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American Musical Life Before 1900

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The mission of the Society for American Music is to stimulate the appreciation, performance, creation, and study of American musics of all eras and in all their diversity, including the full range of activities and institutions associated with these musics throughout the world.[1]

The *Journal of the Society for American Music* is the official organ of the Society; as such, the articles published in its pages deal with a wide range of topics that both reflect its mission and illustrate the incredible diversity of music and musical styles composed, performed, and heard in the Americas. A glance at the tables of contents for issues published in the last three volumes of the journal (February 2011 through February 2014) provides an illuminating snapshot of the wondrous multiplicity that characterizes American music history. The thirteen issues published during that time include articles on popular music (hip hop, ragtime, swing, jazz, rock, country, soul), musical theatre, teachers, conductors, works by composers ranging from Ives and Copland to Feldman, Harrison, and Reich (and many in between), performers (Heifetz, Robeson, Zappa), jam sessions, ethnomusicological topics; in other words, the journal reflects in a truly impressive manner the rich and varied musical culture of the Americas. What is seriously underrepresented in this panoply of musical multiplicity, however, is the rich, diverse, and similarly wondrous American musical culture of any time before the twentieth century. Of the forty-two articles published over this three-year period, only two (5 percent) deal with American music or musical life before 1900, both of them on nineteenth-century topics.

The most logical explanation for this rather remarkable imbalance is that very few Americanist scholars are conducting research on music before the twentieth century. This notion breaks down rather quickly, however, in light of other evidence. A rather different picture emerges, for example, if one also examines the list of reviews from this same sample of *JSAM* issues. There are reviews of editions, biographies, cultural studies, and recordings of pre-twentieth-century American music and topics in twelve of the last thirteen issues of *JSAM*; sometimes there are two or three such reviews in a single issue. In addition, even a cursory look at the programs for the Society's national conferences indicates without a doubt that scholarship in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music is not only being undertaken, it is in full and riotous bloom. Just to satisfy my curiosity, I examined programs from the last five conferences—Ottawa (2010), Cincinnati (2011), Charlotte (2012), Little Rock (2013), and Lancaster (2014). All of the presentations from each meeting are indexed in its conference booklet, and at the top of each index everything is divided into chronological periods (thank you, Wayne Shirley). "Early" music in the Americas is well represented: there are seminars, poster presentations, interest

[1] From the homepage of the Society for American Music, http://www.american-music.org/.

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group topics, lecture recitals, concerts, and many papers (sometimes in full sessions devoted to a musical topic from the eighteenth or nineteenth century; sometimes part of a session that is dedicated to a particular subject but not a specific time period), all of them dealing with American music and musical culture before 1900. Finally, it might be worth pointing out that last November a collection of essays, most of them written by SAM members and gathered into a volume titled *American Orchestras in the Nineteenth Century* (edited by SAM member John Spitzer) won the Ruth Solie Award, given by the American Musicological Society for the best collection of musicological essays published in 2012.

Clearly the argument that very little significant research is being done in American music prior to 1900 is not valid.

Another explanation, which falls into the category of conspiracy-think, is that there is an editorial bias against publication of such articles in the journal—despite the fact that every year the current editor of *JSAM* gets up at the business meeting held at the annual conference and implores all members to submit their best work, especially if they are conducting research in areas that are under-represented in the journal. In reality, the number of articles submitted does not even begin to reflect the quantity of excellent work being conducted in pre-twentieth-century Americanist musicology. For some reason, many scholars toiling in the vineyards of American music history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries just do not submit their excellent work to *JSAM*.

This special issue of the journal is an attempt to fix this problem. Last year, Mark Katz, the current editor of *JSAM*, invited me to co-edit a special issue on American musical life before 1900. I agreed, for the same reason that I had agreed to assemble a similar issue for *American Music* in 2003: to encourage both the creation and publication of scholarship that reflects the wonderfully rich musical history of the Americas prior to the twentieth century. (Although the previous paragraphs should make it clear that encouraging the *creation* of this type of scholarship is no longer as important a goal as it was in 2003.) In spring 2013 the call for papers was issued, and early in the summer we began to read our haul—a large number of articles, all of which dealt with some aspect of music and musical life in (mostly) North America during the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. We chose four of the articles, which are published in this issue, "Musical Women in Nineteenth-Century America," because they worked well together and allowed us to create an issue with a particular theme. (The book, recording, and multimedia reviews in this issue also focus on music in the Americas before 1900; the first book review considers two monographs on women musicians in nineteenth-century America.) But *JSAM* now also has in reserve another six articles—which have been either fully or provisionally accepted—that will appear in future issues of the journal. I have also heard from a number of Americanists who work on "early" music and who either missed the call or were too busy to put together an article this past summer, but whose interest in publishing their work in *JSAM* apparently has been piqued by this effort. Both Mark and I sincerely hope that this issue and future issues that include articles on pre-twentieth-century topics will prime the pump so that our journal finally will begin to represent not just the diversity of American music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also the rich musical heritage that we share.

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Each of the four articles in the current issue deals with the activities of women in nineteenth-century America and the importance that music played in their lives. The subjects of three of the essays are professional musicians: two were prima donnas (one European, one American) who worked in the world of itinerant opera companies (one in the antebellum period, the other at the end of the century); the third was a performer, teacher, composer, editor, and writer on music. The fourth subject was an amateur musician who became one of America's most important nineteenth-century poets; an examination of music in her life provides valuable insight into both the role of amateur music-making in a middle-class American family and the impact that music had on the development of her poetic voice. The four articles are quite different and were all written independently, but they overlap marvelously and provide wonderful insight into the cultivation of music by women in nineteenth-century America. The picture that emerges from the issue as a whole, in fact, is most decidedly greater than the sum of the individual parts.

