Matthew Gelbart. 2007. *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music": Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Reviewed by Julian Onderdonk**

A focus on the historical causes of normative social assumptions and everyday patterns of thought has been one of the many important consequences of the structuralist revolution. From Claude Lévi-Strauss's groundbreaking anthropological work of the 1950s to the deconstructionist approaches of Jacques Derrida in the 1960s and beyond, the focus on language, ideas, and social behaviors as interrelated forms of cultural expression has had a major impact in helping us understand why we view the world the way we do. Among music historians, one early manifestation of this relativizing project occurred with the application of literary theories of reception to the discipline—the realization that long-cherished beliefs about everything from composers' critical reputations to established historical narratives are in fact constructed over time, and as such are subject to further discussion and revision. From this beginning, structuralist skepticism about received opinion has come to permeate every corner of the discipline, with the result that the largely positivist methods of the past have given way to a new historiographical focus that sees music in broader social and cultural terms and, thus, as part of an ever-evolving history of ideas.

Matthew Gelbart's *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music"* represents a landmark publication in these developments, for it calls into question long-held assumptions about folk and art music. These are terms of enormous significance to Western musical culture. They frame our entire approach to the classification of music, from the way the academic musical curriculum is organized to the value judgments we variously attach to the labels "high" and "low." The terms would also, at first glance, seem to possess a strong and secure meaning in our musical culture—"universal" categories of invariable significance that have existed for centuries. Such assumptions are far from accurate, however, as Gelbart convincingly shows through a wide-ranging historiographical examination of two centuries' worth of writings on culture and musical aesthetics. According to this analysis, the emergence of "folk" and "art" categories dates to the first glimmerings of cultural nationalism in the mid-eighteenth century—a period when nascent ideas of political self-determination necessitated the identification of a nation's "communal property" that could, in turn, aid the struggle for political and cultural independence. While this cultural need naturally

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focused attention on a given region's folk music, Gelbart makes it clear that art music was no less important to this development—indeed, that art and folk categories were made meaningful only in relation to one another. This is not only because both form a linked binary opposition, familiar from structuralist discourse, but also because the new nationalism developed alongside new, fundamentally Romantic ideas about human creativity that valued the individual as part of a larger racial and ethnic whole. In these terms, the "individual genius" and the collective "folk genius" were cut from the same cloth—products, in their different ways, of post-Enlightenment society and politics.

The emergence of the folk/art dichotomy hinged on the question of origins. Whereas music had previously been categorized by function—for dancing, for domestic use, for formal occasions, etc.—the eighteenth century initiated the tendency, now taken for granted, to classify music principally by authorial source. This trend reflected the growing sophistication of eighteenth-century copyright laws, but ultimately emerged in response to geographical and political needs. Thus the idea of "national music," the term which gave way to "folk" music over time, first arose in Scotland, which in the eighteenth century was embroiled in a long and tortuous struggle with England, its powerful neighbor to the south. The controversial 1707 Act of Union and the harsh English reprisals following the mid-century Jacobin uprisings prompted Scots to emphasize and promote elements unique to their national culture. For music, this fundamentally meant establishing the Scottish authorship of specific musical works. Gelbart traces the winnowing process-in-reverse from the 1720s to the 1770s whereby specific songs (words, music, or both) were ascribed first to David Rizzio, a sixteenth-century Italian musician attached to the Scottish court, then to James I of Scotland (r. 1406–37), then to putative third-century Scottish bards like Ossian, and eventually to the anonymous Scottish "folk" themselves. From here, the idea of a "national music" that had been communally evolved within endogamous societies over centuries quickly spread abroad, especially to Germany, where the concept of the *Volkslied* coined by Johann Gottfried Herder gave the concept its most lasting formulation.

It was in Germany that the other side of the binary—"art" music—came into play, but only after far-reaching shifts in musical aesthetics and cultural attitudes that took nearly a century to work themselves out. The new conception of national music initially existed in categorical opposition to "cultivated" music, traditionally associated with science and craft (i.e., artifice). In part, this was because the influx of Italian and French Baroque music into the British Isles around 1720 prompted worried commentators to look for "national" alternatives. Ultimately, though, the opposition stemmed

from music's usefulness to the new Enlightenment concept of "conjectural history"—the theory that civilizations passed through progressive "stages of mankind" so that different world cultures at any one time occupied different stages of development. Here, national music was linked to ancient, and so-called Oriental and savage music as expressions of "primitive" musical cultures in contrast to the more "complex" music of advanced European societies. While some commentators used the primitive label to condemn this music, others like Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw national music—or *natural* music, as it was significantly also called—as inherently superior for reasons familiar from his "noble savage" concept: such music represented a state of innocence and purity that more "advanced" civilizations had permanently lost. Indeed, the very fact that "natural" music existed outside of the "rules" of cultivated music and yet was beautiful in its own right gave evidence of a collective "folk genius" that stood in opposition to traditional conceptions of musical craft and learning.

