

Christmas Carols, Drums, and Compound Musical Topics¹

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Abstract: The paper presents a semiotic analysis of Katherine Kennikot Davis’s “Carol of the Drum,” also known as “The Little Drummer Boy.” Approaching the composition from a topical point of view, Sheinberg describes the historical background of the work’s content, in particular the socio-political phenomenon of drummer boys in the military and its cultural associations: innocence and devotion. A map of particular musical correlations is then drawn, connecting to established musical topics. Sheinberg also inspects the time and circumstances of the Carol’s composition, as well as its religious repercussions, incorporating additional related musical elements into a web of what may become a new musical topic.

Keywords: music signification, musical topic, military, Christmas carols

One of the main emphases of the relatively recent research in music signification has been musical topic theory.² Most scholarly writings on this subject relate back to Leonard Ratner’s reference to “a thesaurus of characteristic figures” in classical music, which served as “subjects for musical discourse.”³ This starting point has directed discussions of musical topics to an exclusive focus on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴

¹ I am grateful to Prof. Anita Breckbill for her careful reading of this paper and her valuable suggestions for its improvement.

² Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006). An excellent overview of the research in this area, albeit not entirely up-to-date anymore, can be found in Nicholas McKay’s “On Topics Today,” *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 4, nos. 1-2 (2007): 159–83. Musical topics have also been discussed in two collections: Esti Sheinberg (Ed.), *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations—In Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), and in a volume wholly devoted to this subject: Danuta Mirka (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³ Ratner’s most quoted discussion of musical topics can be found in his *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980), p. 9. However, John A. Rice, in his review of Mirka’s collection, mentions that the idea of musical topics, albeit not named yet as such, goes as far back as Ratner’s *Music: The Listener’s Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957).

⁴ Ratner’s immediate followers were Wye J. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze di Figaro & Don Giovanni* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Both books although considered basic to the studies of musical topics, have limited their discussions to the Classical Period. Studies as late as Danuta Mirka’s introduction to *The Oxford Handbook* seem still attached to this umbilical cord when she states that “topics are islands of affective signification emerging from the sea of eighteenth-century music” (p. 23).

However, as Raymond Monelle pointed out, the use and signification of musical topics should not be limited to any particular period: “some topics are to be found throughout our culture, from the sixteenth century through the twenty-first.”⁵ The following discussion, therefore, regards a musical topic as any cultural unit signified in music in a generally consistent way, and subsequently interpreted as such.⁶ By “generally consistent way,” I refer to a combination of characteristics that are present either in whole or in part in a cultural unit while still having a substantially constant meaning, recognizable by stylistically competent listeners.⁷ Since, by definition, no cultural unit can be unrelated to its past, musical topics are not rootless phenomena either; they develop from combinations of percepts, habits, historical facts, and social conditions, and continue to aggregate into complex significations, enriching and adapting them into new, timely relevancies.

Katherine Kennikot Davis’s “Carol of the Drum,” also known as “The Little Drummer Boy,” is such an instance.⁸ The popularity of this short song, originally composed for an a-capella mixed choir, has gone even further than the imagination of its composer who, with regard to its success and the ensuing legal controversy as to its authorship, wrote:

The other day I found in an old notebook the first version of the *Carol of The Drum* tune, and I remembered that there are still some people who doubt whether it is my tune. (...) I know I wrote both the music and the words. But the people who later made a few small changes in it and brought it out as *The Little Drummer Boy* were equally certain that it was a folksong. (...) The *Carol* was first published by Wood in '41 (...) in '59 or '60 the song became a smash hit with its new name (*TLDB*), and a splendid recording which was on the air constantly. (...) I have wondered about it all.⁹

This popularity, however, was not immediate: the song became popular only after the Harry Simeone Chorale recorded it, adding chimes, as well as a general pause before the last verse. Neither this arrangement nor Davis’s admission that “I fall into folk idiom frequently” can explain the incredible success of this song, to this day one of the most popular Christmas carols, as well as the persistence of the belief—in various websites that tell about and discuss it—of its folk roots.¹⁰

⁵ Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 4. His analysis of the *pianto* topic proves this point: Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 66–77.

