Among the iconic figures that emerged from the American West, the cowboy proved as irresistible as he was durable. And no wonder—with stories by Ned Buntline, Bret Harte, and others that began appearing during the 1870s, increasing numbers of readers found themselves drawn to adventures set in that vast region.

In 1882, Buffalo Bill Cody presented the first of what became a 30-year run of variously named “Wild West Shows,” adding the excitement of a circus-like atmosphere to an already alluring image and culture. Western films, with or without singing cowboys and the phenomenon of country and Western music promoted the growth and capitalized on the popularity of Western culture. Portrayed as an indomitable, solitary figure, the pre-modern cowboy of fiction combined the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Samson, the virtue of Sir Galahad, and the valor of Roland. During the era of the “singing cowboy” one might add that he also had a bit of Orpheus’s talent, as well.

The reality, of course, differs. To begin with, there is the name “cowboy,” a word that ranch hands rarely used. As historian Guy Logsdon points out, they referred to themselves as “punchers, cowpunchers, cowhands, cowpokes, buckaroos, wranglers, vaqueros, waddies, cowmen, and other less sophisticated, but colorful, sobriquets.” Furthermore, cowboys were more ethnically diverse than they often have been portrayed in movies, books, magazines, on television, and through other sources. In *Cowboys of the Americas*, Richard W. Stratta estimates that during the peak period of the trail drives from Texas to the North (1860s-1880s), only about two-thirds of the cowboys involved were white. Nearly all of the rest were Mexican, Mexican American, or African American. Finally, the epic clashes that entertained readers and audiences for generations were far removed from the actual daily routine of the typical cowboy’s life, which included long hours of tedious labor, boredom, paltry pay, crippling injuries and fatalities resulting from work or hostilities with others, and exposure to life-threatening extremes of weather. Despite this, the American cowboy has enjoyed mythic status for generations. His songs remain so firmly embedded in our folk traditions that most of us not only remember fragments of at least a few of them but find that they have the power to take us back to a time during our childhood when we aspired to membership in the fraternity of cowboys.

In spite of the cowboy’s popularity and the enduring appeal of his songs, few twentieth-century composers in the classical tradition transformed the music that cowboys sang into “art” songs. (According to *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4th edition, an “art song” may be defined as a “song intended for the concert repertory, as distinct from a folk or popular song.”) This is important because in the early twentieth century, when nationalism in music was a very popular topic of conversation, cowboy songs would have been a logical repertoire from which to draw in creating identifiable American music.
The discussion about nationalism in music may be traced back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century, when composers and critics in this country staked out positions concerning whether and how to compose “nationalistic” works. Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák inserted himself in the debate when, during his residency in this country (1892-1895), he wrote, “A while ago I suggested that inspiration for truly national music might be derived from the negro melodies or Indian chants.” He added that our composers should draw inspiration from the songs that appeal more strongly to Americans than any others, those melodies that “could stop him on the street if he were in a strange land and Wyoming.”8 Their combined output totals more than 30 pieces, Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák inserted himself in Rutlage,” composer Charles Ives’s lone work of that type, the Charles Wakefield Cadman, and Charles S. Skilton embraced which they were so highly trained. The remaining composers, were a prize-winning participant in rodeos in Colorado and in the music of certain American Indians. Predictably, other composers disagreed. Edward MacDowell, for example, argued that whatever nationalist elements one hears in folk music are extraneous and, if removed, leave a melody that could just as well be Chinese as Scottish.9 Whether or not most classical composers of the early to mid-twentieth century were inclined to nationalism, formal settings of cowboy settings were a rarity. Except for the tune “Charlie Rustle,” composer Charles Fox’s lone work of that type, the prominent “American Five” (Ives, Carl Ruggles, Wallingford Riegger, John Becker, and Henry Cowell) neither wrote nor arranged any cowboy songs.

