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Paul Henry Lang on Music

God Save the Anthems

IN MY mail I find a copy of a bill that has recently been introduced in Congress. It proposes that an authorized version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" be adopted, thus establishing its words and music in law. Law and art make poor bedfellows, and even unanimous passage of the bill will not make a poor song into a good one.

Patriotic-national songs are difficult to evaluate apart from their emotional atmosphere, but as a rule they are notoriously low grade when measured by artistic standards, and often it is only their subject that protects them; no one takes umbrage at their artistic poverty. (Bad church music also enjoys this safe conduct.) The festive ceremonial piece usually assumes the rhetorical pose we know so well from the statuary in public places: the outstretched hand or the folded arms, the bowed head or the defiant stare.



Some Exceptions

There are, it is true, some really fine pieces among them; "God Save the King," "La Marseillaise," and "Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser" are everlasting songs. Our own anthem is poorly designed for singing. There is nothing we can do about that: only revolutions resulting in complete political upheaval are likely to change a national anthem, and ours is here to stay quite independently of acts of Congress.

Political-patriotic compositions are not restricted to national anthems; the type has been practiced at the highest artistic levels since time immemorial, but the patriotic in a religious garb produced a very special literature in France, and especially in England.

The official ceremonial art of the Louis XIV era was regal, classically poised, and frosty. This palace art of the Sun King eventually became the whole age's ceremonial

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art, a European style. The palace, the levees, the great assemblies and parades, were repeated in every princely court, small and large, all over Europe. The ballets, plays, and operas, the fireworks, statues, and even the very park of Versailles were imitated with worshipful admiration.

The King also had a musical dictator, Lully, whose odes, *Te Deums*, and festival motets are magnificent "display" music in which the composer shows a wonderful feeling for brilliant mass effects, the trumpets blaring and the drums rolling. Lully was bold, grandiose, and noble in the best sense of the word. Like Mansard, the great architect, he managed to combine the royal and the comfortable, the pompous and the idyllic in an attractive blend. While nominally church music, however, all this was a royal-ceremonial court art.

From France the ceremonial style was exported to England where it found an even more congenial home, one much less exclusively royal and courtly, for it rested on the middle classes as well as on the King and the aristocracy. Purcell, born and reared in this society, represented it in music that is among the finest manifestations of its spirit; but it was an immigrant, Handel, who raised it to the embodiment of national consciousness.

Splendor of Handel

The splendor of Handel's ceremonial music is thrilling, its spaciousness and euphony breath-taking, yet despite the use of Biblical texts, it is not church or religious music; the significance of decisive historical moments pulsates in it. Indeed, in many a "sacred oratorio" when the pious trimmings are forgotten, the ceremonial-dynastic is very much in evidence, as for instance in "Solomon" or "Judas Maccabaeus." Even the famous Hallelujah Chorus from "Messiah" is a typical

coronation anthem, one of the many splendid ones Handel composed. These great works may appear to embody a kind of elevated religious rhetoric, but there can be no doubt that their composer intended them to fulfill a political and psychological purpose, and this is how his contemporaries saw them.

Glorifying the State

He wished to glorify the spirit of the modern humanist state which always reminded the people that the national church, with the King at its head, was an essential part of the state Constitution. This sort of English music easily leads the non-Briton to misinterpretation, for without the patriotic background it is incomplete. For the same reason Handel's church music is seldom used as service music outside of England. The spirit of his anthems does not fit the spirit of any Christian denomination except the Established Church of England, for the church musician does not speak here as a private person but as the representative of a historical national consciousness.

Compositions called forth by political events are seldom introspective or contemplative. In literature they can be satirical and comic, vicious and belligerent, but also noble and hymnic. In music all the negative features disappear; ceremonial compositions are almost always elevated in tone, and the patriotic and commemorative usually, and somewhat monotonously, take a religious or quasi-religious turn. Since commemorative events are notoriously ephemeral, the music often accompanies them into limbo. Nevertheless, there are not a few works that have great and enduring qualities; the idea is dwarfed by the power of the mood and the work becomes ageless.