⁶ Taking as a starting point Umberto Eco’s definition of a cultural unit, I have discussed elsewhere the relations between cultural units and musical topics. See Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 5–9; Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 66–67.

⁷ The concept of “stylistic competency” follows Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 29–30.

⁸ Katherine K. Davis, *Carol of the Drum: for mixed voices (S.A.T.B.) accompanied* (Rockville Centre, NY: Belwin Mills Publishing Corp. [originally the Wood Company], 1941).

⁹ Katherine K. Davis, personal letter to Jack L. Ralston, Music Librarian, Conservatory of Music, University of Missouri–Kansas City, 22 July 1973, quoted in Harrison Charles Boughton, “Katherine K. Davis: Life and Work” (DMA thesis, University of Missouri–Kansas City, 1974, reprinted by University Microfilm International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), 25–26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Most if not all websites where the song is discussed include many inaccuracies: see, for example, the Wikipedia article “The Little Drummer Boy” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Little_Drummer_Boy, accessed 30 January 2018), which lists hundreds of recordings of this song since the 1950s. It also offers many interesting ideas, but still relates the text to “a traditional Czech carol,” without specifying the

The Story Line and its Literary Similes

Pondering the possible associations that might have brought her to write the poem, Katherine K. Davis raised the possibility that “the idea might have stemmed from the legend of the Juggler of Notre Dame.”¹¹ The only possible connection between this story and the text of “The Carol of the Drum” is the figure of a simpleton, often a poor person, who lacks the erudition required for a traditionally authorized prayer, and thus expresses his devotion by whatever he is able to do instead. This is a familiar motif in world literature and folk stories. Examples are: Anatole France’s “Juggler of Notre Dame,” whose juggling was accepted by the Virgin Mary as an offering¹²; Amahl, the child protagonist of Gian Carlo Menotti’s opera for children, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), who offered his crutch as a gift (and then healed, not needing the crutch anymore); or Shalom Asch’s “The Righteous Peasant,” whose devotional whistle “tore open the gates of Heaven” on Yom Kippur.¹³ These stories focus on the deep religious emotion, expressing pure belief and devotion, and preferring them to institutionalized ceremonial rites.

Drummers

In Western tradition, drums belong to the military arena. As such, they are linked to war, bravery, and manhood on one hand, and with festive military parades on the other, thus enabling both dysphoric and euphoric connotations. While eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century drums are usually euphoric, related to military gallantry and historic victories,¹⁴ the literature and music of later periods tend to view war—and, by association, military drums — in a dysphoric light.¹⁵

circumstance of this reference, as described by Davis in her letter. Many other websites offer lyrics (quite often modified), explanations, discussions, interpretations, and more and more arrangements and recordings.

¹¹ Boughton, 25.

¹² Anatole France’s story, published in his collection of stories *L’Étui de nacre* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1892) was based on the medieval poem “Le Tombeur de Nostre-Dame” by Gautier de Coinci (1177–1236), and appeared in his collection of stories *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*—the oldest known source of this story. The story, which has been reprinted in countless collections, was translated into English and published in *The Tumbler of Our Lady (Le Jongleur de Notre Dame) and Other Miracles: Translated from The Middle French* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1909). This edition opens with a photograph of the page carrying the story in the original illustrated manuscript, kept in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris, an illustration that likely would have attracted the eye of any reader. France’s late nineteenth-century story was then followed by Massenet’s opera *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame* (1902), a fact that points to its great popularity around the turn of the century and, moreover, to its becoming a separate cultural unit.

¹³ Shalom Asch, “HaTzaddik ha-Kafri,” in *Sefer HaMoadim: Volume 1—Rosh HaShana ve-Yom ha-Kippurim*, ed. Y.L. Baruch & Y.T. Levinsky (Tel Aviv: Agudat Oneg Shabbat (Ohel Shem) by Dvir Co., 1961), 122–24. This short story is based on a Hassidic folk tale about the eighteenth-century Rabbi Zusya who, believing himself to be too ignorant to pray, expressed his love of God by whistling. The tale appears in dozens of sources and in many variants, most famously in Martin Buber, “Zusya’s Devotions,” *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947/8), 246.

