13 Railway music after World War II

The pieces covered in this chapter are a disparate mix: they are by composers of different nationalities and are written for different instrumental and vocal forces. What the works do have in common is that, with one or two exceptions, they were written after World War II. The decades immediately following the war were politically turbulent and four of the featured composers - Ernst Krenek, Sergei Prokofiev, Kurt Weill and Hans Werner Henze – were émigrés. Part of the reason for them leaving their homeland was for their political convictions and the music of three of them had at some point been censured by the government of their homeland. Earlier chapters have described music written for the opening of lines and stations across Europe, but such celebratory pieces by British composers have been notably absent. A handful of these have finally appeared in recent decades and commemorative music by Michael Nyman, Paul Patterson and Graham Fitkin can be found in this chapter. The chapter features works in a range of styles for different combinations, voices, orchestras, and solo piano and it closes with a work for brass band – Philip Sparke's musical depiction of what is often thought to be the most exciting and exotic train service in the world – the *Orient Express*.

Music for voices

Ernst Krenek

The Austrian-American composer Ernst Krenek (1900 – 1991) loved trains, the travels they could take him on and the destinations they could take him to. As a child he loved to go to the railway yard of Wien Franz-Josefs-Bahnhof

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near his home in Vienna. When he started to compose, train travel became a recurring theme in his works from his smash hit opera *Jonny spielt auf* (Jonny strikes up) (1927), to his song cycle *The ballad of the railroads* (1944) and his choral piece *Santa Fe timetable* (1945).[1]

Jonny spielt auf (Jonny strikes up) (1926) – Ernst Krenek

Although Krenek's opera *Jonny strikes up* does not belong to the post-war period covered in this chapter it is worth a mention here, not least because a railway station is central to its plot and a train usually features as part of the set. Indeed one of the main characters is accidentally pushed off the platform into the path of an incoming train complete with dissonant warning sounds. The jazz-influenced work was premiered in Germany and was a huge success across Europe making an enormous amount of money. However, the work brought the opprobrium of the nascent Nazi party who saw the opera with its black musicians and shimmying dancers, as a symbol of the degenerate Weimar Republic. Subsequent intimidation led to Krenek's emigration, as a destitute refugee, when Hitler's troops invaded Europe. He eventually went to the USA where he taught at several universities and became an American citizen.

The ballad of the railroads, Op. 98 (1955) – Ernst Krenek

In his study of Krenek's life and music John Lincoln Stewart writes that 'railroads and rail travel fascinated him and had at times an emblematic, almost mystical, significance for him'.[2] In 1931 Krenek set the poems of Karl Kraus to music which included the line 'I dreamt of a traveling train'. He went on to compose a song cycle with a railroad theme, *The ballad of the railroads*, which uses his own lyrics. In his programme note to the piece, Krenek wrote

> …many of my own emotional experiences and sentiments are reflected: the feelings of an uprooted man who entrusts himself to the trains, seeking a new home in foreign lands; hopes and fears engendered by the idea of travel; the agonies of separation and waiting; the life-long pull of the South and West; the arrival in this promised land on the shores of the Pacific, which is identified with the lost paradise of childhood.

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Krenek's compositional style changed throughout his life and the music of the ten songs in this cycle is quite different from the jazz-influenced melodies of *Jonny strikes up*. Rather its style could be described as atonal serialism[3] where there is little sense of key. There is no mimicking of train sounds, but the piano helps to give a sense of travelling movement from the opening trills on the words 'Railroads, railroads, dinning in my ear' until the final song where the train 'pulls gently in' and the 'wheels stand still' to the accompaniment of sparse slow-moving chords.

Santa Fe timetable (1945) – Ernst Krenek

In *Santa Fe timetable*, an unaccompanied chorus intones the names of the stations between Albuquerque and Los Angeles on the Sante Fe railroad. Krenek had been inspired by *Liber Generationis Jesu Christi*, a choral piece by the Renaissance composer Josquin des Prez, which uses the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew for its text. In fact Krenek's beautiful piece has a religious feel to it. However this is offset by the words as the station stops are listed – 'Gallup, Gallup, Gallup', 'Hackberry, Yucca, Victorville' and the lively rhythms of 'Topoch, Topoch, Topoch' which, to Krenek, suggested the 'clicking of the wheels on the rails'.[4]

