Dix, <i>War Triptych</i> , 1932.	407
44. Otto Dix, <i>Metropolis</i> , 1928.	412
45. Otto Dix, <i>To Beauty (An die Schönheit)</i> , 1922.	413

Musical Examples

1. Claude Debussy, "Berceuse héroïque," mm. 37–43.	89
2. Claude Debussy, "Feux d'artifice," from <i>Preludes</i> , book 2, mm. 96–100.	89
3. Claude Debussy, <i>En blanc et noir</i> , second movement.	92
4. Claude Debussy, "Les soldats se mettent en rang de bataille," from <i>La Boîte à joujoux</i> .	115
5. Igor Stravinsky, "March," from <i>Trois pièces faciles</i> .	127
6. Igor Stravinsky, "Souvenir d'une marche boche," mm. 13–15.	142
7. Ludwig van Beethoven, Fifth Symphony, fourth movement, coda.	142
8. Vincent d'Indy, "O Sainte Croix," act 1, scene 3 of <i>La légende de Saint-Christophe</i> .	164
9. Deutsch de la Meurthe, "O toi qui le premier osas quitter la terre," from <i>Icare</i> .	184

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 10. Deutsch de la Meurthe, "Mise en marche du moteur,"
"Planant dans le libre espace," and "Descente," from
"En Dirigeable." | 188 |
| 11. Maurice Ravel, "Toccata," from <i>Tombeau de Couperin</i> . | 189 |
| 12. Alban Berg, <i>Wozzeck</i> , act 1, scene 2, mm. 1–4. | 236 |
| 13. Olivier Messiaen, "Offertoire: Les choses visibles et
invisibles," from <i>Messe de la Pentecôte</i> , mm. 1–2. | 237 |
| 14. Maurice Ravel, <i>Frontispice</i> . | 389 |

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Introduction

Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market.

E. J. Hobsbawm, lecture to the American Anthropological Association, February 1992

Musicians, in their most idealistic moments, argue that their art is an international language. But when nationalism is asserted, music is rarely far behind.

Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 23 December 1997

War is a terrible thing. Yet the cadence of troops marching through the streets, the ringing sound of national airs, the flapping of proudly hoisted flags, and, in more modern times, the swoosh of aircraft racing overhead typically send hearts pounding and aspirations soaring. Inevitably, it is in the period following the cessation of hostilities, in times of so-called peace, that the initially envisioned mission becomes increasingly difficult to identify. An awareness of the cohorts of war surfaces even more gradually, and only in recent decades has the study of the Great War of 1914–1918 moved beyond political and military tactics to a consideration of cultural issues. This shift has in turn helped to illuminate the factors behind the call to arms and has simultaneously driven the debate concerning the Great War's role in the birth of modernism.

These are large questions that have necessarily been addressed piecemeal. Paul Fussell has defined the Great War as a world calamity that undermined traditional cultural sensibilities and promoted a language of disillusionment and ironic skepticism. More recent studies have focused on urban culture, the role of memory, and postwar commemorative rituals; considered the religious imagination and the sometimes conflicting roles of church and state in wartime; traced humankind's encounter with age-old dreams of flight viewed in light of the conquest of the air on the eve of world war; given sympathetic accounts of the child as symbolic participant and unwitting victim; discussed the role of masculinity and the fallen soldier in the reshaping of memory of the Great War; argued the functions

of entertainment, propaganda, and popular culture not only in western Europe but also in Russia, where war abroad and revolution at home overlapped; and considered how views of gender and color in Europe and America changed as a result of the call to arms.

In the course of writing the present set of essays I came to realize that each of these topics has a musical counterpart. Indeed, music in every nation gave “proof through the night”—ringing evidence during the dark hours of the war—not only of its historic role in the definition of nationhood and of nationalist resolve but also of its power on distant battlefields to recall home and hearth and to commemorate loss long after the guns had been stilled. A somewhat grander argument, one clearly incapable of final resolution, centers on the suggestion that twentieth-century modernism was launched full force with the advent of the Great War. Yet modernism, both as term and concept, has resisted consensus definition to such a degree that the notion that it signals a manageable concept or even an identifiable chronology has had to be jettisoned.¹ No surer sign was ever given of the impossibility of viewing modernism as a progressive movement along a single continuum than during the period of the Great War, when Neoclassicism sounded not so much a full retreat into history as a necessary reclamation of it in the service of establishing national identities, and when Dada launched a brief and zany sideshow, signaling from another angle that prewar modernism was moribund and due for a facelift.