The first article, "'*My* Business is to Sing': Emily Dickinson's Musical Borrowings," is George Boziwick's masterful examination both of the ubiquitous presence of music in American culture of the nineteenth century and of the impact of music on Emily Dickinson's poetry. By scrutinizing the music in Dickinson's bound volume of sheet music (called a binders' volume), extracting musical references from her letters, and compiling information about her family's exposure to music through amateur music-making, attendance at professional concerts, and church hymnody, Boziwick creates a compelling portrait of how thoroughly music permeated the life of this particular mid-century American family. Quotations from Dickinson's letters illustrate in a persuasive manner how familiarity with popular song titles (many from sheet music in her volume) created a language of allusion that was shared by all members of her family. Also fascinating is Boziwick's contention that Dickinson, in part because of social constraints (which, as we shall see, both Augusta Browne and Emma Juch chose to circumvent), eventually relinquished any desire to pursue music as a career, and instead turned her attention and ability to the less public (but still somewhat controversial) avocation of writing and publishing poetry. One of Boziwick's most important revelations, in fact, is how thoroughly Dickinson's love and knowledge of music informed the poetry she would create, both by her use of imagery inspired by music and by the application to some of her poems of the metrical structures of hymnody.

In "Rosa de Vries: a Dutch Diva and Nineteenth-Century Trans-Atlantic Operatic Culture," Helen Metzelaar reconstructs the musical training and professional career of a European prima donna who enjoyed a successful career in Italian and French opera in both Europe and the United States at mid-century. Relying on archival materials from the Netherlands, the United States, Italy, Great Britain, and elsewhere to tell her story, Metzelaar illustrates in a compelling manner how a woman with de Vries's abilities was able to create and manage her own career—through careful training, creation of a network of artists and impresarios with whom she worked, changing her style of opera (from French to Italian) to suit the market, traveling constantly, and somehow managing to bear and raise five children *en route*. De Vries is little known today, and as a foreign performer did not face many of the social constraints of the time that confronted most American women

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(and the other three women featured in this issue). But she was a successful prima donna whose vehicle was a style of musical theatre that was an important part of American popular culture of the antebellum period, and an examination of her achievements—and the difficulties that she overcame during her career—reveals a great deal about American operatic culture at mid-century. Her story also clearly illustrates in a particularly persuasive manner the close relationship that existed between the United States and Europe in the world of mid-century opera.

Bonny H. Miller, in her essay "Augusta Browne: From Musical Prodigy to Musical Pilgrim in Nineteenth-Century America," focuses on another mid-century woman who enjoyed remarkable success but who is little remembered today. Browne (ca. 1820–82) has been called "the most prolific woman composer in America before 1870," but she also enjoyed a successful career as a pianist, teacher, editor, and prolific writer.[2] Examination of her early life as the member of a rather peripatetic musical family in antebellum America suggests a different style of quasi-itinerant life that was not unusual for musicians; her childhood experiences were similar in some ways to those of de Vries—or possibly the prima donna's children. Browne grew up in a musical family, but her decision to pursue music as a performer and composer (and later as a writer) nevertheless illustrates the types of choices that a professional woman had to make. Like Emily Dickinson and Emma Juch (the subjects of the other essays in this issue), Browne had to contend with the reality that her professional choices, particularly as a published composer and writer, were outside the normal boundaries of acceptable behavior for middle-class nineteenth-century American women. Miller also devotes a portion of her article to a close examination of Browne's 1845 essay "The Music of America," and in the process exposes some significant mischaracterizations (by a succession of twentieth-century scholars) of what she wrote about contemporary American musical culture. Miller's contribution in this realm is important, for it demonstrates how easily false information, once introduced into scholarship, is repeated and eventually becomes accepted as "fact." Correction of such errors can be achieved only by close examination of the original documents.

In the final article in this issue, Kristen M. Turner takes us to the end of the century with an examination of the life and work of another prima donna, the American soprano Emma Juch (1860–1939), whose career peaked in the 1880s and 1890s. In "'A Joyous Star-Spangled Bannerism': Emma Juch, Opera in English Translation, and the American Cultural Landscape in the Gilded Age," Turner scrutinizes an American singer who achieved success on the operatic and concert stage, but who was not a superstar; in doing so, a perspective of American culture emerges that is different from one that would materialize as the result of a study of a more prominent performer. Like de Vries and (in her childhood) Browne, Juch spent much of her career as a transient musician, participating in a performance culture that was not centered in a single city (such as New York); like Browne and Dickinson, she was an ambitious individual who had to work around gendered social limitations. She did so by constructing a public image as a strong and successful woman on the

[2] Judith Tick, *American Women Composers Before 1870*, rev. ed. (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 150.

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public stage who nevertheless understood the social role she was expected to play. Her career choices also illustrate significant changes in the reception of opera in late-century America, which makes this article a useful companion to Metzelaar's. De Vries worked as a prima donna who performed Italian-language opera, which during the antebellum period was an important part of American popular culture. Juch, in contrast, was one of several prominent American prima donnas active in the 1880s and 1890s who chose to perform opera in English in order to counter the increasingly dominant image of foreign-language opera as an elite, aristocratic, and consciously European style of entertainment that was completely divorced from the popular stage.

These four vignettes provide interlocking glimpses into different aspects of musical life in nineteenth-century America. The musical, personal, and professional circumstances of each of these women were different, but each responded (in her individual way) to opportunities and obstacles that were sometimes personal, sometimes social. The refracted images from the lives of these four independent and strong women coalesce, overlap, and combine in this single issue; in the process, the portraits help us to understand better not only the place of music in American culture of this period, but also the significant role that music played in the lives of many American women of the time.

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