Winter Words (1954) by Benjamin Britten

In Benjamin Britten's song cycle *Winter Words* (1954) for high voice and piano, the train acts as a metaphor for the journey through life, from innocence to consciousness. The eight songs are based on poems by Thomas Hardy, and the second and seventh both tell tales of train travel. In 'Midnight on the Great Western' a 'journeying boy', ticket stuck in the band of his hat, is travelling third class knowing nothing of his destiny, 'Bewrapt past knowing to what he was going, Or whence he came.' The piano recalls the train's whistle and the movement of the engine as he hurtles through the night. The song opens with a train whistle sound which recurs several times throughout the journey, acting as a musical motif. In the opening bars the train is heard slowly coming closer in bumpy staccato quavers, the accompaniment starts to build up until jogging yet lilting rhythms of the train are established. The train rhythms drop in and out of the melancholy song, sometimes interrupted by the whistle motif,

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and sometimes by a momentary change of rhythm perhaps representing the changing of points. At the end of the song, the train is moving out of sight, it grinds to a halt and the whistle motif is played again, whistling 'from afar'.

The penultimate song in the cycle 'At the railway station, Upway' takes us back to the song about the journeying boy in the railway carriage. A young boy with a fiddle tries to cheer up a convict who is being taken away by a police constable. The themes of innocence and a journey into an unknown destination return but, in this dark and quasi-operatic song, there are no musical references to the train other than in the title.

'Train to Johannesburg' from *Lost in the Stars* (1949) – Kurt Weill and *Boulevard solitude* (1952) - Hans Werner Henze.

Mention should also be made of a couple of train-inspired movements from two dramatic vocal works written a few years apart. Both composers, Kurt Weill (1900-1950) and Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012), were born in Germany, both were politically active and both spent much of their life living elsewhere, Weill in America and Henze in Italy. Their compositional styles however were very different. Weill's most well-known music, such as 'The ballad of Mack the Knife', is founded on jazz and cabaret, whereas Henze's music, although having some jazz influence, is more cutting edge classical music. By 1939 Weill was settled in America when he composed and arranged music for one of the most popular attractions at the New York World's Fair. *Railroads on Parade* was a pageant telling of the effect of railroads on American life. It was remarkable for its use of locomotives and Pullman cars.[5] *Lost in the Stars* is a musical in two acts after Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In 'Train to Johannesburg' Weill uses more conventional train imitations with repeated rhythms on the drum kit and train whistle sounds provided by the large woodwind section of clarinets and saxophones, and accordion.

Boulevard Solitude is Henze's first full-scale opera and is based on Abbé Prévost's novel *Manon Lescaut*. The opening of the opera is set in a railway station in a French town: Manon Lescaut is on her way to a boarding school accompanied by her brother. The scene opens with a sparse texture of percussion sounds, a station announcement is made and the percussion texture builds up into more regular repeated patterns.

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Two pieces for orchestra

Both of these orchestral pieces were written for children: the first, *Winter*, was written for children to listen to; and the second, *Chat Moss*, was composed for children to perform. Sergei Prokofiev's *Winter Bonfire* is deliberately simple, whereas *Chat Moss*, by Peter Maxwell Davies, is surprisingly complex. Train journeys are central to both pieces.

Winter Bonfire, Op. 122 (1950) - Sergei Prokofiev

The Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (1891 – 1953) left his homeland after the 1917 Revolution moving to the United States, then Germany, then Paris, making a successful living as a composer, pianist and conductor. In 1936 he returned home and enjoyed success there with compositions including *Peter and the Wolf and Romeo and Juliet*.

Winter Bonfire was commissioned by the Radio Committee in celebration of the approach of the thirtieth anniversary of the Pioneer movement, a youth organisation aiming to implement political and moral education and to develop socialist attitudes amongst children.[6] It is an eight-movement suite for narrator, choir and orchestra. It is set to a text by Samuil Marshak, a popular author of children's literature. The text describes the journey of the Pioneers who have travelled from city to countryside in order to visit a collective farm and it is read by the narrator before each movement begins. *Winter Bonfire* depicts the events of the children's outing in the snow, the departing train ride, snow falling behind the window, waltzing on the ice and the evening bonfire. It is probably the simplest work amongst Prokofiev's later works for children. This is evident in its use of straightforward harmony and repetition. Most of the opening movement does not leave the key of C major, and the final movement 'Return' repeats the locomotive themes and the sound of the trains' whistles of the opening movement. It is deliberately simple, partly to fulfil the contract which required that the music was to be accessible for children, but also to avoid any criticism from the Soviet authorities that the work was 'formalist' and did not conform to Socialist Realism. The definition of formalism was very vague, music would be criticised as formalist simply because it was not sufficiently Russian-like. Prokofiev once said with a note of satire that "Formalism is music that people don't understand at first hearing."[7]

