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Music and Nationalism

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Abstract: This article offers an overview of musical nationalism. It considers how states have used music as a political tool as well as the ways in which communities have employed music to reject national identities and challenge nation-states.

Keywords: activism, global, immigration, Music Notes, nationalism, politics

The online version of this chapter includes all embedded content and is available at <https://worldmusictextbook.org/nielsen-vallejo-2022>.

Nationalism: *The concept that people, lands, and cultures are divided into nations that provide a central component of citizens' identities.*

Modern nationalism developed in Western Europe in the revolutionary atmosphere of the late eighteenth century. During this time, the nation-state became increasingly central to defining territories and the peoples who inhabited them.¹ Nationalism seeks to homogenize and unite those within a territory, often antagonizing individuals within its borders who do not conform and are therefore considered a threat to a perceived national unity.

Nationalist movements in the 1800s sought to create musics to reflect the desired ideals of nations. This imperative emerged as European nations increasingly defined themselves in opposition to each other and the growing number of colonies. European nationalist composers often drew on melodic or rhythmic traits considered particularly indicative of national styles. Because music is a symbolic medium, the meaning of these rhythms and melodies was culturally established: Listeners and composers were themselves cultivated to hear certain traits as nationalist, developing these musical symbols of nationalism (Beckerman 1986:73). Many nationalist composers have drawn on collected folk culture and music from across territories and peoples subsumed into nations. These folk collections are presented as a shared national heritage or folk culture. In many cases, these projects claimed to “save” or “preserve” culture, often by notating versions of oral traditions in written forms, effectively freezing them into one single “official” version. Music books and media,

¹A nation-state is defined as an entity in which a majority of citizens identify with each other culturally. It retains autonomy over the corresponding land inhabited by those who identify as its citizens.

such as radio, recordings and film, aided the dissemination of a shared national culture that sought to cultivate national identity as a dominant force in citizens' lives (See Anderson 1983; Boyes 2010).

In formerly-colonized lands, nationalism reflects a complicated mixture of both liberation and the continuation of colonial power structures. With the advent of independence movements, lands that were previously colonized by European nations have sought to create their own national identities, including musical identities. In doing so, they have frequently drawn on the same model as European nations that push a homogenized cultural form as a shared national heritage. Following the European model of turning to "the folk," or communities seen as preserving older strata of culture, many countries have appropriated these musics as sources of national music heritage. In countries like Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador, the music of Indigenous communities—many of whom remain wary of state governments because of histories of genocide—has been co-opted into indigenismo nation-building projects in the twentieth century.² One famous example is "El Cóndor Pasa," a piece from the eponymous zarzuela (operetta) composed in 1913 by Peruvian composer and ethnomusicologist Daniel Alomía Robles. Similar efforts have taken place in African countries where governmental organizations have played significant roles in shaping a shared national culture in the second half of the twentieth century when many African nations gained independence. In countries like Ghana, government organizations have supported performances with different ethnic groups representing cultures across its territories (Agawu 2003:19). These efforts face the challenges of representation: What music represents diverse nations of people, often speaking many different languages? Who gets to decide?

Settler colonial states—meaning the dominant population is descended from colonizers who have oppressed Indigenous communities through acts of genocide, systematic dispossession of lands, and cultural repression—have also used music to define themselves. These nation-states, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, may recognize some differences among groups of people when those differences do not challenge the nationalist rhetoric. Yet overall, they demand assimilation and depend on native societies losing their land, language, and cultural practices (Simpson 2014; Wolfe 2006).

Political and social figures have showcased—and in many cases, misrepresented—musical styles and dances that they feel should be celebrated as "roots" music representing their idea of a nation. For example, Appalachian old-time and country music in the United States has been overwhelmingly portrayed as Anglo- and Euro-American music; the African and Black roots of these musical styles were intentionally down-played and erased in part through the efforts of wealthy Anglo-Americans such as Henry Ford (See Brucher 2016).

So how do communities and musicians respond to nations and ideas of na-

²A political strategy to co-opt Indigenous culture into nation-states while excluding Indigenous people.

tional musics when these same musicians often find themselves systematically excluded? In some cases, people push for inclusion and recognition, finding spaces for marginalized identities to be viewed and heard as part of a national heritage. This approach might be observed when the lyrics of a national anthem includes several languages; for instance, South Africa changed their national anthem following apartheid to better reflect the inclusive ideals of a new era (see example below). Research and scholarship have also played an important role in amending histories that have marginalized communities (See Hay 2003; Flemons 2018; Our Native Daughters 2019). Another example is mariachi music, which has been embraced as a representative of Mexican and Latin American cultures in the United States and public-school music curricula. At the same time, it can also be understood as a vital U.S. American music given its significance within the United States today (See Salazar 2011; Sheehy 2006).

In other cases, various racial, ethnic, and economic social groups within a nation may disagree, redefine, or create their own definitions of what their national music is (Wong 2012). And whereas it may be assumed that membership within a nation is or should be an end goal for those who are marginalized and seeking the benefits of citizenship, there are contexts in which rejecting membership of one nation may be preferred in order to advocate for the sovereignty of another identity group. Music, along with other culturally-identifying practices such as language and dance, have often been central for people resisting or rejecting a nationalist identity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as the second Hawai'ian Renaissance Movement's protest songs and renewed interests in Hawai'ian language, chant and dance (Lewis 1987; Stillman 1995:4-5).

In summary, although nationalism in its current form is a relatively recent phenomenon that began among colonial European nations, today it structures assumptions of how humans organize themselves, cultures, and musics. While music may create affinity within nations, musical nationalism does so by excluding others—often by erasing communities and practices all together.

Additional Materials

Note: this chapter has an [accompanying annotated playlist available here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. In the passage above, it is mentioned that folklore projects “claimed to ‘save’ or ‘preserve’ culture, often by documenting or freezing versions of oral traditions in written forms.” In many cases, however, there are multiple versions of songs, meaning that decisions must be made about which versions to preserve or make “official” by publishing. What problems might arise in this process? Who should get to make these decisions about which songs join folk music canons and which ones are left out? What might be some consequences of these choices?

2. Are people able to claim an identity or membership within a nation or political grouping even if they are not recognized as a member from the nation or political grouping? Why or why not? What are some of the identity issues that arise when one's claims to membership may or may not be recognized by a larger group? How might these discrepancies impact musical performance?
3. Make a list of rights or benefits that are awarded to someone who is able to claim citizenship to a nation state. Then consider what is at stake for someone who is denied citizenship to a nation state.
4. Conduct an internet search using Google or a database like JSTOR to read about plurinationalism. Find an example of how this is practiced in a given nation state or country. What are some of the social challenges of this political structure? How does music relate to the ways this plurinational state is represented?

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