¹⁴ See, for example, Monelle’s discussion of Haydn’s “Drum Roll” Symphony No. 103, *The Musical Topic*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 178 ff.

Mahler's late nineteenth-century orchestral songs offer at least three instances of dysphoric songs about war, all mentioned by Monelle.¹⁶ "Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen" is, in fact, a tender love duet between a maiden and her lover, who is leaving for war and who is killed in battle. The song includes the sounds of trumpets, but no percussion disturbs its tender, melancholic atmosphere. On the other hand, "Revelge," from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, employs the snare drum as a military signal that echoes the bitter satire of its repeating refrain, the "tra-la-la, tra-la-li, tra-la-lera" of the dying drummer. Of these three, only "Der Tamboursg'sell" refers to the young age of its main protagonist who was led to his execution. However, nothing in the music points to the innocence of youth: the "Gesell" simply points out that the soldier is a novice, partly understanding and sympathizing with his fear and thus with his—probable—desertion in face of war. Monelle also alludes to the use of percussion and snare drum in two twentieth-century compositions, both portraying war and the military from a satirical angle: Holst's "Mars, the Bringer of War" from *The Planets*, which is written in a 5/4 meter, and Britten's "Dies Irae" from his *War Requiem*, in 7/4—both works thus parodying the idea of a military march.¹⁷ None of the above-mentioned works relates to children or to the youth and innocence of the persons killed in war.

Drummer Boys

Drummer boys were a frequent, almost familiar phenomenon in former eras, usually serving in military platoons that were sent to war. Since drum calls served for communication during battle, drummers—mainly boys—fulfilled an active role in battle, playing a significant part in the American Civil War.¹⁸ Most drummers were in their early teens when they enlisted. Johnny "Shiloh" Clem (1851–1937), from Ohio, enlisted when he was ten years old; Willie Johnson, from Vermont, was awarded a medal of honor for bravery in war when he was 13 years old; John McLaughlin from Indiana was enlisted at "a little over ten years of age," and "Little Oirish" from Kentucky joined the Confederacy's "Orphan Brigade," being 11 years old. Photographs of drummer boys abound in online archives.¹⁹ The photo of "Jackson"—either a freed or an escaped slave, who joined the "all black" unit in Arkansas, shows a young lad of 16 years at most, in full uniform with his drum. All these boys played the drum while taking an active part in the fighting.²⁰ Europe did not lag behind. Drummer boys as young as nine years old were enlisted in the British army from the early 1600s and well into World War I.

Portraits of drummer boys abound in art: paintings, sculptures, and photographs of drummer boys can be found all over Europe and the United States, usually connected with local heroic figures and related to as symbols of innocent heroism and self-sacrifice. Among these is the figure of Joseph Bara (or Barra), the 14-year-old drummer boy who was killed during the French Revolution, who appears in several paintings and sculptures.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 180.

¹⁸ Michael Aubrecht "A History of Civil War Drummer Boys. <https://emergingcivilwar.com/2016/07/27/a-history-of-civil-war-drummer-boys-part-1/> (accessed 30 January 2018).

¹⁹ See, for example, <http://soldiers.dodlive.mil/2013/12/the-beats-of-battle-images-of-army-drummer-boys-endure/> (accessed 30 January 2018).

²⁰ <http://soldiers.dodlive.mil/2013/12/the-beats-of-battle-images-of-army-drummer-boys-endure/jackson-79th-infantry-drummer/> (accessed 30 January 2018).

Jacques-Louis David depicted Bara's death in 1794 in a quite symbolic fashion.²¹ *Le Mort de Bara* by Charles Moreau-Vauthier (1857–1924) is a realistic painting, showing the boy lying dead, in uniform but barefoot, clasping his drum with one hand and his soldier's cap in the other.²² An even more dramatic portrait is *Le Mort de Bara* (1883) by Jean-Joseph Weerts (1846–1927), showing the boy surrounded by foes at the moment he was killed.²³ The bravery of André Estienne, a boy drummer in Bonaparte's army, is honored by his statue in Cadenet, his hometown.²⁴ Unnamed drummer boys often appear in art as symbols of innocent bravery. Such are the drummer boys in several paintings by Archibald Willard (1836–1918), all called *The Spirit of '76*.²⁵ The move from portrait to symbol can be completed with a painting by Charles Edwin Fripp (1854–1906). The depicted scene, of the 1879 battle between the British army and Zulu tribes, includes a small drummer boy among the surrounded British soldiers, although, historically, the youngest soldier in this battle was over 16 years old.²⁶