If the folk genius concept established an opposition between folk and art categories, it also signaled a rejection of traditional ideas of art that would lead to a mutual dependence and dialectical tension between these categories. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paradigms had linked art directly to nature, whose "universal" rules and "scientific" basis represented the ideal that art sought to emulate. (The scientific and "artificial" orientation of cultivated music, mentioned above, related directly to this mimetic theory of art.) And yet here, in the concept of national music, was a "nature" that was valued precisely for its avoidance of rules and artifice—a nature, moreover, that was universal in its own right by virtue of its resemblance to other primitive musics found throughout the world. The implications of this realization were enormous, for in essence it asserted that musical creativity consisted of something more than simply divining and emulating scientific nature. Nor was such creativity limited to folk and "primitive" artists, for the discovery of *local* national musics, existing within the lowest stratum of all societies, meant that even cultivated musicians could tap into their ethnic roots for creative purposes. In this way, the racial and ethnic orientation of the "folk genius" become bound up with new conceptions of "individual genius" that quickly became central to Romantic ideas of the rule-breaking artist.

(It is of course true that the Romantics themselves did not limit "inspiration" to purely ethnic forces. Idealist philosophy famously attributed genius and creativity to the quest for the "infinite"—abstract and transcendental truths that could never fully be identified, much less enumerated. To the extent that this quest was dependent on the values of an authenticity, purity, and universality that was now identified with "unschooled" nature, however,

the Romantic concept of the individual genius emerged in connection with the idea of folk genius. The fact that both forms of genius mystified and obscured the details of their respective origins—attributing authorship in the one case not to the individual singer but rather to orally transmitted "tradition," locating the process of individual creation in the quest for transcendence born of personal and/or ethnic "authenticity" in the other—simply gives further evidence of the two categories' interdependence.)

This linking of folk and artistic genius occurred principally in Germany, and set the stage by which the dialectic reached the form that prevails to this day. The needs of cultural nationalism, again, drove these developments, for while the folk/art "question" was a literary as well as a musical topic of debate in France and Great Britain, in the German lands it was the musical angle that was addressed most intensively. If Rousseau had privileged primitive music over cultivated music, German pride in its musical traditions sought to redress the balance by *synthesizing* the new emphasis on "pure" nature with traditional ideas of "science" (i.e., musical craft). This synthesis took the form of the "organic" artwork—the notion, promoted by Herder and others, that an individual composition might grow from a single thematic kernel or seed so that all aspects of the work related to each other in the same way that all aspects of nature did. Organicism thus empowered the constructive skill of the individual composer even as it encouraged him or her to use folksong, the most "natural" and "universal" form of musical expression, as the "raw material" of art. The quick success of the concept in the cultural marketplace helped to solidify the prestige and influence of nineteenth-century German (and Austrian) music, a development that in turn inspired non-German nationalist composers to challenge German hegemony by basing compositions on their own native folksong. The irony, of course, is that this compositional strategy was itself a German prescription, and to the extent that these nationalists themselves embraced the organic work concept, they not only strengthened that hegemony but also unwittingly ensured that their own music would be granted secondary status. Certainly, aestheticians like A.B. Marx and Eduard Hanslick viewed such nationalists as "newcomers" to the field: unlike German composers reared on the great "folk-influenced" music of Bach, Schütz, and others, they could not help but invoke their folk music self-consciously and thus superficially. Only German musicians, as Richard Wagner argued, could intuitively compose "as the folk"—an assertion that at once proclaimed the more thorough-going organicism of the German tradition and formed the basis of its claims to universality. Non-German nationalist composers thus found themselves in a double bind: those who deliberately based their styles on their own folksong were accused of not being "organic" (i.e., universal)

enough, while those who avoided folksong altogether were criticized for their lack of "authenticity" by superficially imitating a German musical style whose folk "layer" they were ill-equipped to perceive.

