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Women and American Music, Three Stories

Comments

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Like a series of Russian dolls, the three lives told to us here nest inside one another, taking us from the 1870s through the 1910s—and in fact even into the twenty-first century. Three historians, Katherine Preston, Joseph Horowitz, and Michelle Wick Patterson, write about the intensely musical lives of exceptional women—the opera singer/entrepreneur Emma Abbott, the professional club woman Laura Langford, and the ethnomusicologist Natalie Curtis Burlin—as both singular and representative. In varying degrees they treat their subjects as "prisms of history," (to borrow Barbara Tuchman's timeworn and timeless phrase) addressing issues involving the social contingencies of musical taste, but also including women's history and American cultural history in their purview.[1]

I am writing my comments from a slightly different perspective, which is to observe these essays as "prisms of historiography." I want to emphasize the collective subversive potential of the essays to unsettle conventional Gilded Age/Progressive Era history by raising issues of gender and sexuality as well as class and cultural hierarchy.

With respect to issues of gender, I see Emma Abbott as a gloss on the classic trope of the "true woman," that familiar phrase from the early decades of women's history. If I invoke it here, it is because The True Woman on Stage was an oxymoron Abbott spent her career resolving and exploiting. Abbott's sensibility has a long reach. Just like the "Christian rap" and "Christian rock" of later periods (with their huge markets), Abbott's "Christian opera" (my term, not hers) conformed to the faith-based standards of her overwhelmingly Anglo-Protestant Midwest audiences. Interpolating Protestant hymns into Italian opera, she represents an American version of the "femme libre," the European term applied to opera divas who conveyed authority and agency for writers such as Georges Sand and George Eliott. Abbott derailed her

[1]Barbara Tuchman, "Biography as a Prism of History" in Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York, 1981), 80–90.

early career by refusing on moral grounds to perform the centerpiece role of Violetta, Verdi's tragic courtesan in his great *La Traviata*. How perfect that Abbott publicly rebutted a Methodist minister in Nashville, Tennessee in 1887 who attacked sinful theater when Abbott was attending his service. Using her pew as a stage, Abbott defended herself as a good Christian woman. Her company was doing great business in Nashville and had just opened its opera house. (Long before the Grand Ole Opry, Nashville folks liked opera.) This incident, which turned into a national scandal, produced what could be framed as a manifesto of creative rights against religious parochialism, perhaps worthy of consideration as a document in an anthology of feminist readings.

With respect to issues of class and hierarchy, Preston chips away at casual historiographic misperceptions around American musical hierarchies. Preston believes Abbott is a paradigm of opera's continuing cross-class appeal. This extends into the 1890s the argument from her earlier book, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–60* (1993). Preston describes Abbott's marketing genius in presenting herself as the "people's prima donna" and her success in producing "Opera for the People." Preston's article encourages us to investigate these terms, so often confused with cultural democratization. Populist marketing through the label "people's" this or that was and continues to be applied to a variety of musical genres, be it the racist minstrel songs of E. P. Christy or the leftist anthems of Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger in the 1940s. Abbott was no anomaly. Her historical successor, Beverly ("Bubbles") Sills, another *bel canto* prima donna, another anti-diva, popularized Italian opera, routinely appearing on late-night television talk shows. Sills's company, the City Opera, which was also affectionately called the "People's Opera" in contrast to its Lincoln Center neighbor, the Metropolitan Opera, also specialized in Italian opera in translation. Preston concludes: "Abbott's success tells us much about the importance of opera to a segment of the American audience that we have assumed had no interest in it," middle-class audiences in the so-called heartland."[2]

[2]In a communication to the author, Jan. 3, 2013, Preston elaborates: "In a nutshell, I have always maintained that [Lawrence] Levine's ideas about bifurcation of culture do not work at all in relation to musical theater, which in the nineteenth century seems to defy categorization in terms of audiences and cultural designations." For a similar perspective, see Lawrence Hamberlin, *Tin Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era* (New York, 2011).

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The ultimate entertainer-as-artist Louis Armstrong quoted Verdi right in the middle of "The Muskrat Ramble." That Armstrong grew up playing operatic excerpts and European symphonic music as a member of the Colored Waifs Home in New Orleans brings us to the second musical life examined in this journal—Laura Langford. Langford practiced her version of social justice by bringing orphans from the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum and the Hebrew Orphan Asylum to concerts of Wagner and Beethoven at the Brighton Beach Pavilion in Brooklyn in the 1890s.

