“Singing the body eclectic: Immigrant cultural resources in America's music libraries" in "Music librarianship in America, Part 3: Music librarians and American music"

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Singing The Body Eclectic: Immigrant Cultural Resources in America’s Music Libraries

D. W. Krummel

Our European ancestors no doubt sang for joy once they got past Ellis Island. At least we have been proud to believe this. What they sang, and why, and how, we do not really know, for this evidence is badly documented. Although the inadequacy of the extant evidence causes scholars by nature to lament, in matters of political import it also encourages guilt and anger. The subject of immigrant cultural resources can also suggest a different agenda: an effort to determine what American music libraries are and are not, could be or can never be, want to be but may be helpless to be.

In a sense the strengths of America’s music libraries were achieved largely at the neglect of all but two of its immigrant communities. The melting pot (or more appropriately, the cooking pot) in America’s music libraries contains a stew with ingredients from around the world, but prepared by English cooks following German recipes. The result has been very nourishing, and rather tasty—especially for today’s variously cosmopolitan or yuppie palates. Comparing the diet of a hundred years ago, our music libraries could give thanks; the years have left them perhaps a bit overweight, but far from senile, in fact still very healthy.

A prevalent English character to music libraries should be expected, considering the character of America’s library community in general. The landmark founding of the Boston Public Library reflected the Public Library Act of 1850 in Great Britain. It did so of course by fortunate default, since there was no other model anywhere at the time. The institution’s notable donor was Joshua Bates, a Boston merchant longtime resident in London. Later library service in the United States, especially to scholars, found its models in three distinctive English institutions: the superb Präzensbibliothek that Sir Anthony Panizzi was building at the British Museum; the fine circulating collection at the London Library fostered by Thomas Carlyle; and the Bodleian Library, the fragrant odors of which were later to transport George Santayana’s Last Pilgrim into his world of pathos and duty, or love and war. Francis James Child was discovering a world of humanity in the British ballad. Sustaining the viability of these elements in the interrelated worlds of music and commerce was England’s rich tradition of antiquarian book dealers and collectors, which inspired a deep sense of veneration for the bibliographical icon.

The tradition of American libraries is distinctly British, but with a strong admiration for things German. Harvard University’s first great special treasure was Cristoph Daniel Ebeling’s collection of Americana, acquired in Germany in 1818.
It was brought to the attention of Harvard authorities by Joseph Green Cogswell, who later served briefly as Harvard librarian and, subsequently, as the first head of the Astor Library. His aspirations for Harvard were stimulated by his experience at the Göttingen University Library. Also influenced at Göttingen was George Ticknor, the first of a lineage of students at Göttingen that later included Child. Harvard built Gore Hall as her library between 1838 and 1841; one look at a picture of it (figure 1) makes one wonder how anyone could possibly imagine it to come from any time other than the period when Albert became Victoria’s consort.

Did this Anglo-Germanic library world then actually contribute to the Germanic character of America’s musical orientation? The case is thin. At most one might suggest that the world of libraries and books tolerated music because it was a sign of culture, and loved it because it was German. Clearly German music was vigorous and hearty enough to take care of itself. One needs no reminders of the German domination beginning just before the great immigrations of the late nineteenth century—through conductors like Theodore Thomas, followed by Boston’s lineage of George Henschel, Wilhelm Gericke, Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, and Carl Muck; by impresarios like Oscar Hammerstein and Florenz Ziegfeld; by music publishers with names like Theodore Presser, Carl Fischer, Gustav Schirmer, and Arthur P. Schmidt; and editors like Theodore Baker, an American who had acquired German academic credentials with a dissertation on Amerindian music. Baker's successors, cast in a similar mold but holding more traditional scholarly credentials, were also the heroic founders of American music librarianship, Oscar Sonneck and Otto Kinkeldey.

As for the other national traditions, some today will argue that they were all mothered by late eighteenth-century sentimental romanticism, and fathered by the slightly younger national states that emerged over the nineteenth century. In the early years, their study was fostered by scholars (notable among them being Bishop Percy in England and the Grimm brothers in Germany). From such roots sprang the cultural stereotypes that we remember more colorfully than we might wish. They often define the current text: however unfortunate, these stereotypes embody what ethnic music has come to mean in America today.

Powerful among the promoters of the stereotypes, of course, was a music publishing industry that found nationalistic sentiments a useful means to sell copies. The traditions of the fake-Irish, the phony-Dutch, and the coon-song African-American owe much to the exploitations of American music publishers. European music publishers were more genteel in appreciating the opportunities: Simrock, thanks to its superstar composer Johannes Brahms, persuaded Antonín Dvořák to join its flock; Peters caught Edvard Grieg on the way up; while Breitkopf & Härtel did very well indeed with Jean Sibelius. Among later publishers, Universal Edition in Vienna was to build a gloriously cosmopolitan catalog on the slightly more rebellious spirits of Leoš Janáček, Alois Hába, Karol Szymanowski, Béla Bartók, and Zoltán Kodály.

