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Commentary and Reactions: From the Musicological Perspective

by KATHERINE K. PRESTON

I was delighted to be invited to comment on papers presented in a session devoted to music criticism in antebellum Boston at the national conference of the American Literature Association, especially because the session was *not* part of a conference devoted to music history. I brought to my task a strong personal and professional belief that in order to understand American history and culture, it is absolutely essential that scholars in the humanities at least acknowledge the importance of the performing arts (of all kinds) in American life of whatever time period they are dealing with.

This, of course, is hardly a startling statement. There is copious academic research today—by scholars of history, American studies, music, theater, and dance history, cinematic studies, and American literature—that includes music, dance, theatre, and film. This is particularly obvious in the realm of popular culture, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries. One would be hard-pressed today to attend an academic conference in the humanities and not be overwhelmed by presentations on popular culture—a perfect example is the program of the ALA conference of which this session was a component. But this approach is much less common—and hence even more important—when the topic of the scholarship is an earlier historical period. This adds to my delight at participating in this session, since its focus was music and musical criticism in Boston during the antebellum period.

For most of my professional career I have studied the performance and reception of music in nineteenth-century America. I have spent countless hours—days, weeks—of my life reading and extracting information and insights about music from contemporary print media, including popular press magazines, local newspapers, and more specialized journals devoted to music and the theatre. The type of information available from such sources obviously helps us to understand the important place of music *within* American culture. But we can also use music (its place in society, its reception, etc.) as a tool to help us understand American culture itself.

I will start with a brief summary of how the three speakers utilized the information about music that they retrieved from periodicals and serials. Then I will share some insights that are informed by my musicological background—suggesting different ways that one might think about or ask questions of the same material. The point is to share cross-disciplinary points-of-view.

All three authors used music criticism (broadly defined) in both of the manners I have suggested above: as evidence of musical culture in antebellum Boston and as support for their observations about certain aspects of American culture. They approached the topic in slightly different, but sometimes overlapping, ways.

Teresa Neff argued that reviews of Handel and Haydn Society concerts had concrete repercussions: that critical commentary and recommendations in reviews inspired the Society's directors to make

positive changes. In general, she paired evidence from newspapers with archival documents that reveal decisions by individuals associated with the Society (administrators, conductors, etc.) that were made in response to the criticism. This clearly suggests that reviews (words) sometimes result in actions that change organizations. Wesley Mott examined music-related articles written by Margaret Fuller, John Sullivan Dwight, and John Francis Tuckerman in the Transcendentalist periodical *The Dial* and used that information both as evidence of musical performances in Boston in the 1840s and to support his contention that such criticism reveals a great deal about Transcendentalists' general "moral aesthetics." Robert Scholnick used reviews written by George Washington Peck and published in the Boston *Post* in the mid-1840s to illustrate both the growth of public concerts in contemporary Boston and to argue that the *Post*, as a so-called "penny press" newspaper with a large circulation base, overtly sought to educate its middle-class readers about a particular repertory (what we call "classical" music) and encourage the growth of such concerts in the city.

In the interest of cross-disciplinary approaches to scholarship, I will share some of the ideas that occurred to me as I read these papers prior to the conference. Some of my questions and ideas suggest very different approaches to the information used by each author. But that is part of the joy of scholarship: that different researchers approach the same material in dissimilar ways. I believe that when scholars come from unrelated disciplines and share our varied insights, this can lead to more nuanced and interesting ways of thinking: we can all learn from each other.

When reading Teresa Neff's discussion of the Handel and Haydn Society, I was convinced by her basic argument that music criticism can function in a cause-and-effect manner to serve as a catalyst for change. But I was also intrigued by the idea of using the information in the reviews (and the reactions that they preserve) as a portal to understanding more profoundly the circumstances of musical life of the period.

Think of it this way: the programs from both of the concerts that she discussed (December 1815 and April 1817) are extant. So it is possible to learn basic information, such as the repertory performed at each concert, and perhaps the names of the performers. But on its own, this information is static. We might compare and contrast repertories, or learn if there was overlap among the performers, but we can do very little beyond that.