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The opening movement 'Departure' begins with the narration of a text of thirty six lines describing the arrival of the pioneers at the station early in the morning. The sound of a whistle is heard and they hurry to get on to the train. The orchestra evokes the sounds of an approaching train through such imitative effects as a regular beat on the timpani, a thundering roll on the snare drum, mechanical-sounding figurations in the strings, and blasts from the muted trumpets, all designed to recreate the sounds of the clatter of wheels and the blasts of a train whistle.

Prokofiev need not have worried about Soviet criticism and accusations of formalism; *Winter Bonfire* received an enthusiastic reception in the Soviet Union and was awarded a Stalin Prize.

Chat Moss (1993) – Peter Maxwell Davies

Peter Maxwell Davies (1934 – 2016) is widely regarded as one of the UK's leading composers. His compositions are extensive and in a variety of styles ranging from the radical experimentation of the music theatre piece *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1978) to a series of ten large scale symphonies. Much of his early life was spent in Salford and Manchester, where he studied music.

From 1959 to 1962, Davies was director of music at Cirencester Grammar School, where the significance he attached to performance and composition, by pupils of all musical abilities, had a lasting impact on British music education. Through his teaching, Davies helped to show that children were far less resistant to the features of new music often considered displeasing by adults (and sometimes music teachers). He went on to write many pieces for school orchestras and community musicians. *Chat Moss* is an orchestral piece for school orchestra first performed by St. Edward's College, Liverpool. But this is not to imply that the music is easy; it is subtle and by no means straightforward. Davies set out to stretch young players and the piece is often played by professional orchestras. Furthermore it is much quoted in his Symphony No. 5 (1994).

Chat Moss is an area of Salford, close to Davies' childhood home in Leigh. Its underlying peat bog threatened the completion of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway because of the difficulties in creating a solid base. However, in 1829 the challenge was met by the engineer George Stephenson and his adviser Robert Stannard, an expert on marshland. Their ingenious solution was to

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'float' the line on a bed of wood and rubble stone and in 1829, they succeeded in constructing a railway line through it. The line is still in use today.

The opening string melody is based on the plainsong *Haec Dies*. This quiet theme is developed across the woodwind and brass and then a more buoyant chugging rhythm is introduced underlying more variations. The music slows to a more sedate pace with a lazy oboe melody but then the pace picks up again, brass, timpani and crashing cymbals come to the forefront and the excitement builds as steam trains thunder by. Towards the end, the music falls to a hushed orchestral passage, the brass interject with a piercing chord reminiscent of a train whistle, and then comes to a quiet close.

Three pieces written to celebrate railway openings.

As we have seen in previous chapters, many orchestral pieces were written by well-known classical composers across Europe to celebrate the opening of new stations and railway lines in the nineteenth century. But, although broadside ballads often announced the arrival of new lines in the UK, there are no entries for celebratory pieces by British composers. It is hard to know why, although there may be a class element involved in the absence of music commissioned by British composers. Although the UK invented the railways, they upset the status quo, industrialised countryside and sped up the pace of life. So it could be that railways were not seen as a fitting subject for 'high' art. It appears that in other countries the train also takes a more central appearance in classic literature. Zola's novel *La Bête humaine* (1890), for example, is based upon the railway between Paris and Le Havre, and trains are a recurring motive throughout Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1887) with several major plot points taking place on the Russian railways. However, there is no classic British novel where trains or railways are central to this degree other than some short stories. On the other hand trains and railways do feature prominently in British nineteenth century popular fiction such as crime novels and sensation novels.

Not until the twentieth century were there any railway pieces commissioned for the launching of new lines or trains.