In the United States, meanwhile, when one surveys the stunning Moravian music archives at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, that were begun in colonial times, one finds many umlauts but few hakes. This is no surprise, since common wisdom holds that in Europe around 1750 the Mannheim rocket-launchers came mostly from Bohemia. By 1850, most of Europe’s concert music was dominated by a musical empire with its composers in Vienna, its pub-
lishers in Leipzig, and its politics in Berlin. The immigrants came from lands whose institutions—publishers, conservatories, and concert life—strived bravely to maintain an independence, before affiliating themselves with the stronger German interests. It was clear that the best talent would eventually be lured to Germany in search of an international reputation. In time the dominant music aesthetic of all of Europe, appropriate to the notions of German master composers, became “composerly.” America’s immigrants really had no choice but to sing a German tune; the best they could do was to sing it with delightful arrogance—and in their own language. If my several odd examples seem mischievous, we have only to blame what is sometimes known as the Power of Music.1

Scandinavian immigrant music is less than memorable for its Hardanger fiddles or Viking cellos. The giants in the earth seem instead to have preferred to worship God through “Fairest Lord Jesus” by F. Melius Christiansen, with contrary voice leadings reminiscent more of Jean Sibelius’s Finlandia, done up in a Fred Waring choral style so as to sound very much like Brahms. From my own teenage years in southwestern Michigan I recall the regular Saturday night “Polish hops” with Bert Novak’s orchestra out of South Bend. Never mind that the Novaks probably came from the wrong side of the Tatra Mountains: at least South Bend was known for the Poles who masqueraded as the fighting Irish. Furthermore, Bert’s last number was always that pre-Archie Bunker answer, not to Brahms in this case but to Johann Strauss, “The Beer Barrel Polka.”

One also recalls Antonín Dvořák’s visit to Spillville, Iowa. Brief and sad perhaps, although he was probably there in part because his music sounded so much like

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1 In comments on the papers at this session, Oscar Handlin warned about oversimplifying categories. The ethnic categories do reflect those discussed in the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), although these are themselves evolving conceptions that reflect changing conditions of geography, language, religion, and culture. Whether musical ethnicity is more of a commercial artifact than other forms of ethnicity is interesting to study, if partly because the evidence itself is unclear.
Brahms. Next came Dvořák’s brief dealings with Jeanette Thurber and the Institute of Musical Art in New York. The episode may conjure a relationship rather like that between Otis B. Driftwood and Mrs. Claypool in the Marx Brothers’ film A Night at the Opera. Less than fair no doubt: better to see in the event a model for Charles Seeger’s later conception of “The Folkness of the Nonfolk and the Nonfolkness of the Folk.”

Meanwhile, were any of the immigrants really served at the public library? Yes, in a few celebrated instances where general materials are concerned, but one finds little evidence of any music. Revisionist historians tell us that it was the Irish who drove Justin Winsor out of the Boston Public Library in 1877 and sent him packing across the Charles to the more genteel atmosphere of Harvard. This may indeed have been what happened, although it should also be noted that the library’s recently published catalog reports five times as many subject headings for English music as for Irish, twice as many for Jewish, and about as many for Spanish. (So much for Library of Congress subject headings, of course, although in this instance one must wonder that they may be telling us something.) Several public libraries earned special respect for their provision of service to ethnic communities: Cleveland and St. Louis in general, and various units of the New York Public Library, such as the Aguilar branch for the Jewish community. The Cleveland Public Library program no doubt further encouraged one of its trustees, the attorney John Griswold White, to assemble the fine collection of Völkerkunde, including folksongs, that it today justly treasures. As evidence of a concern for music in any of the institutions, this is the most conspicuous instance I know of. The other libraries are famous for their services through books. Often in the early twentieth century, book collections were assembled as part of what came to be known as “Americanization programs.” To my knowledge, music was never mobilized to serve the cause. It was irrelevant, or it was hopeless. Which one? Publicly the former, privately, the latter perhaps.

One may reasonably go one step further and argue that a neglect of immigrant music in American libraries is a natural state of affairs. The immigrant communities themselves required what cultural anthropologists today refer to as “barriers”—devices that enabled the local unit to sustain and justify itself by excluding outside influences. Music can function powerfully as a barrier: the community maintained its identity through its affection for music that society in general would be quick to damn, as “awful stuff that doesn’t sound the least bit like Brahms.” The nuances of the musical style itself, much like the patois of its native speakers, contributed significantly to preserving the sense of community. Scores and other music library materials were irrelevant, not so much because the redneck ethnics were necessarily illiterate but rather because their music was too important to belong in the library. Thus, instead of the electric, our libraries today have inherited the eclectic; instead of the grin on the Cheshire cat, we end up with the cat on our doorsteps.


