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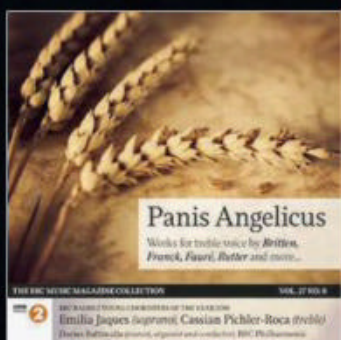
Classically trained

America's railroad revolution

Mark Simpson

We meet the young composer

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Way Out West

150 years ago, America's First Transcontinental Railroad was completed. Brian Wise describes how music thrived in the golden age of train travel

After the freezing morning of 10 May 1869, a crowd gathered at Utah's Promontory Summit to watch as a golden spike was pounded into an unfinished railroad track. Within moments, a telegraph was sent from one side of the country to the other announcing the completion of North America's first transcontinental railroad. It set off the first coast-to-coast celebration, and at New York City's Trinity Church, a choir chanted the Te Deum, 'imparting thankful harmonies', in the words of mayor A Oakey Hall.

Completed four years after the Civil War, the new rail link enabled the flow of people and commerce to the West Coast, with a trip that had once taken as long as six months cut down to a week. The impact was huge, and with the 150th anniversary this year marked by a wealth of museum exhibits and performances, it's clear that classical music in the US was forever transformed by the golden age of train travel.

Key to the railroad's construction were immigrant labourers – mostly from Ireland and China – who worked amid avalanches, disease, clashes with Native Americans and searing summer heat. 'Not that many people know how hard it was to build, and how many perished while building this,' says Zhou Tian, a Chinese-American composer whose new orchestral work *Transcend* pays tribute to these workers. The piece, which includes melodies in the style of the folk tunes that the Chinese labourers sang, will be performed by 14 US orchestras this year (see 'Anniversary events', p49). Tian adds: 'As significant and magnificent as the structure was, it was at the core a human story.'

As the Transcontinental Railroad opened up the American West, dusty frontier towns with little more than a jail and a saloon aspired to display their growing wealth and ambition. Naturally, this meant culture. Between 1865 and 1900, some 4,000 opera houses were built, from the Corinne Opera House, in Corinne, Utah (1870) to the Downs Opera House in Evanston, Wyoming (1885). 'As soon as the railroad came to town, or even before its routes were finalised, town fathers, newspaper editors, culture-hungry women and ordinary citizens campaigned for an opera house on Main Street,' writes Ann Satterthwaite in *Local Glories: Opera Houses on Main Street, Where Art and Community Meet*.

Naturally, the term 'opera' should be loosely applied to the frontier opera houses. Most presented an assortment of musical



Carriage made in heaven: Sunday services on a train of the Central Pacific Railroad, 1876; (below) Leland Stanford hammers in the Golden Spike



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revues, operettas, magic acts, 'horse operas' and minstrel shows, often staged by resident stock theatre companies. Still, the word 'opera' had a magic to it. With the construction of theatres, the number of singers and troupes traversing the country exploded.

One of the railroad's earliest passengers was the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, who in February 1870 rode the newly opened Union Pacific Railroad to San Francisco, pleased to avoid the onerous trip across the Isthmus of Panama, where he had previously contracted yellow fever. Though there are few published details about Bull's journey, contemporaneous accounts suggest that music was sometimes performed on the trains themselves. Some of the early 1870s Pullman cars were even equipped with organs, and the evenings brought 'musicales' by travelling theatre troupes. 'Music sounds on the prairie and dies away far over the plains,' wrote Henry Williams in *The Pacific*

Some of the early 1870s Pullman cars were even equipped with organs

Tourist. 'Merry-making and jokes, conversation and reading pass the time until 10 o'clock, when we retire.'

Among the first symphony orchestras to hit the rails were the New York Philharmonic, which ventured to Detroit and Kansas City in 1882, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which gave annual concerts in Chicago between 1886 and 1893. Opera companies also caught the touring bug. New York's Metropolitan Opera embarked on its first west coast tour in 1900, in five weeks travelling to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Lincoln, Kansas City and Minneapolis. The conductor Walter Damrosch established the Damrosch Opera Company in 1894, specialising in German opera and travelling to 27 cities on one tour. Oscar Hammerstein I (grandfather of the famous lyricist) created the short-lived Manhattan Opera Company in 1906, which also enjoyed a busy touring schedule.