Thus by a circuitous route did the relative values of "art music" and "folk music" assume the aesthetic positions that they hold today—with the former essentially occupying a position superior to the latter. This is not to say that folk music is lacking for champions (in an interesting final chapter, Gelbart demonstrates how folk and art music have been grouped together and mutually elevated at the expense of a "meretricious" commercial popular music since the mid-nineteenth century), only that in general terms it has been placed at a lower level of cultural significance. The more important point, however, is that the relationship between the two that prevails today is basically the product of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German discourse. As Gelbart points out, the few twentieth-century nationalist composers who have been accepted into what Richard Taruskin calls the "panromanogermanic" mainstream have been composers like Benjamin Britten, who notoriously attacked the "provincial" use of folksong and stressed the cosmopolitanism of the English Baroque composers who influenced him. Béla Bartók is an even more striking case, for this champion of folksong essentially took the German view that the greatest music was that which assimilated the folk completely and distilled it through the individual genius. That Bartók should take this position—one that clearly represents how he viewed his own music—in the face of the enormous importance he placed on folksong and his collecting work in general testifies to the lasting power of the folk/art dialectic as molded by German Romantic aesthetics.

This overview of the book's main argument does scant justice to its breathtakingly panoramic focus or to the impressive learning of its author. In less than 300 pages, Gelbart discusses eighteenth-century Scottish political and cultural history, the evolution of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought, the emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline, German literary theories of sentimental versus naïve poetry, the controversies swirling around the authenticity of the Ossian fragments, and the relationship between Anglophone and German discourse about oral transmission and folk culture generally. (On this last point, interestingly, Gelbart downplays the significance of Herder's *Volkslied* concept, which he traces to earlier English and Scottish writing on national music, but makes an impassioned claim for Herder as the originator of the conceptual synthesis of nature and science that resulted in the organic work concept.) Gelbart closely examines the composition and complicated receptions of works such as Beethoven's Scottish folksong settings, Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* Overture, and Niels Gade's *Im Hochland* Overture. He incorporates critical perspectives

like genre theory, Edward Said's Orientalism discourse, and William Weber's work on the relationship between patterns of middle-class concert life and canon formation. The attention given to Weber is especially refreshing, for Gelbart reminds us that the high-minded and often arid exchange of aesthetic ideas that forms the core subject of his book were also rooted in social class and the everyday practical needs of making a living. He shows, for example, how the incompatible goals of academic folksong collectors and publicists (many of them gentleman amateurs) and creative professional musicians (many from middle-class backgrounds, and under pressure to carve a niche for themselves within the music business) were reflected in the different ways the two groups actually handled folk material.

The focus on the details of folk music—its invention and mediation by "outsiders"—is another strength of the book. In a crucial chapter on "the invention of folk modality," Gelbart examines the long-standing European obsession with the unusual scales of different national musics (pentatonic, modal, and variously gapped), and itemizes the strikingly similar ways that commentators from Rousseau to Bartók used their observations of scalar patterns to link the "primitive" musics of the ancients, the Orient and the "folk." The story is fascinating not merely because the perceived musical parallels formed the justification for the "universality" of European (and especially German) folksong, but also because the various views of this music were in fact not entirely consistent and reflected the preoccupations of specific commentators and their times. Thus, to cite a few examples, Benjamin Franklin attributed gapped scales to the limited capabilities of early instruments, Charles Burney focused on the parallels between Scottish and ancient Greek music as gleaned from Plutarch, Abbé Roussier saw both Greek and Oriental scales as emanating from ancient Egyptian tetrachords, and George Thomson (the man who commissioned Beethoven's Scottish song settings) theorized that the seemingly different pentatonic scales found "in the field" were in fact a single scale that possessed five possible cadential pitches. Even the few writers, like Thomas Dauney in the 1830s, who rejected outright the theory of a pan-universal scale, felt the need to establish ancient origins by treating modal Scottish tunes as modern "survivals" of Medieval plainchant. Gelbart's painstaking reconstruction of the details of the debate over time does justice to its richness and variety while never losing sight of its fundamental uniformity, one born of the Enlightenment project of comprehensive "world learning" that was itself part of a larger strategy to flatter modern European cultural achievement. And since that achievement was fundamentally identified with "art" music, we can again see how the folk/art binary, here reflected in the theory of modality, ultimately served the purposes of high culture. Nor has this "strategy" materially changed

in the two centuries since the question of modality first arose. According to Gelbart, twentieth-century writers on mode as diverse as Bartók, Cecil Sharp, Hugo Riemann, Erich von Hornbostel, Bertrand Bronson, and even Harold Powers have essentially presented updated versions of theories first propounded between 1760 and 1840. Some of these scholars, it is true, incorporated into their work Darwinian and Spencerian methodologies dating from the later nineteenth century. But as Gelbart points out, theories of biological and social evolution, far from upending Enlightenment ideas of conjectural history, in fact strengthened those ideas by recasting them in seemingly irrefutable scientific terms.

