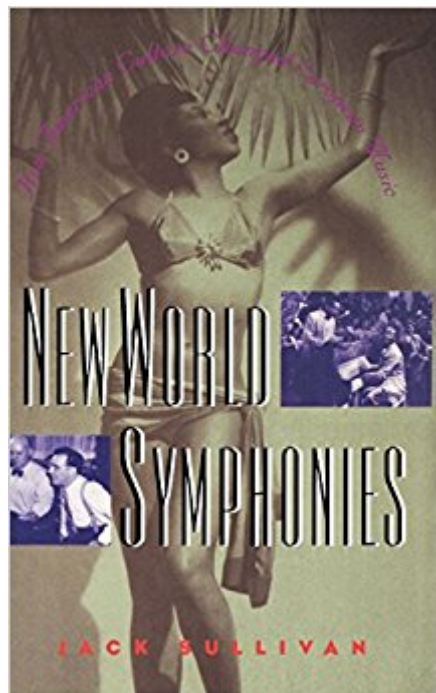




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New World Symphonies: How American Culture Changed European Music



Synopsis

This groundbreaking book shows for the first time the profound and transformative influence of American literature, music, and mythology on European music. Although the impact of the European tradition on American composers is widely acknowledged, Jack Sullivan demonstrates that an even more powerful musical current has flowed from the New World to the Old. The spread of rock and roll around the world, the author contends, is only the latest chapter in a cross-cultural story that began in the nineteenth century with Gottschalk in Paris and Dvorák in New York. Sullivan brings popular and canonical culture into his wide-ranging discussion. He explores the effects on European music of American authors as diverse as Twain, DuBois, Melville, and Langston Hughes, examining in particular Dvorák's fascination with Longfellow, the obsession of Debussy and Ravel with Poe, and the inspiration Whitman provided for Holst, Vaughan Williams, and dozens more. Sullivan uncovers the African American musical influence on Europe, beginning with spirituals and culminating in the impact of jazz on Stravinsky, Bartók, Walton, and others. He analyzes the lure of Hollywood and Broadway for such composers as Weill, Korngold, and Britten and considers the power of the American landscape—from the remoteness of the prairie to the brutal energy of the American city. In European music, Sullivan finds, American culture and mythology continue to resonate.

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Customer Reviews

The subtitle of this book gives its theme: How American Culture Changed European Music.

Beginning with the touchstone New World symphony of Dvorák (which author Jack Sullivan believes celebrates the African American and Native American strains in American music), Sullivan, a professor of English at Rider College, takes readers on a tour of music history right up to the present day. His study centers on the American writers, poets, and styles that have influenced the Old World, using such examples as the impact of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, of Walt Whitman on Ralph Vaughan Williams, and of Edgar Allan Poe on a host of composers. Sullivan also takes up Frederick Delius's stay in Florida and Edgar Varèse's love affair with America and even includes the careers of expatriates such as Erich Korngold and Kurt Weill. The book ends with a long consideration of the effects of jazz, which Sullivan views as the American classical music. Sullivan has done his homework very well, and most of the expected names and relationships are here. Yet his highly opinionated tone and habit of compartmentalizing and strictly categorizing the music (atonalists and serialists are "bad," as are British musical-theater composers) can limit the scope of his arguments. There is no doubt, for instance, that jazz has had an influence on European music, but can one really say, as Sullivan does, that it has changed that music? Did Vaughan Williams's love for the poems of Whitman alter his music any more than his love for John Bunyan did? Did Poe's "The Bells" redirect Rachmaninoff in ways the composer never suspected? What we have here is a book that is an interesting elaboration of an idea perhaps better confined to an evening around the fire with friends. --Patrick J. Smith

Sullivan, an English professor at Rider University (*Words on Music: From Addison to Barzun*), offers a brief but far-reaching book about cross-cultural influences. Dealing with literature, music, even mythology, Sullivan opines that the influence of America on the Old World was more profound than vice versa, and this assertion makes his book different from the usual Euro-originated views of the phenomenon (such as Wilfred Mellers's *Music in a New-Found Land*). Sullivan offers many detailed examples of New World-Old World cultural interrelations: Longfellow's influence on Dvorák and Poe's on Debussy and Ravel; how jazz inspired Stravinsky and Bartók; and how Hollywood and Broadway worked their magic on Weill, Korngold and Britten. Based largely on secondary sources, the book is composed of fairly leisurely chapters of straightforward narrative, uniting a variety of familiar information. Particularly the last two chapters, about the influence of Broadway musicals and jazz on European music. Probably the best chapter is the one in which the author's past as a horror anthologist (he edited the *Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*) is put to good use: "New Worlds of Terror: The Legacy of Poe." Sullivan ends the book with a discussion of jazz, sidestepping the greatest musical factor dominating European music in the last 35 years or