Ultimately, as Charles Hamm points out, what many classical composers of the time period came to consider as distinctively American music was not essentially folk music, but music by immigrant urban Jewish composers, with names like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, drawing on black, Jewish, Irish, and Italian styles, accepted both at home and abroad as the most distinctive American music of its time.7 According to annotations in the scores, only two of Fox’s cowboy songs (“Come All Ye Jolly Cowboys” and “Texas Songs of the Open Range” (1927) included 21 song texts, while Fox and Guion’s success in New York City in the early 1930s, Fox embraced a simplicity and directness that enhances rather than limits the appeal of his songs. While that may result in part from a desire to minimize the technical difficulties that They presented to performers—the arrangements present few challenges to pianists and the voice part is usually doubled in the arrangements nevertheless are very moving.21 David W. Guion (1892-1981), largely self-taught as a composer, studied piano as a child before traveling to Vienna for further instruction under Leopold Godowsky from 1912-1914. Although now thought of primarily as an arranger of the music of African Americans and cowboys, Guion found success in New York City in the early 1930s, as a nationally broadcast radio-show host and composer.4 As with Fox, some of Guion’s settings, such as “All Day on the Prairie” and “Carry Me Home to the Lone Prairie,” are notable for their directness, which works particularly well in “O Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie.” In this song Guion enlivens the texture through the use of drone-like and repeating figures in the arrangement and in the third verse where the text turns to the wild coyotes (sic) will howl over me. Oh bury me not on the lone prairie.13
end of the verse in which McCaffee tells us that he murdered his wife. The bleakness of the rest of the song is anticipated by prominent discords in the two-measure interlude that follows. A tolling, repeated low bass note accompanies McCaffee's final words, as do dissonances that underscore the grimness of what led to his regrettable demise.

The three songs with texts by Marie Lussi (“Prairie Night Song,” “Ride, Cowboy, Ride!” and “The Song of the Whip”) differ from the others in that their grandiosity of style, with leaps, full-voice chords, bring to mind not so much the imagery of the West as they do the more effusive, perhaps even exaggerated, style of opera.

None of the remaining composers had the close contact with cowboys that Fox and Guion did, so it is not surprising that their contributions to the repertoire were smaller. Arthur Farwell (1872-1952), whose arrangement of “The Lone Cowboy Song,” is the earliest of the published songs, is remembered primarily for his interest in and arrangements of American Indian music and as an innovative music publisher.

Charles Ives (1874-1954), the New Englander whose works celebrate that region and range from chamber simplicity to their one cowboy song, “Charlie Rufle.” The poem, which he found in Lomax’s collection of cowboy songs, is based on D. J. O’Malley’s “A Cowboy’s Love Song,” which is remembered primarily for his interest in American music and as an innovative music publisher.

Composer and organist Seth Bingham (1882-1972), who taught at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary and was the organist at New York’s Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, is, like Ives, an unlikely composer of cowboy songs. Nevertheless, in 1930 the H. W. Gray Company published his first Cowboy Song, each coming from songs in Lomax’s collection of Cowoys Songs, although three of them (“Days of Forty-Nine,” “Root Hog or Die,” and “The Song of the Whip”) are disguised as different as the songs of the cowboy. The second reason that so many early twentieth-century composers had little, if any, interest in cowboy music may be because of the nature of the poetry found in so many cowboy songs. With its reliance on rhyme, meter, transparency, and simplicity, cowboy poetry, at least until recent decades, at times seemed intermediate to the genre of the mainstream American poetry. There are, of course, exceptions. As Lawrence Levine points out in High Bridge/Low Brow, nineteenth-century Americans were far better versed in Shakespeare than we are today. It is not surprising, then, to find a parallel between Allen McCaffee’s “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy” and Shakespeare’s As You Like It. Shakespeare’s Duke Senior, banished to the Forest of Arden, praises his life there: And this our life, exempt from public haunt, Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

In the third verse of his poem, McCaffee paraphrases Shakespeare: My ceiling the sky, my carpet the grass, My music the lowing of herds as they pass; My books are the brooks, my sermons the stones, My person’s a wolf on a pulpit of bones.