The examination of modal theories is but a small component of Gelbart's comprehensive treatment of the history of European folksong scholarship past and present. (The book begins with a discussion of the historical disagreements among scholars about folksong definitions and methodologies, and includes an entire chapter on the emergence of "tradition," a shadowy concept that not only made the idea of folk genius possible but also determined many of the period's collecting and editorial practices.) Such comprehensiveness is not reserved exclusively for the folksong and ethnomusicological literature but extends to nearly every subject. His handling of the crucial theme of "nature" is a case in point, for Gelbart draws on a wide array of primary and secondary writings on literary, musical, and intellectual history to show how changing ideas of nature—specifically its separation from science and art, detailed above—resulted from the eighteenth-century focus on the primitive. Strikingly, he chooses to demonstrate the shift by tracing changing attitudes towards the pastoral, the age-old literary genre whose depictions of a "timeless" landscape had always stood as a metaphor for humans' complex relationship to nature. Referencing classic studies by twentieth-century literary critics like William Empson and Paul Alpers, and undertaking close readings of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poems by Alexander Pope and William Wordsworth, Gelbart divines a rift in the traditional fabric of the genre during the period in question, one caused by the "discovery" of the primitive. The result is a new sense of human separation from nature, and the morphing of the fundamentally affirmative values of pastoral into the more tragic ethos of the picturesque, whereby the traditional Golden Age of pastoral art is rendered ultimately unrecoverable. Suddenly, from being a place of assured consolation and permanent residence, nature becomes a metaphor for the modern European's lost innocence, a landscape now occupied solely by the primitive "other." The stage for the idealization—and invention—of the "folk" has been set.

The importance of this conceptual shift to Gelbart's entire thesis is obvious, and has undeniable merit in establishing the aesthetic basis for the

emergence not merely of "folk" music but of the entire folk/art dialectic. And while I would agree that the picturesque—and, as Gelbart also acknowledges, the near-contemporaneous concept of the sublime—is a crucial stage in the development of both categories during this period, the author's handling of the pastoral nonetheless represents a missed opportunity. Writers like Alpers and Empson may emphasize the flexibility of a genre that can cover a wide spectrum of human experience in a remarkable variety of contexts, but there is another critical tradition, forwarded by Raymond Williams (1973) and Laurence Lerner (1972) among others, that subordinates this variety to a uniform cultural politics forwarded by social elites. In this reading, the pastoral idealization of nature has always been sponsored by the powerful who seek, consciously or otherwise, to maintain their standing in society precisely by *appearing* to reject the sophistication and urbanity that are the inevitable consequence of power. Put another way, the pastoral embrace of the simple signals a kind of mystification of the truth of social relations, and its loud lament for humanity's "loss" constitutes a strategy specifically designed to preserve the elite from the hardships that a true return to nature would entail. The applicability of this paradigm to one of the central points of Gelbart's study—that the folk/art divide ultimately served the purposes of art music—will be clear. For despite the tremendous shift in attitudes that he rightly traces in his book, the fact remains that "nature," variously defined, consistently shaped elite conceptions of music throughout this entire period. This was true both before the shift occurred, when mimetic theories of art prompted composers to follow the "rules" of "scientific" nature, as well as after, when notions of "unschooled" nature gave rise to a new "organic" conception of music. The result, in both cases, was a continued and unbroken emphasis on musical learning, craft, and integration of materials, the traditional tools of cultivated music since perhaps the dawn of human societies and the ultimate source of its aesthetic "superiority" and influence. It seems surprising that Gelbart, whose careful readings of the modal debate and of the rise of conjectural history show real sensitivity to the political uses of culture and whose own observations about the centrality of musical craft both before and after the shift clearly point the moral, should miss this. Perhaps the problem arises from the difficulties of genre definition, in particular the handling of the gray area that inevitably exists between related genres. Underestimating the depth and seriousness of the lament for nature imbedded in even the earliest pastoral poetry, the author consequently overestimates the "newness" of the lament as reformulated in the eighteenth-century concepts of the picturesque and the sublime. Doubtless the "discovery" of the primitive did give an added jolt to the European expression of loss, but the commonality of that lament

with traditional pastoral forms and attitudes points to the shared grounding of all three sensibilities in the cultural and ultimately political needs of the social elite.