Not much literature and poetry was devoted to drummer boys. A song by William S. Hays (1837–1907), published in 1865 and entitled “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh,” relates to the American Civil War. The song, which is sentimental in both lyrics and music, and has no effects resembling drumming, gained much popularity, and to this day is included in several collections of Civil War songs.²⁷ It is unclear whether or not Katherine Davis knew this song; in any case, her “Carol of the Drum” bears no resemblance in lyrics or in tune to Hays's song, and any inspiration—if drawn at all—would have been limited to the historical subject alone.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, drummer boys were banned from actively partaking in battle. By 1941, when Katherine Davis composed “The Carol of the Drum,” drummer boys lived on as a purely cultural unit, symbolizing a chilling combination of innocence, vulnerability, courage, and unconditional self-sacrifice. Davis's little drummer boy, although not explicitly so, nevertheless bears these cultural associations. Both the text and music of her carol offer a combined network of aural senses that touch one cultural nerve: the unconditional, innocent sacrifice of the young in battle.

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_of_Young_Bara#/media/File:Bara_David.jpg (accessed 30 January 2018).

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Bara#/media/File:MortdeJosephBara.jpg (accessed 30 January 2018).

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Bara#/media/File:Mort_de_Bara_-_Jean-Joseph_Weerts.jpg (accessed 30 January 2018).

²⁴ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/01/Cadenet_-_Au_Tambour_d'Arcole.JPG (accessed 30 January 2018).

²⁵ For example, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Sprit_of_'76.2.jpeg (accessed 30 January 2018).

²⁶ *The Last Stand at Isandlwana* (1879), the drummer boy is fourth from the left among the standing figures. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drummer_\(military\)#/media/File:Isandhlwana.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drummer_(military)#/media/File:Isandhlwana.jpg) (accessed 30 January 2018).

²⁷ For example, Tony Randall, Bonnie Hamilton, John Aler, Alan Baker, & Lawrence Skrobacs, *Songs of the Civil War* (New York: New World Records, 1976, 33 1/3); in score: Richard Crawford, *The Civil War Songbook: Complete Original Sheet Music for 37 Songs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977). The song was originally published as a single leaf, which can be seen in the Historic American Sheet Music collection website of Duke University:

<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/sheetmusic/b/b10/b1051/b1051-1-150dpi.html> (accessed 30 January 2018).

The Carol of the Drum

Unlike the military topic, to which Monelle devotes about a third of his book, the drummer boy is not (as yet) a musical topic per se. However, by alluding in a special, sublimated way to the military musical topic, and combining it with other meaningful musical senses, Davis points at a new musical cultural unit that may become a musical topic: the devotional, innocent military, uniting these disparate correlations into what Hatten called “spiritual abnegation,” in itself a combination of spiritual yearning and acquiescence.²⁸ Unlike Mahler’s “Revelge,” for example, where an actual snare drum echoes the military in a sinister, almost Berliozian *Hexen*-like gallows march, Davis’s drum is present only by allusion, an onomatopoeic snare-drum sound performed by men’s voices: “prum! Prum!” (see Example 1).

Example 1. Katherine Kennikot Davis’s “Carol of the Drum,” opening bars

S. "come," they told me pa rum pa pum pum

A. "come," they told me pa rum pa pum pum

T. prum prum prum prum prum prum prum prum prum prum

B. prum* prum prum prum prum prum prum prum prum prum

*) Roll the R

This sound repeats throughout the song, its rhythm intensified and further subdivided in each verse. The soprano and alto, opening with “horn fifths” (alluding to the military in a very subdued way) and continuing in parallel thirds, sing the lyrics, told by the drummer boy, each line intersected by the onomatopoeic drum motto²⁹:

“Come,” they told me, pa rum pa pum pum__
 “Our newborn King to see,” pa rum pa pum pum__
 “Our finest gifts we’ll bring,” pa rum pa pum pum__
 “To lay before the King!” pa rum pa pum pum__
 Rum pa pum pum__ , rum pa pum pum__
 So, to honor Him, pa rum pa pum pum__
 When we come.

