



# "Preserving our heritage for the future" in "Music librarianship in America, Part 1: Music librarians as custodians of cultural history"

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## Preserving Our Heritage for the Future

*Dena J. Epstein*

Historians are supposed to be concerned with the past, not the future. But the rapid technological changes that have altered printing, publishing, and library processes—such as microcomputers, optical disks, telefacsimile, and cassettes, both audio and video—will inevitably influence the methodology of historians.<sup>1</sup> How much influence they will have is another matter altogether. The fantasy that was popular in the literature not too long ago of the “paperless” library where all literature was entered into a central computer lies at one extreme.<sup>2</sup> In this scholarly Shangri-la, the historian sits in the comfort of home or office developing an idea. Punching a few buttons on a personal computer will instantly bring forth all relevant literature. It has even been conjectured that the computer could “automatically launch an empirical investigation and make suitable generalizations.”<sup>3</sup> A few more buttons could edit and document the paper, another button could order a printout, and a new contribution to scholarship would emerge, ready to be entered into the central computer for the edification of other scholars.

This fantasy seems now to have fewer enthusiastic advocates than it once had. Humanistic scholars use a varied vocabulary that can make on-line retrieval difficult if not impossible. Moreover, on-line databases frequently lack retrospective files whereas historians depend on older material in a variety of subject fields that may be needed by only a few widely-scattered readers.<sup>4</sup> These problems may be solved as more retrospective files become available, but it seems unlikely that complete automation of research library collections will occur. The historian enthusiastically welcomes the very real help that technology can provide in expediting such tedious tasks as collating, indexing, compiling concordances, editing, and the like. Conversely, the disadvantages of electronic media—their inherent instability and the problems presented by equipment obsolescence—should not be ignored. Historians will continue for the foreseeable future to rely on print as their basic resource and means of communication.

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<sup>1</sup> “Contemporary Technology in Libraries,” Beth M. Paskoff, issue ed., *Library Trends*, 37 (1989).

<sup>2</sup> F. W. Lancaster, *Toward Paperless Information Systems* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), and his *Libraries and Librarians in an Age of Electronics* (Arlington, Va: Information Resources Press, 1982). See also George R. Jaramillo, “Computer Technology and Its Impact on Collection Development,” *Collection Management*, 10 (1988), 1–13.

<sup>3</sup> C. W. Churchman, *The Design of Inquiring Systems: Basic Concepts of Systems and Organization* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 117, quoted in Lancaster, *Libraries and Librarians in an Age of Electronics*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Stern, “Online in the Humanities: Problems and Possibilities,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 14 (1988), 161–164.

The task of the cultural historian was well described in Richard Altick's *The Scholar Adventurers* as the solving of

a vast and tangled puzzle—the contradictions, the obscurities, the very silence which the passage of time leaves behind in the form of history. To repair the damage done by those who in past ages have falsified, distorted, or destroyed the written record . . . requires detective talents—and staying power—of the highest order. . . .

Research is frequently dull and laborious beyond description. . . . Much of it ends in despair. . . . But the same research has nevertheless provided us with an understanding . . . which was impossible fifty or a hundred years ago.<sup>5</sup>

Historical interpretations can vary widely over time as social patterns change. Cultural history, however historians try to protect it, is affected by prejudice and political myopia. When I began my research in the history of African-American folk music in the early 1950s, most scholars regarded such a search as an exercise in futility. “There is no trustworthy evidence before the Civil War,” wrote one expert;<sup>6</sup> “The Negro is not distinguished by culture from the dominant group. Having completely lost his ancestral culture, . . .” wrote another.<sup>7</sup> Given the voluminous literature on slavery, it seemed incredible that nowhere was there a contemporary description of music, dancing, and instruments. At that time, much of the contemporary literature was disregarded as being unreliable. This was particularly true of the slave narratives, published recollections of fugitive slaves written before the Civil War. Ulrich Phillips, the most influential historian of the South in his generation, damned these writings as a group: “Ex-slave narratives in general . . . were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful.”<sup>8</sup> A healthy skepticism about his judgments has, however, been justified by time. At least two of the most maligned narratives have been subsequently authenticated from contemporary records, such as census lists and legal documents.

Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* includes a vivid, first-hand account of the life of a slave fiddler (figure 1), while Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* describes the John Canoe festival at Christmas in antebellum coastal North Carolina, a celebration better known in the West Indies.<sup>9</sup> Thus, slave narratives, originally judged wholly unreliable, are now considered a highly valued primary source.