Both developments invite recall of Baudelaire’s observation that “modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.”² For just as in Germany an exhausted Expressionism found a resonating and essential converse in a “new objectivity,” so in France a spent Impressionism and Primitivism transmuted into a seeming polar opposite, Neoclassicism.³ Action and reaction thus often appeared as the operative coordinates, and ultimately none of the “isms” emerged as tidy affairs.

Clearly, then, there were numerous façades to the Great War, all haunted by the looming specter of personal sacrifice in the name of country. They ranged from the deliberately frivolous to the patently grisly, from boisterous rally to solemn rite. The present study of the music produced during this period of crisis must be read, therefore, as an anthology of somewhat arbitrary, if also central, test cases that are obliged to stand for a host of equally compelling stories. Because music is related to other cultural markers such as national institutions and international politics, as well as to other arts, these topics are periodically allowed to direct and occasionally even dominate the discussion of the music. The aim throughout

is to present history not as indiscriminate static cling but as resonating interdisciplinary collage.

The impossibility of covering every aspect of music's relation to the Great War prompted the further decision to tilt the present study toward a consideration of responses by the Allies to the perceived threat of German hegemony in matters of intellectual and artistic accomplishment. As a result it will be noted that, although only three chapters are devoted primarily to Austro-Germany and its internal struggle with the politics of culture, the book's perspective takes that very culture as a continual point of reference from the first to the last chapters. Furthermore, the sectional organization of the book along lines of national identity and an approximate chronology should not conceal the fact that within this framework lies a series of broad topical essays intended to italicize the degree to which principles and values bled conspicuously between opposing camps and the extent to which they were frequently verbalized with similar language.

On 3 August 1914 the British statesman Lord Grey of Falloden sounded a dire warning that was to prove prophetic: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."⁴ There can be no question that the wick sputtered in the world of music, but even though composer after composer complained of the struggle to keep the flame alive, it never expired. Fixation on the issue of national identity may have promoted a degree of self-consciousness that was little conducive to the writing of enduring masterworks, yet ultimately it did not preclude their emergence. At the same time, when placed in their proper context, the import of the slightest of these pieces is greater than an unannotated performance would suggest, and their role during the war was arguably no less powerful than that of wartime propaganda leaflets or political cartoons. It should be clear, therefore, that several chapters, which may initially appear to be close readings of minor works by a single composer, address issues well beyond the concept of the masterpiece or personal biography. The accompanying compact disc offers the opportunity to hear some of these less familiar works together with other more popular ones of special historical interest and to judge their collective impact.

Among the political, social, artistic, and literary personalities of both sides was surprising agreement on one thing: the power of music to establish national goals and to secure a spiritual or moral tone for society that seemed to be beyond the power of the written word or the visual image. One of the most forceful proponents of this credo was the controversial Romain Rolland, whose story serves not only as the opening gambit of this study but also as a recurrent foil for artists as diverse as Richard Strauss,

Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky, Vincent d'Indy, Gerhart Hauptmann, and Gabriele D'Annunzio.

Another persistent figure was the mythic Ludwig van Beethoven—a paradoxical presence repeatedly summoned by Allied and Central powers alike under a rainbow of claims. He appears logically and positively in biographies written by Rolland and d'Indy, but under an even wider range of perspectives he is found in the writings of Stravinsky, Ravel, Claude Debussy, Alfredo Casella, George Bernard Shaw, Edward Elgar, and Ferruccio Busoni. And the inclusion of Beethoven's works throughout the war on orchestral programs from Chicago, Boston, and New York to Berlin, Rome, and London spoke of the capacity of his music to serve as a symbol of human aspiration for virtually all nations. Contrarily, the reputation of Richard Wagner among the Central powers as the standardbearer of some future glorious empire was countered in Allied quarters by redefining him as a composer whose purportedly bloated music matched the basest implications of the word *boche*. Such an appraisal represented a sea change in France, where during the period immediately following his death in 1883 Wagner had been viewed virtually as a god.

