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The “yearnings of the heart to the Infinite”: *The Dial* and Transcendentalist Music Criticism

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“When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky . . . and I remembered with as much pity as pride, if I remembered at all, my acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the oratorios.” So wrote contrary Henry Thoreau in *Walden* (1854; [Princeton UP, 1971], p. 159). His literary acquaintances, in fact, had made important contributions to the emergence of music criticism in Boston a decade earlier in the Transcendentalist periodical the *Dial*. Published from 1840 to 1844 and edited by Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the *Dial* promised readers in the first issue to give voice to “a new spirit” and to “new views and the dreams of youth,” to aid “the progress of a revolution . . . united only in a common love of truth, and love of its work” (*The Dial*, 4 vols. [rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961], 1:1-2. The

definitive study is Joel Myerson, *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial: A History of the Magazine and Its Contributors* [Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1980]).

Featuring poetry, essays, reviews, and translations on an eclectic range of literary, philosophical, theological, and aesthetic topics, the *Dial* published only four articles substantially about music: one by John Sullivan Dwight, one by John Francis Tuckerman, and two by Fuller (excluding her lengthy study “Romaic and Rhine Ballads” [3:137-80] and brief commentary scattered in review articles). Each wrote one installment of an annual *Dial* feature for 1840-42—a review of the previous winter’s concerts in Boston. These three articles offer valuable facts and judgments; together with various other *Dial* essays, they yield a kind of Transcendentalist music theory.

Dwight had the classic Transcendentalist pedigree: A Harvard graduate, briefly a Unitarian minister, early member of the Transcendental Club formed in the wake of Emerson’s slender manifesto of an idealistic young generation, *Nature* (1836), contributor to the *Dial*, and member of the utopian Brook Farm community at West Roxbury. He contributed only a poem and three essays, all in the first volume of the

Dial—only “The Concerts of the Past Winter” (July 1840) was about music. Each of Dwight’s *Dial* essays, though, reveals something of his moral aesthetic. “The Religion of Beauty” (July 1840) asserts his belief (tinged with Plato and Swedenborg, filtered through Emerson) in correspondence: “Everything beautiful is emblematic of something spiritual” (1:21). His two-part “Ideals of Every-day Life” (January/April 1841) announces that “[t]rue labor,” as opposed to “[d]ruidery,” ennobles us and “cultivate[s] a sympathy for all men” (1:310-11)—a conviction that soon drew him to Brook Farm, whose cofounder George Ripley envisioned “a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor” (quoted in Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004], p. xv).

It’s tempting to dismiss Tuckerman’s sole *Dial* contribution, “Music of the Winter” (April 1841), as an aberration. A Harvard classmate of Thoreau and a friend of Dwight, Tuckerman wrote nothing else for the *Dial*, graduated from Harvard Medical School (1841), and became a naval surgeon. His brief “Music of the Winter” (April 1841), however, usefully assesses popular taste, the uneven quality of opera in Boston, and the success of the Academy of Music. His strong praise of the Handel and Haydn Society is mixed: “The chorus is excellent,” but the amateur soloists are seldom adequate and sometimes inaudible. He thus rejoices at the “engagement” of the great English tenor John Braham, whose “purity of tone [sometimes] appears almost unearthly.” Tuckerman’s lengthy, glowing evaluation of “the bright star of our winter season,” however, is nuanced. Once “the finest tenor of the world,” Braham now is past his prime, “often careless and loose in execution, displaying at times a redundancy of ornament,” too willing to adapt to his audience, and given to “an incorrectness of tune.” Yet in the face of the tenor’s critics, Tuckerman prefers to “hang with rapture over the last echo that returns the voice of Braham” (1:539-43).



Fuller’s more than forty contributions to the *Dial*—essays, verse, reviews, translations, and editorial squibs—include the woman’s-rights manifesto “The Great Lawsuit” (July 1843), the first version of her most famous work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Her “Lives of the Great Composers, Haydn, Mozart, Handel, Bach, Beethoven” (October 1841) and “Entertainments of the past Winter” (July 1842), which covered several arts, are also carefully researched, discerning essays. In the latter review, Fuller admitted she knew “little” of opera but shared “the intoxication of feeling” stirred by Vincenzo Bellini’s *Somnambula*, though it “is a very imperfect work.” Like Tuckerman, she was uplifted by the chorus and by the range and power of Braham’s solos in the Handel and Haydn Society’s

selections from *Messiah* and *The Creation* (3:53, 56-57). And she thought “none conferred so solid a benefit” all winter as the Academy of Music, “an excellent orchestra, under the guidance of an able leader” (3:60).