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MGV (Musique à Grand Vitesse) (1993) – Michael Nyman

MGV (*Musique à Grand Vitesse* - High-speed music) was commissioned by the Festival de Lille for the inauguration of the TGV North-European line and was first performed by the Michael Nyman Band and the Orchestre national de Lille on 26 September 1993. The *TGV Train à Grande Vitess* high-speed train is France's intercity high-speed rail service. Over the years the *TGV* has broken several speed records. The fastest single long-distance run was from Calais-Frethun to Marseille at a speed of 306 km/h (190 mph) for the inauguration of the *LG Méditerranée* in 2001.

The compositions of Michael Nyman (b. 1944) combine elements of classical music with hi-energy repetitions. His distinctive style is familiar from his many film scores, notably *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *The Piano*. Many pieces, including this one, are performed by the Michael Nyman Band, an unusual combination of saxophones, brass, strings and electric guitar. *MGV* is characterised by its layers of ostinati (repeated bars), different speeds and rhythms, and changing speeds. The recurrent rhythms are striking. The opening movement establishes cycles of 9, 11, or 13-beat rhythmic cycles which are heard against a regular rhythmic cycle of 8 creating interesting cross rhythms. The piece is relatively simple harmonically with chord sequences built mainly over C and E. The piece runs continuously, but it is divided into five sections, 1st region, 2nd region etc. each lasting about five minutes. Nyman describes these as 'five inter-connected journeys, each ending with a slow, mainly stepwise melody'. Only when we reach the end of the journey, the 'destination', do we hear the triumphant melody in its full glory replete with brass fanfares.

The Royal Eurostar Opus 76 (1994) – Paul Patterson

Paul Patterson (b. 1947) was commissioned to write *The Royal Eurostar* by European Passenger Services for the State Opening of Waterloo International and the inauguration of the Channel Tunnel in 1994. It was written for 19 brass and percussion players with optional organ. The 12-minute piece builds on a sustained D which corresponds to the hum of Eurostar engines. It incorporates both 'Rule Britannia' and the 'Marseillaise'. The 'Eurostar Fanfare' was originally conceived as the opening to *The Royal Eurostar.* The plan was for it to be played on the arrival of a train bringing the Queen from France.

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However, it became a separate piece after it was decided that the Queen would travel to, not from, France. 'Paris Fanfare' celebrated the arrival of the Queen at Waterloo, and was performed for the inauguration of the London-Paris service on 16th November 1994. On the same day the 'Brussels Fanfare' was used for the launch of the London-Brussels Eurostar service.

Track to track: The Athlon (2012) – Graham Fitkin with words by Glyn Maxwell.

Track to Track was commissioned by the London Chamber Orchestra to celebrate the start of the 'Javelin' shuttle service between St Pancras and the Olympic site at Stratford ready for the 2012 London Olympics. It was composed as part of an education project where children came up with rhythmic motives for Fitkin to use in the piece as well as ideas for the text which were brought in the by the writer Glyn Maxwell. *Track to track* is scored for ensemble and string orchestra. The music was designed to be broadcast on the train with different music for the six-minute outward and return journeys, some of it palindromic. The piece opens quietly and reflectively with sustained chords. Descending glissandi (slides) follow and we hear the words 'I rose so very early that day, so early that day'. As the day begins and the journey commences a rhythmic ostinato is heard, building up as the train approaches the Olympic site. The ostinato continues as the train makes its return journey becoming livelier and jazzier, but, in the manner of a palindrome, returning to the sustained chords and downward glissandi of the opening and the words 'I rose that day so very early'.

The final two pieces in this chapter are unconnected and very different. The first is a short complex piano piece by a cutting-edge contemporary composer, and the second is a much lighter crowd-pleaser, a wind band piece written in a popular vein.

Freightrain Bruise (1972 rev 1980) by Michael Finnissy

Freightrain Bruise is a short jazz-infused piano piece by the British composer Michael Finnissy (b. 1946). Like many of his works it is rhythmically complex and intricate in texture. The scores are often labyrinthine in appearance. For some years Finnissy worked with dancers and dance companies and he wrote several pieces that were written either to accompany dancers or to capture

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on paper his spontaneous improvisations. *Freightrain Bruise* was written in collaboration with Charlotte Holtzermann, an American dance student in London at The Place, and it is dedicated to her. The piece is influenced by the music of jazz musicians such as Art Tatum, Errol Garner, Thelonious Monk and it is marked 'Lightly and quietly, but with a raunchy swing' at the top of the score. At the same time the jazz elements are filtered through modernist language; it is written in a chromatic fashion without a strong sense of key, and is fragmented with intermittent silences. Irregular groups of notes are played against each other, not just three against two but five against four and six against five. Finnissy has described these elements as 'bruises on its surface, places where the ripe fruit of jazz hit the cold floor of late twentieth-century angst.'[8] Nevertheless it is music to dance to, there is a constant sense of movement as the freight train trundles along, chugging away until it comes to an abrupt halt and the piece closes.