The Met's tours were for decades central to the company's lore, rooted in the maxim that 'everything but the opera house must go'. Crates of scenery and costumes were trucked to rail yards as soon as the curtain closed on the

Well-trained: Italian soprano Adelina Patti and crew with her Pullman car; (right) violinist Ole Bull rode the Union Pacific Railroad in 1870; (below) Paderewski practised the piano on his private train



spring season. For the 1900 tour, 220 people travelled in 16 Pullman cars; musicians amused themselves with rollicking poker games in the dining car. Once, before leaving for San Francisco in 1906, Enrico Caruso bought a revolver and ammunition to protect himself from the 'bandits and assassins' he expected to encounter in that city. The Italian tenor unnerved fellow passengers by conducting target practice out the windows of the speeding train.

The era also saw the arrival of over-the-top star perks. Divas like Adelina Patti, Nellie Melba and Lillian Nordica travelled in private coaches hooked onto the caboose position (at the end) of a train. Patti had an opulent, \$65,000 car with her name in gilt lettering on its side. 'The diva travelled for years in luxurious seclusion, though hardly in total solitude,' writes Quaintance Eaton in *Opera Caravan*. 'Indeed, she required an entourage of a dozen or so, all of whose fares constituted an obligation of the management – including a personal chef.' When Patti's car pulled into Omaha, she opened the blinds to show off her sumptuous quarters. 'The curtains are of heavy damask silk,' noted a local reporter. 'The walls and ceiling of gilded leather tapestry, the lamps of rolled gold. A grand piano of carved wood cost \$2,500.'

There were mishaps and hardships, too. Musicians had to cope with dirty, coal-burning locomotives and tight quarters; reports of illness were common. The 1906 tour to California was dramatically cut short by the San Francisco earthquake and fires, which destroyed much of the city. After giving two performances, the company fled town largely unharmed, but its sets and costumes were destroyed.

Pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski travelled in comparable luxury when in 1891 he began the first of his nearly-annual tours to some 80 North American cities. His private train had a bedroom, kitchen, dining room and a salon with a Steinway, enabling him to practise along the way. There were separate cars for his retinue (including chef, valet, masseur, porters and piano technician) and journalists. By contrast, when the New York Philharmonic travelled to the Midwest in 1910, the 100-member orchestra squeezed into three cars – two coaches for the musicians and one baggage car.



Anniversary events

■ Fourteen US orchestras have co-commissioned *Transcend*, a piece by Chinese-American composer Zhou Tian. Nevada's Reno Philharmonic will give the first performances on 27 and 28 April. renophil.com

■ *The Utah Opera* will premiere four ten-minute operas related to the 150th anniversary by composers Lisa DeSpain, Jacob Lee, Tony Solitro and Michael Ching (all of whom have links to Utah) on 20-22 May in Salt Lake City. utahopera.org

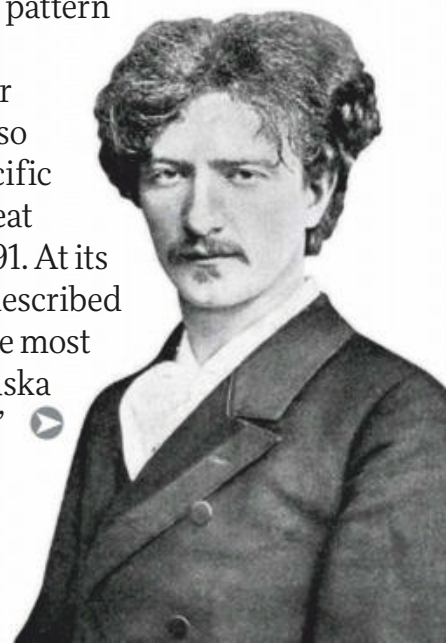
■ *The Spike 150 Chorus*, young students from every county in Utah, will perform at Promontory Point, Utah on 10 May. spike150chorus.weebly.com

■ The Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah hosts '*The Race to Promontory: The Transcontinental Railroad and the American West*', featuring the three ceremonial spikes that completed the railroad, along with around 150 photographs and stereographs. spike150.org

Railroads, meanwhile, continued their westward push. Between 1850 and 1910, railroad mileage had increased from 9,021 miles to 240,293 miles. By 1900 there were four additional transcontinental lines, built with assistance from federal government land grants. Each day, many of these lines were moving performers. They stopped in outposts like Cheyenne, Wyoming. In the early 1880s, a group of prominent townspeople, tired of their ramshackle opera house above a livery stable, raised funds to build a magnificent 1,000-seat theatre containing a 52-foot-wide chandelier. The opening night, featuring Audran's comic opera *Les noces d'Olivette*, was a city-wide celebration. The *Cheyenne Daily Leader* reported the venue was, 'A lasting proof to all comers of the intelligence and refinement of this little city of less than 4,000 people'.