Music historians now accept the view that music is influenced by the life around it. Almost everyone is aware that Charles Ives was an insurance executive as well as a composer and that Benny Goodman received his early training in a settlement house music school at Hull House. A recent history of music in late medieval Bruges drew upon “its social, cultural, intellectual, economic, urban, liturgical, and ecclesiastical histories”—not an easy task.<sup>10</sup> Music librarians cannot be expected to

<sup>5</sup> Richard D. Altick, *The Scholar Adventurers* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1959), “Appendix 1: The Negro-White Spiritual,” pp. 345–364.

<sup>7</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, rev. ed., (New York: MacMillan, 1957), pp. 680–681, quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 443.

<sup>8</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1941), p. 219.

<sup>9</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), and Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagin Yellin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Paula Higgins, review of *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*, by Reinhard Strohm, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 42 (1989), 152.

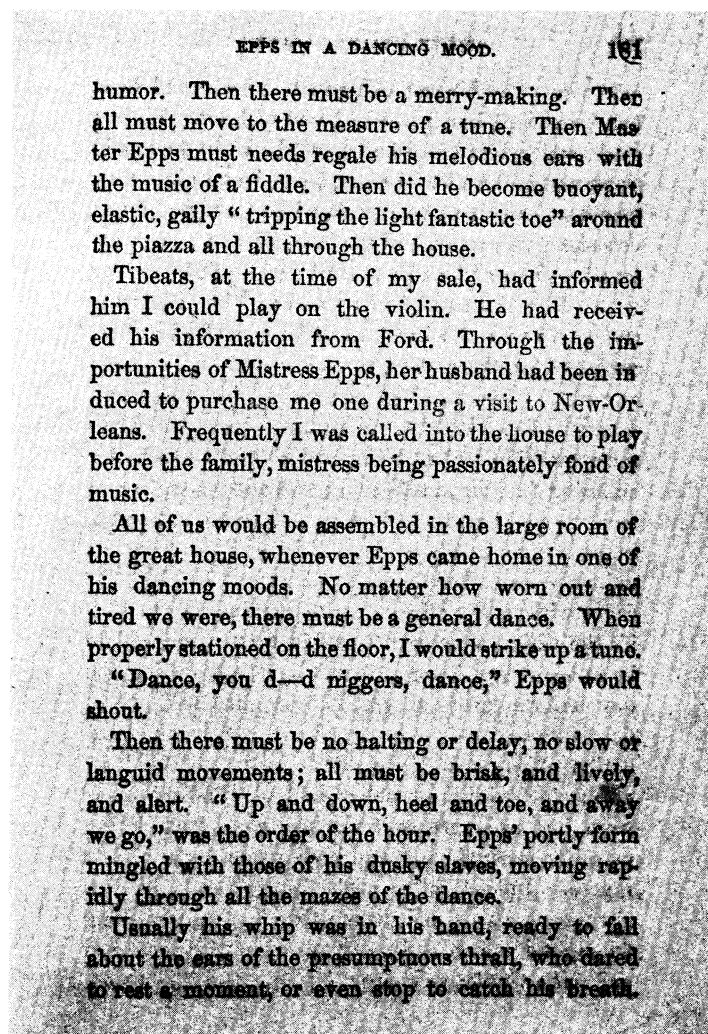


Figure 1. From Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1855; originally published 1853).

have all these resources at their fingertips, let alone in their libraries, but they should be aware of the widening boundaries of music scholarship and should help direct scholars to appropriate materials.

The effort that has gone into reconstructing the musical life of Renaissance Florence or medieval Bruges may also be necessary to recapture the musical life of the United States in the recent past. Examples of the thoughtless destruction of potentially valuable research materials may provide object lessons for music librarians of today and tomorrow. Consider the treatment given to the records of the Federal Music Project of the New Deal's Works Projects Administration. Although widely recognized as the most extensive program of government support for music that the United States has ever seen, its historical record is widely scattered and incomplete. We do not know how much was simply discarded. When the project was terminated, many records were sent to the National Archives and the Library of Congress, but many more, including concert programs, orchestral scores and parts, oral history transcripts, and collections of folk music and texts, were left elsewhere. The Illinois State Historical Library, for example, holds the archives, in thirty-six boxes, of the Federal Music Project in Illinois from the years 1935-43.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> D. W. Krummel et al., *Resources of American Music History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 111.