Orient Express (1992) – Philip Sparke

In 1883 the *Orient Express*, the epitome of comfort and luxury, crossed the whole of Europe entering places little known to most Western Europeans. The inaugural train left Paris on October 4 scheduled to reach Constantinople in three and a half days. The engineer behind it was Belgian Georges Nagelmackers, founder of the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits*. In a series of letters about his journey, a correspondent for *The Times* described the train as having a level of 'comfort and facility hitherto unknown'.[9] It had an elegant dining room serving gourmet food, ladies boudoirs, a library, Turkish carpets, upholstered beds, and showers with running hot and cold water. The route covered 1800 miles and crossed seven borders. As well as the small number of luxury carriages, there were also several basic ones for third-class passengers travelling from one Eastern European country to another. The *Orient Express* soon became popular leading to the inauguration of a variety of other routes, all with variants on the name. A second line opened in 1918, the *Simplon Orient Express* which used the Simplon Tunnel between Switzerland and Italy travelling via Milan, Venice and Trieste and in the 1930s, yet another route started on the *Arlberg Orient Express*.[10] A London connection was added in between the wars with a Calais ferry and rail link to Paris. However, by 1962 partly owing to the spread of motor car ownership, only the *Simplon Orient Express* was left. The

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route was shortened several times until in 2009 with the opening of the high-speed line between Paris and Strasbourg, it ceased to operate at all.

Orient Express is a wind band piece and was commissioned by the Tokyo Kosei Wind Orchestra. In his programme note, the composer Philip Sparke writes

> The piece describes a journey on the famous luxury train which runs from London to Venice. Starting among the hubbub of London's Victoria Station, the music subsides as the guard blows his whistle and the enormous engine starts rolling. At last the train is under way, hurtling across the European countryside. A slower central section gives the passengers time to think about home but the relentless journey continues, eventually slowing to a halt as the train reaches its destination.[11]

Venice Simplon Orient Express poster

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In the passages where the music imitates the sounds of the train, *Orient Express* is notable both for the instruments it is scored for and the way the instruments are used. In Sparke's quest to replicate rolling engine setting off, the usual wind band instrumentation of woodwind, brass and percussion is supplemented by a guard's whistle, a steam whistle and sandpaper blocks. A piercing blast from the guard's whistle and the first jittering movements of the train are heard in the percussion; snare drum played with alternate sticks and brushes, with what gives the impression of randomly-placed sandpaper blocks. All this is underpinned by intermittent crushed chords on muted trombones. The silences between the notes gets shorter until a repeated pattern is established across the percussion, brass and lower woodwind, all the time getting louder and faster as the train accelerates. The high woodwind enters with a long dissonant sliding chord which fades out for the first main theme of the journey to enter. The Orient Express is on its way.

Endnotes

1 https://www.krenek.at/en/forum

2 John Lincoln Stewart. *Ernst Krenek. The man and his music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992): 252.

3 Serialism is a system devised by the composer Schoenberg to replace tonality (keys) in his music. It is sometimes known as the twelve tone system.

4 Stewart, *Krenek*, 249.

5 The music was not published, but in 1992 David Drew composed a concert suite, *Trains Bound for Glory*, using some of Weill's folksong arrangements taken from it.

6 Joseph I. Zajda. *Education in the USSR*. (Oxford: Pergamon, 1980): 82.

7 Boris Schwarz. *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1970*. (New York: W W Norton, 1973): 115.

8 https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/22296/21/Finnissy%20-%20The%20Piano%20Music%20%284%29.pdf

9 *The Times*, November 2, 1883.

10 Christian Wolmar. *A Short History of Trains*. (London: Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 2019): 196.

11 https://musicum.net/orient.pdf

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