The *Dial*'s music criticism provides brilliant, sometimes idiosyncratic commentary on the state of music in Boston in the 1840s. Together these essays also reveal a sort of composite Transcendentalist moral music aesthetic that we can say, for convenience, concerns four major factors:

1. Self-culture and social reform. For the Unitarian/Transcendentalist mind, self-culture was the purpose and goal of life. This was not a matter of either narcissism or elitism but a profoundly demanding moral pursuit. “[F]or all educated Americans,” Emerson famously wrote in “Self-Reliance,” “Travelling is a fool’s paradise,” and its cause is “want of self-culture” (*The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* [CW], 10 vols. [Harvard UP, 1971-2013], 2:46). The *Dial*'s verdict on whether the Boston music scene fostered true culture was mixed. In his 1841 *Dial* review, Tuckerman praised the rising “popular interest” in concerts while sniffing at the public’s “usual want of nice discernment”—a condition that he thought continual exposure to top-flight orchestral works and oratorios surely would alleviate (1:539). In her July 1842 “Entertainments of the past Winter,” Fuller, who had high expectations of both performer and listener, declared Boston’s Academy of Music and the Handel and Haydn Society excellent even as she complained that some ensembles played “down” to their audiences (*Dial* 3:60). In a review of Francis James Fetis’s *Music Explained* the next April, however, she pointed to a decline in the quality of the Boston concert experience. True, audiences were large, but occasions for exalted “feelings” were marred by “the frequent rudeness of talking during the finest performance.” The Academy’s programming, moreover, had grown repetitive, over-relying on Beethoven’s admittedly great Fifth Symphony, and despite the previous success of Braham, the Handel and Haydn Society still lacked “good solo singers” (3:533-34).

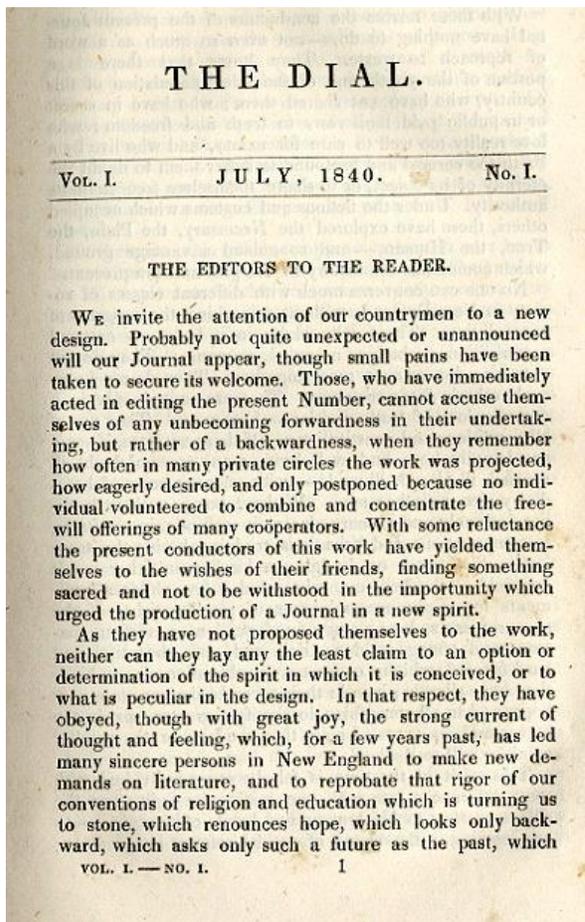
Recent scholars (such as Michael Broyles, Adrienne Fried Block, and William Weber) have argued that in the 1840s a rift grew between European classical music and American culture, and that in Boston an upper-class elite of Unitarian and Episcopalian Brahmins were driving the growth of orchestral music. Ironically, Transcendentalists were still viewed in some circles as a different kind of elite: freethinking, privileged intellectuals peddling infidelity or lunacy. Certainly Dwight was never wealthy, virtually all Transcendentalists were social reformers, and their music criticism, like their other literary and artistic ventures, was socially engaged. The target of Fuller’s music criticism, her biographer Charles Capper rightly comments, was not “the lower but the boorish upper classes” (*Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, 2 vols. [New York: Oxford UP, 1992, 2007], 2:544n25). Indeed, she argued that reading biographies of composers is enriched by “our own day[’s]” sensitivity to “the simple annals of the poor,” where we find the origins of many great artists (2:149). For Fuller and Dwight, good music not only elevates mind and spirit—it also enhances social and civic life through the *collective* “living” experience of what Fuller called “the identity and universality of all thought” (2:151-52). The “great pleasure” of the 1841-42 concert season, she wrote, “and one never to be forgotten by those who had the happiness to *share* it,” was the Academy of Music’s performance of Beethoven’s “Pastoral and Fifth Symphony” (3:61; emphasis added). Further, Dwight’s ideal of music as a means of “mutual reconciliation of

individuality with collective association,” writes Ora Frishberg Saloman, signaled his distance from the more detached Emersonian brand of self-reliance and subsequent embracing collectivism at Brook Farm (*The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petruionis, and Laura Dassow Walls [New York: Oxford UP, 2010], p. 471).