One portion of the project that is well worth serious study is the Composers' Forum-Laboratory, "a workshop to encourage new musical compositions by American artists. . . . A composer whose work was chosen . . . could rehearse the performers and conduct the orchestra. . . . Following the performance, the audience would discuss the work."<sup>12</sup>

The roster of composers represented on the programs of the Forum in New York City alone reads like a "Who's Who in Twentieth-Century American Music": Marc Blitzstein, Ernest Bloch, Henry Brant, Carlos Chávez, Aaron Copland, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Paul Creston, Hanns Eisler, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, Mary Howe, Otto Luening, Walter Piston, Quincy Porter, Wallingford Riegger, William Schuman, Roger Sessions, and Virgil Thomson. William Schuman, who received the first performance of his serious music there, in October 1936, said that he had "gained ten years by the experience."<sup>13</sup> The success of the Forum-Laboratory idea in New York led to its establishment in other cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Oklahoma City, and Los Angeles.

There is, surprisingly, no history of this significant effort, hardly even an awareness that it existed. *Amerigrove* mentions it in passing in a brief paragraph on the Works Progress Administration.<sup>14</sup> The only hint about the location of some of its records that appears in the index to *Resources of American Music History* is an ambiguous entry, "Composers' Forum," referring to the New York Public Library.<sup>15</sup> We do not know what works were performed or how the audiences reacted.

Besides the Composers' Forum-Laboratory, the Music Project established performing companies—orchestras, bands, dance and theatre orchestras, chamber ensembles, vocal groups, Negro choruses, and opera companies—that were separate from those sponsored by the Theatre Project and its dance companies. Most of the Theatre Project materials are now housed at George Mason University in Virginia, where an effort is being made to encourage their research use. The Writers' Project and the Theatre Project have received some attention, but so little has been written about the Music Project that the Library of Congress bibliography on the WPA published in 1982 includes only a meager list of titles. The section "Where Is It Now?" omits the Music Project altogether.<sup>16</sup> What a heartbreaking example of the neglect and destruction visited upon our heritage! Fortunately research has begun on the history of the Music Project in one city, Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to distortion and destruction, historians must cope with the enormous gaps in the historic record caused by the neglect of large sectors of the population. Ignored or forgotten were women, African-Americans, immigrants, and the poor, along with their creations—non-European and popular cultures. The histories of

<sup>12</sup> Marguerite D Bloxom, comp., *Pickaxe and Pencil: References for the Study of the WPA* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1982), p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> Ashley Pettis, "The WPA and the American Composer," *Musical Quarterly*, 26 (1940), 101–112. A list of the composers whose works were performed and of media of performance is given on pp. 103–104.

<sup>14</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, s.v. "Works Progress Administration (WPA), Federal Music Project of the."

<sup>15</sup> *Resources of American Music History*, p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Bloxom, *Pickaxe and Pencil*, pp. 51–71. Milton Meltzer in his *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976) claims that "transcripts of the dis-

cussions in New York and Boston were made and copies filed with the Library of Congress" (p. 96), but no transcripts were reported to *Resources of American Music History*.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine P. Smith, "Operas, Grand and Light: Produced by the Federal Music Project in Southern California, 1936–1939" (paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Sonneck Society for American Music, Nashville, April, 1989); and Stephen M. Fry, "Sources for the Study of the WPA Music Project in Los Angeles," in *California's Musical Wealth: Sources for the Study of Music in California* (Santa Barbara: Music Library Association, Southern California Chapter, 1989).

the past that dealt only with the great masters or the upper classes left a sadly distorted picture.

With regard to women, progress has been made, but no impartial evaluation of their accomplishments has yet been made. For instance, the biographical sketch of Fanny Mendelssohn in *The New Grove* of 1980 reads in part:

Fanny is said to have been as musically gifted as her brother. . . . However, her historical importance consists in her having provided . . . much essential source material for the biography of Felix. . . . Six of her songs were published under her brother's name. . . . Most of her compositions, however, . . . were never printed.<sup>18</sup>

Why her songs were published “under her brother’s name” and why most of her works were never published at all is not explained. This article is not a reprint from earlier editions but was written expressly for *The New Grove* by Karl-Heinz Köhler, of Weimar, Germany. Perhaps it represents some progress, since there is no entry at all for Fanny in the German music encyclopedia *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. A proper evaluation of Fanny Mendelssohn as a composer will require examination of those manuscripts that have remained unpublished for almost one hundred and fifty years.