The 1880s marked Wyoming's opera house era, as travelling performers put on one or two nights not only in Cheyenne but also in Laramie, Evanston and other railroad towns. Fires broke out in the Cheyenne house in 1888 and 1902, the latter of which ended its life as a performance venue. The building was eventually torn down in 1960, in a tragically familiar pattern across post-war America.

Not to be outdone by larger cities, Kearney, Nebraska, also situated along the Union Pacific line, built the grand 1,200-seat Kearney Opera House in 1891. At its opening a local newspaper described the five-story building as 'the most imposing structure in Nebraska outside Lincoln and Omaha' ▶





Track records

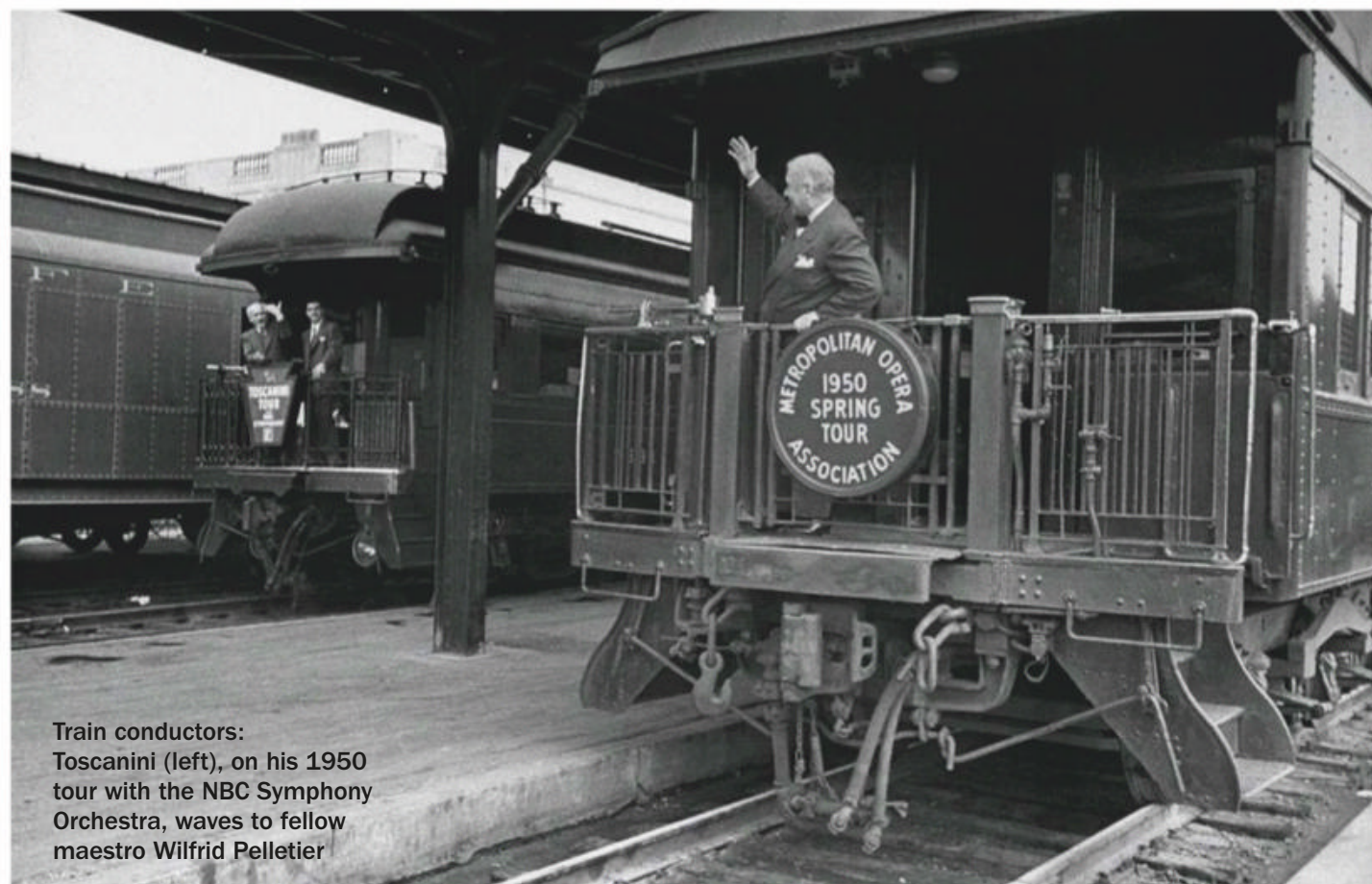
Music's rail enthusiasts

Cecilia Bartoli (pictured above) is a devotee of train travel, in part because of her well-publicised fear of flying which has limited her appearances in North America. In the 1990s the Italian mezzo-soprano travelled from New York to Los Angeles in a private car attached to an Amtrak train, evoking the opera singers of an earlier age.

Antonín Dvořák was a very keen trainspotter. Not only did he enjoy criss-crossing Europe by rail but he spent his free time chatting to workers at Franz-Josef Station in Prague. He memorised international train schedules and once claimed that the opening theme to his Symphony No. 7 came to him at the Prague station, as a train carrying his countrymen arrived from Pest.

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet builds model train sets as a hobby. The Z-scale tracks that he uses are 220 times smaller than reality, about the width of a black key on the piano. 'When I'm travelling,' he told us back in 2010, 'I enjoy thinking about new layouts and I even carry a little Märklin circuit with me – one locomotive, one wagon and a little oval track. I can even set it up on the dinner table after a concert.'

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Train conductors:
Toscanini (left), on his 1950 tour with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, waves to fellow maestro Wilfrid Pelletier

Arturo Toscanini held court in a car equipped with a bathtub, panelled library and dining room

and a symbol of 'Kearney's beauty and Kearney's manhood'. Audiences in Victorian finery came from nearby towns to sit in its plush boxes and see performers such as John Philip Sousa and Harry Houdini. Kearney's heyday as an agriculture and light industry centre faded after World War II and the opera house was demolished in 1954.