2. Lives of composers as moral example. Fuller began her much-admired “Lives of the Great Composers” by acknowledging that “The lives of the musicians are imperfectly written for this obvious reason. The soul of the great musician can only be expressed in music” (2:148). She went on, nevertheless, to explain the unique creations of these “high-priests of sound” (2:149) and to define qualities of “self-reliance” manifested differently in the life of each composer (2:156). Emerson would develop the concept of exemplary lives in *Representative Men* (1850), showing that the value of biography lies not in dry facts or passive hero-worship but in our ability to see our own virtues and vices reflected in famous lives through the ages. No musician is included in Emerson’s book. But Handel is key to his formulation of the theory in his 1836 journal: “Raphael paints wisdom, Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakspear writes it . . .” (*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 5, ed. Merton M. Sealts Jr. [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965], p. 150). He reworks this passage in his January 1841 *Dial* essay “Thoughts on Art” to explain “the reappearance [in the arts] of one mind, working in many materials to many temporary ends” (1:375; reused in the 1870 essay “Art” [CW, 7:26]). In an 1838 journal entry he asserts a rarefied self-reliance and cautions us, as he would in *Representative Men*, not to fixate on the virtues of *any* hero: *not* to “play the tunes of Handel only, or learn Handel’s music, instead of becoming Handels ourselves by expressing the beauty that enamours the soul through the modulations of the air” (*Journals*, 5:492-93).

3. The inefficacy of language and musical texts. In its opening number, the *Dial* editors announced that “There is somewhat in all life untranslatable into language” (1:3). It followed (paradoxically, because expressed by these brilliant *writers*) that words are ultimately unable to capture the deepest truths—language is the mere residue of felt experience. Bronson Alcott tried, through his “Orphic Sayings” in the *Dial*, to tap the mystic through the verbal, but his attempt was incomprehensible and widely mocked as the epitome of fuzzy-brained Transcendentalism. Fuller proposed instead that music, alone among the arts, gave full scope to the spirit. “[T]o-day,” she declared, “Music is *the* living, growing art,” and “Beethoven, towering far above our heads, still with colossal gesture points above” (2:150). Valuing what she called “spontaneous genius,” she liked an anecdote about Haydn, who “had no reason to give why he put a phrase or note here, and thus, except ‘It was best so. It had the best effect so’” (2:156). This view of the inefficacy of words to prove or explain led Dwight to depreciate the value of *texts* in musical compositions. “Music is the aspiration, the yearnings of the heart to the Infinite,” he declared, and “Words, the language of thoughts, are too definite” to carry such “yearnings” (1:126-27)—as is music that too literally *imitates* or *describes* sights and sounds of nature. Dwight championed the symphonic form pioneered by Haydn and perfected by Beethoven because he thought instruments alone capable of ushering the heart to the highest, non-verbal experience. But here was one point of disagreement, inconsistency, and paradox among *Dial* critics.

4. Inconsistency. My late colleague David McKay noted Dwight's *self*-contradiction: Dwight advocated "'pure' music, praising particularly Beethoven's *Sixth [Pastoral] Symphony*," yet he thought Beethoven's *Ninth*, which incorporates Schiller's "Ode to Joy," the most sublime symphony, and he "unabashedly embraced Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Handel's *Messiah* as music of the highest order" (*Biographical Dictionary of Transcendentalism* [Westport, CT: Greenwood], pp. 73-74)—all, of course, works *full* of words! Contrary to Dwight's denigration of words, Emerson, who claimed to have "obtuse ears" but enjoyed oratorios, thought more radically that "The sweetest music is not in the oratorio, but in the human voice when it speaks from its instant life, tones of tenderness, truth, or courage" (*Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 vols., ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, 10 vols. [New York: Columbia UP, 1939, 1990-95], 7:494; *CW*, 2:216). Fuller found a sensible third approach to the argument over *words* in music: She simply *redefined the problem away*: In *Messiah*'s "soaring onward impulse" and its "sublime chorus, 'Lift up your heads . . . He is the King of Glory,'" she announced, "These are not *words* from [Handel], or rather they are true words, not traditional, but from the fulness of the soul" (3:56). *Dial* contributors sometimes seemed to certify Emerson's famous dictum in "Self-Reliance": "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" (*CW*, 2:33)! The Transcendentalist critics agreed, incidentally, that Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation* are sublime masterworks. With Dwight, however, most maintained a paradox: They considered Nature a manifestation of the divine but rated *Creation* the lesser of the two works because, in their view, it too literally mimics the very world it so beautifully evokes, whereas *Messiah* transports us, in Fuller's phrase, to "another region, sublimer, deeper, sweeter, stronger" (*Dial* 3:55). Haydn, they thought, captures earthly glories, which are emblematic of the spiritual realm—to which Handel ushers us directly.