Of necessity, such a review forces the central question that lies behind all cultural studies devoted to the Great War. Was it really just a military operation after all? Was imperialist territorial conquest the ultimate goal, or was the more fundamental issue one of cultural identity? From the perspective of the Allied nations German *Kultur* was on the line and was being backed by a military machine. Contrarily, the French, repeatedly denying any and all aggressive intentions (with the obvious exception of a healthy *revanchisme* that promoted the prospect of national revenge through the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine), preached that it was engaged in an act of defense for its own *civilisation*. Although the judgment that World War I took place because "Britain owned the world and Germany wanted it"⁵ may summarize the issue of maritime supremacy and colonial ambition with reasonable clarity, it barely hints at the deeper concerns regarding cultural stature and the attendant insecurity reflected in persistent patterns of global outreach by small patches of European real estate.

What was implied by the word *Kultur*? The admiration of the French and British for German philosophy, science, and literature, for example, could be counterbalanced by Germany's recognition of Anglo-French political stability and, among other things, France's dominance in the world of form and taste. Yet it was understood that under the appropriate sponsorship each of these positives could be transformed into a negative. Especially unsettling was the recognition that if the equivalent of *Kultur* in

these countries were reduced to the prevailing state of music, the balance of power would shift dramatically.

Since the eighteenth century, German-speaking countries had produced such a sequence of commanding musical personalities (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Bruckner, Brahms, Wagner, and Mahler among them) that their supremacy in that sphere could scarcely be questioned. With the principal exception of Berlioz, and to a lesser extent Gounod, Bizet, Chabrier, and the imported Meyerbeer, France's musical profile in the Romantic Age had been somewhat less glorious than that of Germany. At the turn of the century, however, Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Massenet, Charpentier, and d'Indy had been joined by Debussy and Ravel in signaling an impending era of preeminence. England's musical creativity, barely audible beyond its borders after the age of Purcell (except for the Anglo-German Handel), in no way matched the triumph of its colonial policies, even as Elgar was now claimed as a hopeful sign alongside the newly promoted notion of an English Renaissance. And Italy, a minor contributor to the war effort, had enjoyed an enviable and continuous history of musical achievement comparable to that of France from the time of the Middle Ages, including more recently two of the great masters of opera, Verdi and Puccini. Somewhat different from all of these countries was Russia, long dormant as a producer of art music, who through the course of the nineteenth century had gradually come of age and had begun to show signs of escalating authority, beginning with Glinka and continuing with *The Five* and Tchaikovsky.

More recently, the United States of America, savoring the first flush of colonial success in the wake of war with Spain in the Caribbean and then in the Philippines, and awakening to the proposition that its geographical horizons need no longer be "rooted in the territorial formation of the nation," began to imagine its frontier anew in relation to its destiny in the world.⁶ As a consequence, the Great War saw American composers making a self-conscious effort to free their music from a pervasive German influence even as America's longstanding musical dependence upon Germany left it struggling to define what might qualify as truly American. Although the present study is not focused exclusively, or even largely, on American music, it does entail a broad consideration of the newly emergent status of the United States as not only an economic and military power but also a musical and cultural one with expanding musical aspirations in the post-Armistice period.