Almost concurrent with Nebraska, Colorado experienced a theatre boom built on touring circuits. The entrepreneur Peter McCourt established the Silver Circuit in 1889, with 13 stops including Aspen, Colorado Springs, Greeley, Grand Junction, Leadville and Trinidad, plus junctions in Utah and Wyoming. McCourt's associates in New York contracted troupes and booked tours on the circuit, the costs shared among the theatres. To this day, Aspen's Wheeler Opera House, established in 1889 and restored in the 1980s, hosts prominent touring acts and Aspen Music Festival productions.

By the early 1920s, when Hollywood movies were vying with live performances and radio was entering the living room, the era of railroad tours had peaked. Automobiles enabled travel to bigger cities with lavish new cinemas. 'This plethora of new entertainment opportunities,' writes Satterthwaite, 'spelled the end of live, often high-quality theatre and entertainment in opera houses, especially in small towns'. The decline of railroads accelerated after World War II, with the growth of air travel and the Interstate Highway System. Yet in April 1950, Arturo Toscanini

and the NBC Symphony left New York's Pennsylvania Station on a special 13-car train that would take them across the continent on a six-week tour, spanning 21 concerts in 20 states. It was partly an elaborate publicity stunt by NBC, and admiring news reports portrayed the Italian maestro visiting a New Orleans jazz club and riding a ski lift in Sun Valley, Idaho. As Joseph Horowitz writes in *Understanding Toscanini*, the conductor held court in a car 'equipped with a bathtub, panelled library and dining room'. If this was a last hurrah for transcontinental train tours, it was evidently a glamorous one.

The 1960s was a decade of railroad company mergers and bankruptcies, and in 1971 nearly all long-distance passenger traffic was assumed by Amtrak, an agency that has since become a routine target of conservative politicians. Jet-set conductors, meanwhile, became a reality of the classical music business, and artist managers have learned to navigate the wilds of lost airline luggage and mishandled instruments.

Still, musicians haven't entirely given up on US rail travel. In 2017, composer Philip Glass told *BBC Music Magazine* about a cross-country trip he had recently taken on Amtrak. 'Of course, the train was falling apart,' he said. 'But the country isn't falling apart. It's a vast and beautiful country we have. I ended up in Los Angeles six days later. It wasn't the most comfortable trip. We've downgraded Amtrak. On the other hand, it was a wonderful experience.'