In general, however, cowboy poetry is noted more for its simplicity than its complexity, more for its decisive action than its nuanced gesture. Consequently, the cowboy poet portrays the obvious so we are not left probing the layers of allusion and symbolism of more modernist art songs. Consequently, it is not surprising that many composers of art songs find more of interest in the poetry of William Blake and James Agee than do in D. J. O’Malley and Baxter Black, in the culture of Europe or in the exultation of the Middle and Far East than do in the American West. Moreover, given their remoteness from the cowboy experience, one cannot help but wonder under which circumstances composers ever encounter cowboy poetry: probably not in their academic, professional, and social environments.

The third reason that most prominent composers of the early to mid-twentieth century were not interested in the songs of the cowboy may be found in cowboy music itself. Music historian Bill C. Malone asserts that “[t]he cowboy contributed nothing to American music.” At first glance that seems outrageous, but upon further reflection it makes sense: unlike the novelty of ragtime’s syncopated rhythms and blues’ altered scale degrees and 12-bar form, one will not find similarly distinctive elements common to cowboy music that distinguished it from traditional folk music.

Aaron Copland, for example, wrote the following about composing the ballet score for Billy the Kid: I have never been particularly impressed with the musical beauties of the cowboy song as such. The words are usually delightful and the manner of singing needs no praise from me. But neither the words nor the delivery are of much use in a purely orchestral ballet score, so I was left with the tunes themselves, which I repeat, are often less than exciting.

Given the paucity of classical works based upon the folkloric dimension of cowboy song, subsequent generations of art composers would seem to have agreed with Copland’s assessment. Finally, despite its risks and hardships, the cowboy’s life was, for most, a life of choice. The admittedly fanciful images that
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It is unlikely that many readers of Western novels zan warehouses Gene Autry or John Wayne will ever hear Andre Previn’s "Sally Chism remembers Billy the Kid" or any of the other songs that are the focus of this study. And yet through different means of artistic expression—painting, photography, sculpture, film, and music—the seemingly mutually exclusive tastes of disimilar audiences are satisfied, drawn to that storied time in our nation's history. Though few in number, cowboy songs that were transformed into art songs provide one of the trails to our collective heritage—the American cowboy.

Notes

2. Richard W. Smatra, Cowboy Songs of the New Haven (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 86. More specifically Smatra argues that 63 percent of these cowboys were white, 25 percent were black, and 12 percent were Mexican or Mexican-American.
5. Ibid.
6. Edward MacDowell, "Folk Song and its Relation to Nationalism in Music," in Critical and Historical Essays. Lecture delivered at Columbia University by Edward MacDowell, ed. W. J. Baldy (Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1912), 146-147. MacDowell asserted in his lecture that "This being the case, perhaps my statement that the real principles of folk music in its true state has nothing in common with nationalism (considered in the usual sense of the word), will be better understood. And this will be the proof that nationalism, so-called, is merely an extraordinary thing that has no part in pure art. For if we take any melody, even of the most pronouncial national type, and merely eliminate the characteristic tunes, allusions, or sentiments, the theme becomes simply music, and removes no touch of nationality. We may even go further, for if we take the characteristic manifestations of dums, we may harmonize a folk song in such a manner that it will lose its origin, and by means of this powerful factor an essentially modern invention we may even transform a Swedish song, with all its "dums" and character, into a Chinese song, or give an Arabian flavour. This, be it seen, is possible only to a limited degree; still, however, it preys on the roots of harmony, and if it be seen, has no part in folk song.".
7. Charles Harmon, "Cowboy Song," in TheSongs of the American Cow Boy (1897); N. Howard "Jack" Thorp's Songs of the American Cowboy (1920).
9. A list of the names and dates of all the songs is included at the end of this article.
10. I looked only at the song and did not consider choreal and instrumental works. Further, I looked only at the titles of art songs and, in so doing, may have passed over a cowboy text because the title did not suggest an obvious connection.
12. John A. Lemet, Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads (New York: Stokes & Whitney Company, 1910). Numerous collections that appeared without titles include Clark Stakely's The Life and Adventures of the American Cow Boy (1897); N. Howard "Jack" Theopopy's Songs of the Cowboy (1908), and Charles Stagg's The Songs Companion of a Lone Star Cowboy (1919); a thin volume of 14 songs. Stringer's autographed "A Cowboy's Dream" (1883) in a classic account of his life on the range.