Reviews, however, change that situation, for a scholar's access to *reactions* to the two concerts opens up all sorts of avenues to explore. For example, *why* were the reactions to these two concerts so diametrically opposed? Was there a different (less skilled) conductor at the second concert? Was the repertory different? Are there corroborating reviews that confirm good or bad performances, or is the negative critique a one-off? Were the reviews written by different critics? Is it possible to ascertain the critic's identity—and, if so, his (or her) background, training, qualifications, perhaps even an aesthetic philosophy? This type of inquiry—admittedly a difficult task—would both deepen and broaden our understanding of the Handel and Haydn Society's performances during this time.

Wesley Mott is quite persuasive that the musical attitudes expressed by Dwight, Fuller, and Tuckerman reveal a great deal about an underlying Transcendentalist moral aesthetic, and the depth of his expertise on this topic is inspiring. But although I was delighted to learn that the musical commentary by these writers reveals much about Transcendentalism, as a music historian I am

fascinated by the idea of turning the question around—not just what musical writings reveal about Transcendentalist aesthetics but what the Transcendentalists—in general—thought about music. Where did it fit into their world view? The fact that *The Dial* regularly devoted pages to essays about the Boston concert season of the previous year suggests that musical culture was important to some Transcendentalists. But was it a bread-and-butter part of Transcendentalist life (like it was for the 18th-century American Moravians)? And—more important—did most of them share the very new musical views of, for example, John Sullivan Dwight?

This is an important question, for the role of music in western society was changing during this period (from a utilitarian function to a tool for uplift and edification). Dwight clearly believed in the latter role of music—and the comments from critiques by Fuller and Tuckerman suggest that they may have agreed with him. Today, many scholars valorize Dwight because this aesthetic reflects what “classical” music became (and is today), so in retrospect he is considered a forward-thinking individual. But his attitude was not the dominant aesthetic in 19th-century America. Nor did most Americans agree with clear-cut binaries (“classical” vs popular; uplift and education vs entertainment) that is suggested in Fuller’s comments about “ensembles playing *down* to their audiences, or Tuckerman’s quip on the “public’s usual want of nice discernment.” Were these ideas accepted by most Transcendentalists, or did they represent the beliefs of individuals who were not part of the mainstream? The insights of historians or scholars of literature who really know the Transcendentalists and can speak to their attitudes about music would greatly help us to understand this.

Robert Scholnick’s discussion tackles the idea of “music for all” with his very title: “Not for Brahmins Alone: George Washington Peck and Music Criticism in the Boston *Post*, 1840-1845.” As a scholar of American serials, he provides valuable background: the newspaper’s Democratic leanings, its educational aspirations, large circulation base, and overall attempt to create in Boston a vibrant “musical community” that was available to “the people at large.” This general argument is persuasive, especially if considered in terms of the “elites” (whom we tend to associate with patronage of such concerts) vs the “urban middle and working class.”

As a music historian, however, I am intrigued by the question of how persuasive Peck was (or was not) in attracting non-elites to concerts—and who those non-elites were. His goal (and the goal of the *Post*) may have been to educate “the people at large” about the value of this particular repertory, but I suspect that his definition of “we” (those interested, for example, in the success of the Academy of Music) was much more limited than what we consider today to be the “entire Boston musical community.” Prof. Scholnick has ably placed his research into the context of scholars who have written about antebellum Boston musical life. But I suspect that additional information would be useful in the context of his argument. For example, did the Harvard Musical Association place ads for its 1845 chamber music concert in all of the Boston newspapers—even those that served different audiences than the *Post*? If so, then the ad in the *Post* might not necessarily indicate that the HMA was committed to providing chamber music “to the larger Boston community.” And what other kinds of advertisements were found in the *Post*? Were they different from those in other serials? In addition, did the goal of the *Post* to create a “general” understanding of music continue after Peck left the newspaper in 1847? He was on staff for only three years. Do we know why he left? What was the nature of his musical writing for the New York newspapers where he worked? Might that type of information reveal something about the reception of his ideas in Boston or in New

York? These and other questions—about the performers who played in the concerts mentioned in the paper (were they immigrants? native Bostonians? what did they play? were they skilled? what role did they have in Boston musical culture?), the overall nature of the repertory performed (in addition to the classical works we all recognize), and the make-up of the audiences (ostensibly Peck’s target group)—would greatly contribute to the discussion.

The end goal for all of these papers is the employment of print media (or scholarship based on print media) to create a sophisticated and layered understanding of a complex topic during a fluid period in Boston’s history. This is both admirable and valuable, and suggests that collaborative work between scholars from disparate disciplinary fields can yield rich and important new knowledge.

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