²⁸ Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 59–63.

²⁹ The score requires the “r” sound of “prum” in the men’s voices to be rolled, and the “m” at the end of “pa ra” to be continued, echoing through closed lips.

Baby Jesu, pa rum pa pum pum__
I'm a poor boy too, pa rum pa pum pum__
I have no gift to bring, pa rum pa pum pum__
That's fit to give a King, pa rum pa pum pum__
Rum pa pum pum__ , rum pa pum pum__
Shall I play for you? pa rum pa pum pum__
On my Drum?

Mary nodded, pa rum pa pum pum__
Ox and ass kept time, pa rum pa pum pum__
I played my drum for Him, pa rum pa pum pum__
I played my best for Him, pa rum pa pum pum__
Rum pa pum pum__ , rum pa pum pum__
Then, he smiled at me, pa rum pa pum pum__
Me and my drum!

The key is the non-tragic A major; the tune is simple, its range small (a minor seventh); written in common time, the rhythm, except for the long values at the end of phrases, consists only of quarter and eighth notes.³⁰ These traits, combined with the repeated drone in the men's voices, create an impression of a folk song (which indeed this song was, and is, mistaken for, in many references!). The high pitched, child-like voices that sing the main tune in descant, a favorite device of the composer,³¹ create a musical effect of simplicity and innocence. By contrast, the men's voices have a double role, semiotically self-contradictory: on the one hand, they mark the military topic of the drum, their rhythm (its gradual intensification reminding us of "Ravel's *Bolero* effect"), sounding more and more menacing as the song progresses, in complete contradiction to the song's lyrics. On the other hand, the drone supplies the harmonic ground, emitting a feeling of security and confidence, which the composer acknowledged as a general model of her style: "I love anything that gives me a pedal point because I'm an insecure-feeling person, and a pedal point helps you. (...) That thing at the beginning of the Brahms Requiem—you're just sure you're alright after you listen to three measures of it."³²

According to Boughton, the song was composed music first and text later. Nancy Loring, Davis's close friend and companion, described in an interview the strong emotional effect that this particular creative process had on the composer:

... It was late afternoon, and I came in and found her sitting on the floor in the middle of the living room crying. And I said, "What is the matter with you?" "Well," she said, "I've gotten something here." I said, "What is it?" And then she pointed to the manuscript where she had written the "Carol of the Drum." She was just crying because she had found "The Drummer Boy."³³

³⁰ These traits make it part of a group, including various poetic and balladic texts combining youth's innocent self-sacrifice with war images. Such folk-like songs include the Civil War songs "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" by William Hays, and Stephen Foster's "Grafted into the Army"; the French song from World War I, "Marche funèbre d'un jeune soldat" (1914) by Hélène Graton; Pete Seeger's anti-Vietnam war song "The Willing Conscript"; or the Israeli Independence War song, by Alterman and Alexander (Sasha) Argov, "Elifelet." All are written in a major mode, have a quiet air (even Seeger's satire!) and a simple structure. Davis's "Carol" (1941) lies almost at the center of this history-line.

³¹ Boughton, 78

³² Interview with Davis, Boughton, 77.

³³ Interview with Loring, Boughton, 81.

Historical Circumstances³⁴

The exact date of the composition of “The Carol of the Drum” is nowhere mentioned. However, the strong emotional response could also be related to Davis’s personal state of mind in 1941. Thomas Whitney Surette (1861–1941), who was her mentor, music educator, associate and friend, passed away on 19 May of that year. For years, Davis had been involved in educational music projects with Surette and Archibald T. Davison (1883–1961), the two editors of the *Concord Series*, which consisted of music and books about music developed for public school use.³⁵ During 1941, she was working with Davison on the edition of *Songs of Freedom*³⁶—a collection of songs intended mainly for use in schools and music classes.³⁷

What did Katherine Davis know about the political situation in the world and in the United States? Though Boughton’s thesis does not mention it, it is impossible to imagine that Davis would not have been aware of the United States’ growing role in the war, given the fact that newspaper and radio were ever-present, and that she recalled spending “a considerable amount of time” listening to classical music on the radio.³⁸