Langford, an obscure figure a century later, was the Perfect American Wagnerite, and in Joseph Horowitz, who rediscovered her, she has found her perfect champion. Placing Langford's work in the context of the Wagner Invasion of New York opera productions in the 1890s, he presents Langford as a version of evolved clubwoman—the New Woman as cultural entrepreneur. Part of Langford's motivation to organize a society supporting the work of the most famous Wagner conductor of the day was her belief in classical music's potential for "uplift"—a term now associated with the "sacrilization" of art. But Horowitz makes the centerpiece of his argument more pertinent to issues of sexuality rather than class. He shows us how American women like Langford—and Willa Cather and Isadora Duncan, to stretch the reach of this argument—luxuriated in the baths of passion drawn for them by Wagner's heroines. His Wagner groupies "stood up and screamed" their enthusiasm, Horowitz noted in earlier writing as well. Given the history of Wagner's own anti-Semitism and the subsequent use and misuse of his greatness in the twentieth century, it is admittedly difficult to grasp the extent to which his operas served as the source of emancipatory discourse around sexuality in fin-de-siècle urban American society. How did Richard Wagner's heroines—Eva, Isolde, Brunhilde, Sieglinde—come to stand for deep listening to one's body not just one's soul? What made it possible for contemporary classical opera to reach this urban American female audience? Where did they get their musical educations? Did any European composer echo Charles Ives's homophobic contempt for Wagner's "fake nobility and heroism, [a composer] afraid to jump in a mill pond and be a hero. He liked instead to dress up in purple and sing about heroism—(a woman posing as a man)."[3]

Horowitz, however, has a much bigger argument to make, in fact one he has been writing about for years, namely the importance

[3]Charles E. Ives, *Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick (New York: 1972), 134.

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of classical music at a highpoint of its American influence during the American fin-de-siècle. As he describes it, there is an interdisciplinary hurdle to be surmounted here. In the preface of his book *Moral Fire. Musical Portraits from America's Fin-de-Siecle* (2012), Horowitz writes, "As a cultural historian specializing in classical music in the United States, I have long explored subject matter ignored by nearly all other cultural historians. Separated by a crack, classical music occupies a more isolated niche in the world of contemporary culture than do film, dance, or theater" (xiii–xiv). Horowitz's essay on Langford is persuasive for sure. In short: like early feminist historians who argued for the necessity of treating "gender as a historical variable," Horowitz asserts the claims of "classical music as a historical variable" as well at a time when our comparative musical literacy about classical music cannot match that of the fin-de-siècle era.

I am not quite ready to dismount my Valkyrian high horse in arguing the still relatively unexplored historiography around Wagner's American influence. Michelle Wick Patterson builds on Horowitz's argument throughout her essay, which is adapted from her well-received biography *Natalie Curtis Burlin: A Life in Native and African American Music*. She opens with a scene worthy of H.L. Mencken: Burlin chanting Brunhilde's warrior chant to Navajos in her misguided belief that its primitivism would appeal to them. Patterson links Laura Langford's idol, the Wagnerian conductor Anton Seidl, to Burlin's epiphanic moments.

Patterson extends the purview of these essays from heirarchies of musical taste into issues of race, as well as gender and class. Burlin pioneered not only Native American culture at a time of great indifference for and prejudice against it, but also furthered documentation of African American folk song in the Jim Crow era. She founded the Harlem Music Settlement School to offer classical training and supported the career of the African American ragtime bandleader, James Reese Europe in his Clef Club Carnegie Hall concert. She was influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois, himself a Wagnerite of sorts. (Du Bois used Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* as a cultural marker in his own work.) Like Du Bois, Curtis appropriated the German aesthetic surrounding the *Volkslied* to advocate for the integrity of folk music. Burlin was also mentored by Charlotte Mason. I think it is worth a reminder that Mason supported through patronage both Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. To sum up, Patterson explains Burlin as a fascinating example of the Progressive Woman who also foreshadows the New Woman of the 1920s. If she falters somewhat in explaining Burlin's career

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path, Patterson nevertheless concludes that "her turn to Native American and African American music was not, then, a departure from her earliest aspirations as a woman, a musician, and an American composer, but their fulfillment." Thus Patterson recapitulates a leitmotif in all these essays, namely a theme of porous boundaries of musical taste.

How ironic that Richard Wagner in particular and his German modernism drove Mark Twain crazy. He did not understand the "madness" of his fans. Perhaps neither do we, and in coming to terms with both Twain and Wagner with the kind of complex humility that classical music demands, we will be less crazy after all these years and able to harmonize the nature of cultural taste and the role classical music plays in it with greater diagnostic skill.

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