Of all the musical genres during the war, popular song offered both the largest repertoire and the broadest call to patriotism and humor in all coun-

tries, and by enlisting the willing participation of citizens in the war effort, it promoted the notion of “total” engagement. A cadre of popular tunes—like “Le chant du départ,” “La Madelon,” “Wacht am Rhein,” “Over There,” “Keep the Home Fires Burning,” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”—by turns reinforced nostalgia for home, reflected the fleeting relaxation of moral constraints, and inspired feelings of national pride. Although French, German, and Italian wartime songs also figure in the pages that follow, the power of popular song will be considered primarily through a review of British and American pieces. Consequently, it should become clear that the sentiment behind a song like “Tipperary” not only transcended Irish national history, for example, but also summed up the feelings of displacement endured by soldiers everywhere and society’s collective hopes for a brighter future. Soldier songs, both newly minted and recalled from earlier struggles, were joined in the battle by old-time hymns as well as new texts and melodies sponsored by religious institutions that readily exhibited their zeal alongside guarantees of the righteousness of their cause. The Church Militant, historic summoner of youth to join in holy alliance against the infidel, once again invoked music as a powerful cohort.

Yet the first question we are inclined to ask of much of the music written between 1914 and 1918 is “Where’s the war?” Indeed, today many of these musical scores seem decidedly free of political entanglements. Arnold Schoenberg, for example, left only the torso of his most philosophical work in *Die Jakobsleiter*, and Strauss composed the metaphorical *Alpine Symphony*. Fortunately, the correspondence and essays of both clarify their feelings about the conflict and help us to contextualize the works that they wrote during the period. More pointedly, if obliquely, attuned to the issue of war were works like Ravel’s *Tombeau de Couperin* and Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*, although in the process of becoming staples of the concert repertoire the implicit message of both works largely disappeared. Both Ravel and Berg were in uniform, an observation that merits further scrutiny.

Logically, the story concludes with a consideration of the postwar period when, on the classical music front, memory began to forge a response that was frequently more powerful than in wartime. Popular repertoires understandably now turned to newly sprung concerns surrounding the returning soldier: the first Armistice Day celebrations; the ensuing scenes of commemoration that attempted to fix for posterity an inevitably fading memory; the problems of readjustment to civilian life; and the attempts by veterans’ movements to preserve the sense of comradeship experienced in the service. Numerous song texts from this period clearly attempted to

perpetuate a social intimacy across class barriers that was largely illusory and difficult to maintain in postwar society.

More than a little paradoxically, the coda to this set of postwar reflections is given over to a work written in 1961 by a composer born in 1913. In attempting to resolve questions about its creator's pacifist convictions, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* challenged not only the notion of a sacred versus secular art in a period of relative calm but also the discrete categories of art and the isolating chronologies of history. Britten accomplished this not through the juxtaposition of popular war songs and ecclesiastical chant but through the conscription of World War I poems by the British poet Wilfred Owen as tropes to the Latin Requiem Mass. The series of glosses in turn served as an invitation to view the years from 1914 to 1945 as a continuous period.

If most of the British World War I poets knew the horrors of the front, while only a few of the major composers of any country during the period 1914–1918 could claim first-hand knowledge of battle, this distinction ultimately proved not to be the most crucial one in determining music's impact either in America or abroad. Instead, it was in the varying perspectives of combatants and noncombatants, jingoists and pacifists, Tin Pan Alley songsters and genteel composers alike, that music reminded us of its capacity to incite and to calm, to preach and to moralize, to jeer and to cheer, and finally to lament and to memorialize. Collectively, it offered a heady mixture that traversed the entire landscape between heaven and hell.

Today we have just begun to reassess the poignant, if faded, symbolism of numerous concert pieces—the left-hand concertos, oratorios, and requiems, the many incidental pieces penned for war relief, the telling dedications, the soldiers' tales, the art songs—and to protest their essential, if now muted, testimony. But we have also come to recognize how such concert fare is enhanced by assuming a position alongside the lingering popularity of poems like “In Flanders Fields” and songs such as “Over There” and “Goin' Home.” There is a reciprocity there. The struggle to recall the original circumstances that spawned these collective repertoires is one of society's perennial exercises. And despite the irrefutable truth of Robert Wohl's cautionary judgment with respect to the generation of 1914 that “communication across generational boundaries will always be illusory,”⁷ such illusions can and do surprise us with their immediacy and power.

Indeed, confronted with these gathered sonorities from the Great War, listeners are often surprised by the recognition of how many of them speak with a poignancy that can still break the heart. The innocent philosophy and simple wisdom of children lying on quilts under a starry night, so

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