so American rock music. This oversight, however, detracts only little from an otherwise agreeable read. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The one-star review of *New World Symphonies* made me take a closer look at it. In addition to a fact-checker at Yale UP, the book could have profited from a firmer editorial hand. Redundancy is encountered too often. The book could easily be reduced to less than 200 pages. The subject of the book is fascinating. Some of the opinions sought by the author are good to have, such as the comments from Robert Shaw (the choral conductor, not the actor). It appears to be a book aimed at the general reader, since no musical examples are included. Some musical examples would have added interest for many readers. Given that many compositions discussed are unlikely to be in most home CD collections, including a CD with excerpts from some of the works under discussion would have augmented the reading experience. The photos are superb. The reading experience presents us with examples of writing about music that made me squirm: "swelling cadences of black spirituals"; "cadences with exotic trappings" (the trappings remain unidentified); "fruity alto saxophones" (fortunately nothing tutti-fruity emerged); "hearty diatonic chords" (more food on the mind?); "the claustrophobic organum of [Debussy's] *The Sunken Cathedral*" (was the cathedral too tiny for the chancel choir, or sunk so deeply that the choir could scarcely come up for air?); "the piano reaches unto icy, celestial dissonances" (were the performer's fingers cold?); "Varèse exploded clichés about American prairies and open spaces" (this probably refers to, among other things, Copland's ballets, which may now seem clichéd to some, but have not yet been obliterated by any detonations, self or other); "snakelike polytonalities" (I am seeing Jennifer Lopez modulating with an anaconda); "knotty polytonality" (rope or wood?) One can learn much from this book about its subject matter. It could, however, have been much better.

The book purportedly tells the story of classical music in America, how Old World traditions were transformed and revitalized, and how concert music came to interact with popular trends. I flipped to the chapter on film music, and to his credit the author makes some very defensible claims for the genre, at its best, as being the equivalent of incidental music written for plays, or even singspiel music composed by Purcell, Telemann, Mozart and others. (Opera would be a little more of a stretch, since the film composer cannot ordinarily manipulate the "libretto" -- in this case, the screenplay -- where he would be able to, in the case of the genuine article.) However, despite these commonsensical claims and pleas for critical tolerance, the author doesn't seem to know very much about his subject matter. He's got the "sense" right, but his facts are all wrong. I read maybe a

dozen pages and, over the course, found at least four factual errors. He claims that Erich Wolfgang Korngold quotes thematic material from his score to the "Sea Wolf" in the slow movement of his String Quartet No. 2 (when, in reality, it is the Quartet No. 3); he claims the same composer's Symphony in F#, while reminiscent of his film music, is comprised solely of original material (when, in fact, the melody of the slow movement was lifted from his score for "The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex;" and the finale uses a motif associated with the Maria Ouspenskaya character in "Kings Row" -- something I have never seen mentioned by any annotator); and that Dimitri Tiomkin wrote the score for Alfred Hitchcock's "Spellbound" (it was actually Miklos Rozsa, who won an Oscar!). On top of it, I suspected his claim that Victor Herbert wrote the score for D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" was equally false, but THAT I had to double-check. The score is mostly a hodgepodge of pre-existing classics, like "Ride of the Valkyries," anyway. As it turns out, I was right -- it was written by Karl Breil. In any case, it's not my job to research these things. You'd think Yale University Press would hire a fact-checker. Breil aside, I could have written the chapter off the top of my head, virtually complete, right down to the historical dates, and not made so many errors. I don't know if it was sloppy note-taking or faulty memory, but the book never should have gone to publication in this state. What if someone comes across this thing in a university library somewhere and takes it as fact? We'll have all these theses on film music that reiterate the heinous error that Dimitri Tiomkin wrote "Spellbound!" For a good general survey of American music, you might try Wilfred Meller's now-classic "Music in a Newfound Land," or even H. Wiley Hitchcock's "Music in the United States." However, film music is a weak link in both studies. For that, I would refer you to "Film Score: the Art and Craft of Movie Music," by Tony Thomas. Thomas highlights most of the major composers, and many of them contribute in their own words. It's an interesting read, and you learn a lot about the unique challenges faced by the composer in Hollywood.

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