By the end of 1941, after the 7 December attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States formally joined the war against Japan and Germany. Its political involvement in the war, however, had begun much earlier. On 28 December 1940, *The New York Times* reported that the U.S. government had begun to mobilize for all-out war, instituting the first peacetime draft and a fivefold increase in the defense budget. On 8 February 1941, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Lend–Lease Act, making tangible the United States’ financial support of Britain. On 10 April, the United States occupied Greenland and built, with the approval of “Free Denmark,” naval and air bases as counters to U-boat warfare. On 15 May, the first Civilian Public Service camp was opened for conscientious objectors. Less than a week later, a German submarine sank a U.S. commercial ship, leading President Roosevelt to announce an “unlimited national emergency.” This news appeared on the first page of the *Christian Science Monitor*, a periodical that, regardless of its clear denominational connections, was recognized as one of the best newspapers in the United States. Davis, being member of a Christian Science Church, most probably read it.³⁹ The 17 May issue of the periodical stated that “Federal production of vital military equipment as well as governmental power to force private manufacturers to turn out the goods necessary to national defense have been approved by the United States Senate in what are considered here as two of the most important moves induced by the war crisis.”⁴⁰ Earlier, on 1 March, the same periodical published five photographs of young men on its front page, who were clearly engaged in engineering preparations. The caption was: “Higher

³⁴ Most of the general history facts in this section are taken from the Wikipedia USA timeline https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1941_in_the_United_States (accessed 30 January 2018).

³⁵ Boughton, 18.

³⁶ Archibald Thompson Davison, Katherine K. Davis, & Frederic W. Kempf, *Songs of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942).

³⁷ Boughton, 22–23.

³⁸ Boughton, 20.

³⁹ “Did Nazi Raider Imprison Americans of Missing Ship?: Roosevelt Seeks United Aid,” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 May 1941, 33/147: 1.

⁴⁰ Joseph G. Harrison, “Vote gives Government the Right to Manufacture War Goods: Priorities Control Tightened,” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 33/146 (17 May 1941): 1.

Education in Defense Preparation.” The title of the accompanying article read: “Greater Boston Colleges Specializing in Defense.” On 31 October, a German torpedo killed more than a hundred U.S. Navy sailors. The day after the Pearl Harbor attack, three weeks before Christmas 1941, the allies, including the United States, declared war on Japan. War was a concrete fact. One can only imagine the impact of such information on a former teacher, who—albeit in the newspapers—was seeing her young students going to war. The sadness over Surette’s death and her discomfort in the preparation of a song collection she was working on during this time also did not contribute to her emotional well-being.

Songs of Freedom

The political circumstances of the time affected other areas of the composer’s life. Throughout 1941, she was working with Archibald Davison on the preparation of the *Songs of Freedom* collection. There can be no doubt that the national atmosphere would have affected the choice and the editing of the songs and the commentaries that accompanied them. This collection, therefore, merits a closer inspection. It opens with a single-page preface of roughly four hundred words. Of these, the words “democracy” and “democratic” appear no less than five times, an impressive number given the preface’s size. The collection is organized in sections, the first one being “Patriotic and Army Songs.” Given the emphasis on “democracy” in the preface, one might naively expect some avoidance of indoctrinating songs. In fact, the war situation is tangible in the choice of songs, their editing, and the accompanying commentaries. For example, while the first song is indeed the expected “Star Spangled Banner,” the second is much less familiar: the “Song of Freedom,” which opens and closes with the following text:

America! America!
Thy sons awake to hear thy call!
America!
We pledge to thee our hearts, our lives, our all.⁴¹

“America the beautiful” is printed only after the above pledge of hearts, lives, and all was made—an editor’s choice that is thought provoking, particularly when bearing in mind that these songs were meant for children to sing in class. In the penultimate section of the book, called “Songs from Europe,” the following countries are represented: Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Poland, Finland, and Greece. In the section “Songs of the British Isles,” there are English, Scottish, and Welsh songs. There are no French, German, Italian, Hungarian, or Russian songs—all involved in the war and, except for Communist Russia, all allied in one way or another with the Axis Powers. The omission of Ireland from the collection, particularly given the large Irish population in the area for which this book was intended, is significant, and ended in the refusal of certain schools to use the collection.⁴²

⁴¹ *Songs of Freedom*, 7.