This observation in no way undermines the core of Gelbart's thesis or the value of his book. (For one thing, the lament embodied in the picturesque resulted in the invention of a new concept, the "folk," that did, after all, hugely affect the way art music came to conceive of itself. And to the extent that the lament sparked interest, admittedly idealized and subjectively colored, in actual artifacts of lower-class culture, it arguably also marked the first hesitant steps towards the genuine appreciation of social difference that presumably characterizes Western democratic ideals today.) The same can be said of the very few other points, generally minor, that Gelbart either overlooks or misrepresents in the book. His observation that Mendelssohn's "Scottish" works iron out the musical eccentricities of their "local" material in favor of the more streamlined processes of mainstream compositional practice usefully illustrates the German tendency to privilege traditional concepts of art and craft over those of folk expression. But in tracing—rightly, I think—one aspect of this streamlining process to Mendelssohn's student exercises in harmonizing old German chorales, Gelbart overlooks the probability that the composer saw a parallel between Scottish melodies and German chorales, which were beginning to be perceived in this period as fundamentally akin to folksongs. Many chorales were modal and of unknown authorship and, as church music and folksong scholars were actively pointing out, specific details of melody and form were in the process of evolving over time. In this context, Mendelssohn's decision to apply chorale harmonization techniques to Scottish material can be seen as yet another example of the Germanocentric view that the central-European tradition was uniquely qualified to mediate between different folk traditions. As the author himself points out, it was on its supposed ability to mediate between *all* folk traditions that German music staked its claim to an unmatched universality.

Also of mostly secondary concern are the somewhat exaggerated claims Gelbart makes for the uniform adoption of nineteenth-century German conceptions of music by non-German nationalist composers. Edvard Grieg and Antonin Dvořák clearly did integrate the local features of their national folksong into large-scale organic works on the German model, but the same is emphatically not true of Modest Mussorgsky, Igor Stravinsky, and others of the Russian school, who deliberately subjected their vernacular materials to non-developmental processes. That Stravinsky derived this technique, at least in part, from Claude Debussy's music, meanwhile, renders Gelbart's assertion that the late-nineteenth-century French counterattack on

German (and especially Wagnerian) hegemony was unconsciously infused with central-European organic ideals equally problematic. (Sorting out the complex relationship between Debussy and Wagner would require much more space than Gelbart gives it; significantly, this portion of his argument omits any mention of Debussy and invokes instead the likes of Vincent D'Indy and Julien Tiersot, lesser figures of French music who remained far more strongly influenced by German ideals than Debussy.) Finally, there is very little discussion of opera in all of this, the genre that arguably did more to promote national ideals than any other. A seminal nationalist work like Mikhail Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) owes as much if not more to the Italian *bel canto* and French rescue-opera traditions than to "organic" methods of German construction, for example. It is true that Wagner's innovations in operatic form cast an enormous shadow over nineteenth-century operas—even to some extent Verdi's—but this did not happen until the late 1850s at the earliest. In fact, methods of organic construction came to infuse purely instrumental works in Germany and Austria well before they did operatic works, with the result that those methods likewise found their way first into the instrumental music of non-German composers and only eventually into their operas. Future editions of Gelbart's book will want to clarify this time lag by more carefully addressing the varied history of these different genres as they developed in the German-speaking lands.

These are small objections, however, compared to the one truly serious problem with this book—its lack of a concluding bibliography. A study as rich as this in its scholarly reference needs a bibliography if only to allow those readers who wish to keep sources straight or pursue further study to put their fingers on specific citations easily. Gelbart's closely-argued text requires the constant revisiting of sources over the span of many pages. Since these second and third citations naturally refer to the source only in abbreviated form, the reader must leaf backwards through the book to find the first citation with its full bibliographical information. In a lightly-researched volume, this might not normally be a problem, but it emphatically is needed here, where the sheer volume of footnotes, many with illuminating commentary, often makes it difficult to locate the desired source. Nor does the index help. I found it to be very inconsistent and sometimes wholly lacking in references. None of this is the author's fault, of course, and Cambridge University Press should rectify the omission in the event of a second edition.

These few issues aside, this is clearly a very remarkable book. Examining the shifting conceptualizations of music throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth (even to some extent, the twentieth) centuries in great detail, Matthew Gelbart has uncovered the crucial yet hitherto underappreciated significance of a folk/art dialectic that lies at the very heart of our current

aesthetics of music. In the enormity of its subject matter and breadth of its learning—delightfully leavened by an almost colloquial writing style that somehow manages to combine informality with precision—*The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music"* is an indispensable addition to the general history of Western musical culture.

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