What, then, was the *Dial's* contribution to American music criticism? If measured by subscriptions (which never exceeded 300), its influence was slight, though Saloman suggests that number was significant in Boston, “a city whose residents were proud of their enlightened cultural outlook” (*Listening Well: On Beethoven, Berlioz, and Other Music Criticism in Paris, Boston, and New York, 1764-1890* [New York: Peter Lang, 2009], p. 138). In contrast, the national periodical of Associationism the *Harbinger*—published initially by Dwight at Brook Farm (1845-47), then in New York—peaked at 1,000 subscribers (Sterling F. Delano considers the *Harbinger* the first journal of significant music criticism in the U.S.; see *The Harbinger and New England Transcendentalism* [Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1983], pp. 125-26). Critical reception of the *Dial*, Joel Myerson shows, was mixed, though the magazine was warmly reviewed by Horace Greeley’s *New-York Daily*

Tribune, and Fuller’s “Lives of the Great Composers” was covered extensively and favorably by Boston’s *Musical Magazine* (Myerson, *NETDial*, pp. 76, 70). The *Dial's* most lasting legacy was providing a forum for a generation of variously talented idealists responding to Emerson’s challenge in *Nature* that it was *their* time to “build [their] own world” (CW, 1:45). Fuller went on to become the first great U.S. woman journalist with the *New-York Tribune*, serving as literary critic and writing on all manner of cultural and political topics including twenty-nine articles on music (Saloman, *Listening Well*, p. 137). The prolific Dwight became the first great U.S. music critic. He published more than 250 pieces in the *Harbinger* (110 on music [Delano, *HarbingerNET*, p. 125]), founded *Dwight's Journal of Music* (1852-81), and served as historian of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society. Fuller and Dwight helped establish the popular and critical reputation of Beethoven as the preeminent composer (see Saloman, *Beethoven's Symphonies and J. S. Dwight: The Birth of American Music Criticism* [Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995]).

Transcendentalists oscillated between (and some fell out over) the poles of Emersonian self-reliance and communal social action. In 1845, Dwight asked Emerson for a small item for the new *Harbinger*, and got this snuffy reply: “I will not promise a line to any [journal] which has chosen a patron”—a reference to Brook Farm’s recent adoption of organizational principles of the French visionary social theorist Charles Fourier (qtd. in Delano, *HarbingerNET*, p. 12). Dwight, in turn, thought Emerson’s life had been “one ever-lasting non-committal,” and his poems “counsel loneliness, and call that true life” (qtd. in *Ibid.*, p. 73). Yet the *Dial* editors in 1840 *knew* shared generational hopes would take different forms: “This spirit of the time,” they wrote, “is felt by every individual

with some difference,—to each one casting its light upon the objects nearest to his temper and habits of thought” (1:2). Manifested differently, this new spirit would work reform in politics, business, literature and art, philosophy and spirituality. Indeed, Dwight and Emerson remained friends.

A commonplace of literary history is that the youthful idealism of Transcendentalism’s heyday faded with the deaths of Fuller in 1850 and Thoreau in 1862, with the aging of Emerson, Dwight, and Alcott, with the carnage of the Civil War and, in its wake, blighted hopes for political and economic reform and Reconstruction. But in a sense, Transcendentalism did not pass away with its first-generation founders. Instead, its vision of human potential adapted to conditions of a radically new, if also wearier and more skeptical, nation.

Two decades after the *Dial* expired, Dwight invited Emerson to write a new poem to open a Grand Jubilee Dwight had organized to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year’s Day 1863 at the Boston Music Hall. Emerson often declined such requests, claiming writing for occasions chased away his Muse. This time, he accepted. Before a packed house of 3,000—abolitionists, civic leaders, former slaves, and aging Transcendentalists—Emerson read “Boston Hymn,” in which a righteous God delivers a ringing denunciation of slavery and asserts human dignity. The effect was electric. The audience jumped to its feet cheering and singing. Carl Zerrahn, conductor of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, then led his Philharmonic Orchestra in rousing patriotic and sacred favorites such as Beethoven’s *Egmont* Overture, Holmes’s “Army Hymn,” Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” Rossini’s *William Tell* Overture (John McAleer, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1984], p. 572). The poetry, the music—the shared exuberance—must have struck Dwight and Emerson as the latest fulfillment of the prospective spirit of the *Dial*, which in July 1840 promised to announce “not what part of dead time, but what state of life and growth is now arrived and arriving” (1:4).

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