

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

Musical Pioneers of the Old West

A composer's life was a hard one more'n 100 years ago on the prairie, as this here yarn'll bear witness to. Names have been doctored to protect the privacy of these upright and law-abiding folks.

...So one day, just after sunup, Elias Crater, lead cowpoke on the 12 bar double-inverted cañon ranch - the most looked-up-to atonalist in the West - walks into the Golden Mean Saloon, where he lays eyes on Dick Dannysport and Dave Readytread polishin' off a couple of "gettin' started" breakfast margaritas. Dick and Dave are two straight-shootin' fellas; they write old-time ditties just like the pioneers did, way back when. They spy Crater saunterin' in. "Well, lookee who's here - it's old Ellie. Hey bud, what 'cha got cookin' - some dang new opry or conchert-eye, for flute an' contrabassyoon?" Them cowpokes always had it in for Ellie - he bein' a contrary sorta fella, always doin' his own thang - never mind that no body cared a hoot or'n a holler about that new-fangled modernism, or whatcha'call it.

"Lookee here," says Crater. "I'm a'doin my own thang. I'm a-what you call original - just like everybody else, an' I'm payin' no never-mind to all a' them-thar neo-Romantics, or what ever the tarnashun' you're callin' yourselves these days." Crater was riled; he warn't a composer to be messin' with - no how. "You wait an' see," he sniffed. "My ditties'll be strummed on every geetar, and whistled by every cattle driver on the Chisholm Trail, from Texas to Missoura, when your stuff'll bite the dust."

"I don' see you writin' them thar sonatas and conchert-eye no more, like you used to," snorted Dave. "Yeah - you were some mean hombre once, corrallin' notes like thar were no tomorra' - 40 minute string quartets, chello an' piano sonatas. I mean - you were rip-roarin' back in the '40s, '50s an' '60s," added Dick.

"Well," said Ellie, "I ain't no whippersnapper no more," that's for sure. I'm pushin' 98, so a few years back I got me a piece of that thar bottom land,

settled down with my stay-put herd an' started scribblin' some pint-sized mel'dies, where folks could pick out the tunes, strum 'em an' hum 'em and be on their way. Used to be, my ditties warn't easy; fellers had a heck of a time figurin' out all them thar rhythms an' pitches an' stuff. 'Twas a mite harder than your'n, I s'ppose. I was a 'shootin' for the moon an' stars, but I lately come to realize that close up is just as good as far away. Now I'm settin' down some roots. I'm even usin' some of them, what you call, triads now and agin'. Guess I'm gettin' kinda sentimental in my dotage." Ellie looked down, kinda sad-like.

The two trailhands felt a mite simpatico for the old note-pusher. He'd seen it all: ridin' the range with Charlie Ruggles; herdin' sheep with Charlie Ives and Aaron Coplan'. He'd been to Paris, Texas, larnin' from Nad'ja BoolanJay. Heck – he'd even rode the trail with Stravinsky, an' ever'body knows old Igor didn't hang with just anybody. No sir, he were real partic'lar about the company he keep, that's for certain.

Ellie suddenly reared up, boilin' over. "I'll have none o' that there teary-eyed stuff from you boys. I can still scribble them sonatas, if need be!" Ellie suddenly broke out and started to sing, in his high pitched New England cowboy twang:

"I ain't as good as I once was,
But I'm as good once as I ever was
When I'm feelin' bullet proof.
So don't double-dog dare me now,
'Cause I'd have to call your bluff."

The cowpokes were caught off guard. "There's some of that hooch left in you yet, Ellie," says Dave. "Why, I woulda thought you'd be plumb tuckered out, after all o' them metric modulations and dotted thirty-second note septuplets. Just ponderin' all o' that sets my mind to reelin', an' makes me want to take off my spurs, turn in an' get some shut-eye."

Ellie rose up, glowerin' at the traditionalist cowhands, an' with the strength that belied his advanced age, said: "Now listen up, boys, and hear what I'm a'tellin' ya: You cain't keep on a'lookin' back. The trail ahead is where we're drivin' this herd, and that's a'where the danger and the glory be – up beyond that next rise. Maybe you cain't see what's over there and to the range beyond, but I'm a'tellin' you – I been there and back. That country is

rich an' full of unspoiled grazin' land, fit for a new breed of composers. We got to take chances now an' agin, listenin' – getting' our blood goin'. Why, just now I'm rememberin' what old Charlie Ives tell me, when I warn't more'n knee-high to a spittoon: “Stand up an' use your ears like a man!” He were a grand ol' coot, that Charlie!”

“The pioneers – they settled the land. We're just tillin' the soil,” said Dick. “People want what we grow,” said Dave.

“You two can stay here, if you're of a mind to”, says Ellie. “The bushwhackers already come to rest here. Me, I got to keep movin' on.”

As the day descended into dusk on the tumbleweed-strewn prairie, the ven'able Ellie rode off into the sunset, leavin' behind the two wranglers who still hoped to till the old soil, reapin' a new harvest of familiar refrains for a well-disposed public. “That'll be the day,” grumbled Crater to himself.

...Up on the trail, Ellie was soon lost in thought, dreamin' of new horizons – new melodies, new harmonies for an outfit of hardy an' adventurous pioneer listeners he knew someday would put down roots in the undiscovered country, far ahead.

Send your ruminations to Steve Dankner at sdankner@earthlink.net if you've a mind to.