On occasion even the resources of the greatest research libraries will not be sufficient to resolve a problem. Take the need to verify the performance of Florence Price’s Symphony in E minor by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933, the first performance of a symphony by an African-American woman. All accounts agreed on these facts, but the program book of the orchestra makes no mention of the work. It was necessary to consult the orchestra’s scrapbooks to learn that a special series of concerts was given in honor of the Century of Progress Exposition, sponsored by a Friends of Music organization. These concerts, played at the Auditorium Theater rather than at Orchestra Hall, did in fact include the performance of the symphony.

Manuscript materials still in private hands frequently are needed to resolve research questions, and the historian must both locate them and persuade owners to grant access. Many such queries go unanswered, but others are welcomed. I still remember being told by Lucy McKim Garrison’s surviving daughter-in-law that I was the first person ever to inquire about a woman in the Garrison family, although they were inundated by queries about the men. Lucy was a practicing musician in a small way, but the key to her history lay in that of her family and her husband’s family. Tracing a married woman if one does not know her husband’s name can be next to hopeless. Serendipity and luck may be as important as diligence and skill.

Serendipity, the gift of finding something valuable that we are not looking for, can be among the happiest moments in the life of an historian, especially if it solves a puzzle that had baffled us for years. I had inherited some books that had belonged to Thorvald Otterström, a name that probably is not familiar to many of you. Otterström was a Danish theorist who settled in Chicago in 1892, composed many chamber works and songs, wrote several textbooks, and created a number of new scales as an alternative to atonality.<sup>19</sup> The *National Union Catalog* lists forty-seven entries under his name, including a canon, chorale and fugue for large orchestra published in Berlin in 1930. Among the books I inherited was an 1867 edition of *Slave Songs of the United States* and an annotated copy of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* (figure 2). What had these books to do with a founder

<sup>18</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy) [Hensel], Fanny.”

<sup>19</sup> These are described in his *A Theory of Modulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935).

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# DON'T BE WEARY, TRAVELER

*Slowly*

American Negro

Don't be wear-y, trav-el-er, Come a-long home to Je-sus,  
Don't be wear-y trav-el-er, Come a-long home to Je-sus.

S. COLERIDGE-TAYLOR  
Op. 59, No 12

Allegro moderato

PIANO

*mf* *poco accel.* *f* *poco rit.*

*mp a tempo*

*pp. poco rit.* *a tempo*

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Figure 2. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's Twenty-four Negro Melodies (1905) showing emendations by Thorvald Otterström.

of the Bruckner Society in America, a scholarly and austere theorist? Why had he made those careful annotations? No explanation presented itself, and I abandoned the problem. Recently, however, in examining the repertory of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, I found a work by Otterström, *Suite—American Negro*, performed by the orchestra in 1916 and repeated in 1918, 1927, and 1936. The program notes made it clear that the thematic material was drawn from those two books. I hope the Orchestra still has the score and will let me examine it.

Music librarians can be of great assistance to historians by alerting them to new technology that may be of use to them, such as the “American Memory” program of the Library of Congress, which will “disseminate historical documentation and images of artifacts in its collections to libraries throughout the country.” Stored on laser videodiscs and compact discs will be “Visions of America: Seeing the Nation through the Lens of Popular Art and Culture,” including “20 hours of ethnic folk music and 3,000 Currier and Ives prints.”<sup>20</sup>

Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis wrote in his *Collector's Progress*: “Every great library has tens of thousands of books that may not be called for once in a decade. Paradoxically, it is these books that make it great.”<sup>21</sup> The problems inherent in providing access to little-used material must be solved in constructive ways such as relying upon storage facilities, collection sharing, networks, and consortia rather than resorting to simple deaccessioning. Cultural history is full of horror stories, like the Bodleian Library's discarding its first folio of Shakespeare's plays when a new folio appeared. Old city directories can date publications and instruments through addresses. Railroad timetables can plot the itinerary of a touring musician. Newspaper advertisements and old programs document repertories, while family Bibles and tombstones can establish dates of birth and death. Our cultural heritage will be preserved for the future in many forms: manuscripts, prints, microtexts, recordings, electronic formats, optical discs, and others. Locating the necessary material, in whatever form it may have, remains the mutual task of the librarian and the scholar.

<sup>20</sup> “‘American Memory’ Translates Culture to the Electronic Age,” *Library Journal*, 114 (1989), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, *Collector's Progress* (New York: Knopf, 1951), p. 252, quoted in David H. Stam, “‘Prove

All Things: Hold Fast That Which is Good!': Deaccessioning and Research Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries*, 43 (1982), 11.