⁴² Boughton, 66. Ireland declared neutrality during the war.

These choices could not have been coincidental, depending just on the educational and musical qualities of said songs.⁴³

Katherine Kennikot Davis was asked to translate the texts of all the songs that were originally written in a foreign language, mainly French, and add newly composed texts in English to others.⁴⁴ She is usually referred to by initials and the pseudonyms she used throughout her career: KKD, DD, and AEA. She stated that she “loathed” these texts.⁴⁵ Indeed, this was her last cooperation with Davison on a published project.

“The Carol of the Drum” within its Historical and Cultural Context

“The Carol of the Drum” was composed during this period. However, it achieved popularity only after a particular successful recording was made. What was the reason for that? The first recording, of 1955, by the Trapp family, missed two important musical semes required in the original score: the tempo they chose is far from the marked *moderato*, tending rather to *Allegro*, and thus missing the intended ceremonial march feel of the original; also, the men’s voices, with their drone, do not pronounce the “r” in the “prum” syllable as requested, replacing it with a “pum” sound and thus reducing to nothing the snare-drum effect. Indeed, this was not a particularly popular recording. The next recording, in 1957, by the Jack Halloran Singers, has a better tempo, but the men’s voices do not keep the original drone intact: some pitches are replaced by more “consonant” ones (e.g. D in the bass, when the harmony allegedly moves to the subdominant, instead of keeping the original drone on the fifth A–E). Toward the end of the song, there is an unneeded accelerando and, worse, a change of rhythm to all-running eighth notes, unlike the original, that actually slows down toward the end. The Harry Simeone Chorale, which is the 1959 recording that actually brought the popularity of the song to its peak, offered a slightly new arrangement. Simeone, too, had made changes in some of the bass, and added an overstated general pause toward the end. However, the most significant change was the addition of chimes, which offer their silvery, angelic-like sound to the singing voices. From that point, the “Carol of the Drum” gained a life of its own. Over the years that have passed since Harry Simeone Chorale’s rendition of the song, there is no radio or TV program during the Christmas season in which the song is not broadcast at least once (and sometimes more than once).

Can a single song function as a Musical Topic? Probably not. However, its popularity resounds in the public’s sensitivity echo chamber in a way that no other “fighting-children-war-songs” have done. Since the 1960s, there have been hundreds of different interpretations and performances of the song, of which the Wikipedia article devoted to this song mentions “only” about 130. It is clear that something very special happens, culturally speaking, in this particular carol, with its particular mixture of cultural units of war and heroism, folk-tale motifs, innocence, religious devotion, existential dread, and an everlasting hope for grace. It may be sentimental, but its sentimentality, regardless of any particular denomination or specific festivity, is genuine and speaks directly to deeply

⁴³ The inclusion of Finland in the collection is amusing, since it fought Russia, and thus, actually, sided with the Axis. However, being an enemy of Russia may have helped its song to be included in the U.S. *Songs of Freedom*. Or, it may have been an honest mistake of a not-patriotic-enough editor....

⁴⁴ The only exception is the Polish song, which was translated by E. Williams.

⁴⁵ Interview with Davis, Boughton, 67.

rooted human emotional and cultural responses. Music is a product of culture, and culture responds to history and society. While not a musical topic itself, “The Carol of the Drum” may point at a crystallization of such a topic, increasingly significant in a world where children still are being conscripted to military forces.⁴⁶

About the Author

Esti Sheinberg teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA. Authored *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* (Ashgate, 2000). Edited *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations – in Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle* (Ashgate, 2012), and Anatoly Milka’s *Rethinking Bach’s The Art of Fugue* (translated by Marina Ritzarev; Ashgate/Routledge, 2016). Sheinberg’s research focuses on Music Signification.

⁴⁶ *Louder than Words: An Agenda for Action to End State Use of Child Soldiers* (London, UK: Child-Soldiers International, 2012), www.child-soldiers.org, 20.