3 On hearing this paper, Susan Sommer recalled receiving at the Music Division of the New York Public Library a collection of Czech musical editions of Zdeněk Fibich, Josef Suk, and their contemporaries. The collection came from the NYPL’s Yorktown Branch, which serves an area of New York that was long populated heavily by German-speaking immigrants. Other examples may be worth investigating; my assertion is based largely on the commonly known evidence.
The sense of local community thus falls largely outside the pale of the public library. More colorful and also more erratic are the attempts to document and serve the community in the name of the nation at large, specifically through folk music collecting at the Library of Congress. The founder of the Archive of Folk Song, Robert Winslow Gordon, came fresh out of Harvard classes on ballad scholarship taught by Child and George Lyman Kittredge. He was succeeded by John Lomax (also from Harvard, incidentally, albeit less plausibly), whose program later on reflected the fieldwork tradition of Cecil Sharp but was directed toward the music more than the words. Equally important was Lomax’s dialectic, which revived an inspiration that Sharp was either unwilling or unable to advance—namely, the radical socialism of William Morris. The sympathies of these researchers for the Eastern European labor movements emerged with particular power over the Depression years. At the same time, however, their dreams also slowly evaporated, in deference to the rather different dreams of Harold Spivacke. Spivacke’s values were more cosmopolitan, aristocratic, and scholarly than theirs. His credentials included hardened experience as a New York concert pianist; his doctoral work in Berlin was in the rigorous science of physics; he was also clearly a tough behind-the-scenes negotiator in New-Deal Washington. All of these strengths, and the benefit of a long career at the Library of Congress, were still not enough to allow him to establish an American version of the Berlin Phonogrammarchiv of his mentors, Carl Stumpf and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel. What he did achieve, however, was to shape an institution where it was discovered, through the recent discographic scholarship of Richard Spottswood in particular, what all of them seemed totally unaware of: that ethnic record producers had been there before any of these people, issuing Broadway show tunes, ancient ballads, and foreign-language favorites all sung and merchandised in a funky miscegenation of other foreign languages.⁴

One can find occasional survivals of the immigrant presence in America’s music libraries: odd documentation of Finnish music in Hancock, Michigan; Chinese music in Fresno and Berkeley, California; Czech music in Wilbur, Nebraska; Japanese music in Seattle; a few Irish songs owned by Louisa May Alcott in Concord, Massachusetts; Tamburitzaan music at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh; foreign-language hymnals and psalmbooks, printed here or abroad, wherever members of the congregation left them; sound archives wherever an ethnologist was at work.⁵ There are also legends of lost artifacts—Russian balalaika music assembled at the turn of the century by Alan Grover Salmon; songbooks of the Gesangverein from Austin, Texas, which in 1853 found themselves, literally, up Onion Creek without a disaster plan;⁶ the long lost marble bust of Hans Balatka from Milwaukee.


⁵ These examples are drawn from D. W. Krummel et al., Resources of American Music History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981). At the symposium at which this paper was delivered, Paul Mercer called my attention to a large collection of Armenian music recently acquired by the New York State Library. See also the section “Music of Immigrant Ethnic Communities” in my Bibliographical Handbook of American Music (Urbana: University Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 77–80.

In the larger terms of their value as primary source materials for historical scholarship, library resources are generally of three kinds: (1) The puny, consisting of odds and ends that leave us to wonder what intelligent questions we might ever ask; (2) the tantalizing, which offer rich prospects for questions that are provocative if rarely answerable; and (3) the profligate, which leave us secretly wishing that a good fire might have simplified our problems. Most of the collections I know about—even the celebrated ones—fall clearly in the first category; I know of none at all in the third. America’s music libraries have come to be measured by classes “M2” and “M3” in the Library of Congress classification scheme—by their holdings of monuments of Germanic music scholarship devoted to master composers.7

7 Music publishing in the United States for special foreign-language purchasers is a topic for another lecture—probably leading mostly to the same conclusions proposed here. Protestant hymnals would no doubt fill most of the story. Among the few instances I know of extensive secular music publishing is that of sheet music for the Yiddish musical theater.
Meanwhile America’s public library community itself, throughout the social upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, remained serenely WASPish. Melvil Dewey sensed rich and appropriate prospects for feminizing the library profession, although his recruits naturally came mostly from good New England stock. The adrenalous Dewey was inevitably drawn as well to notions of eugenics. He found little place for foreigners, and his profession followed his lead. A few Norwegians made a mark for themselves in Chicago after the founding of the Newberry Library, and later in Detroit; but immigrants rarely became librarians, at least through World War II. The profession was, if not outright anti-Semitic, at least a-Semitic. (The early exceptions include, significantly, two chiefs of the Music Division at the Library of Congress.)

By today, in contrast, anglophilia seems all too comfortably compatible with Beatlemania—an odd blending that defines the cosmopolitan as monolingual radical chic—but this is no place for an old-timer to lament the triumph of vulgarity. Better perhaps to consider the present-day immigrants, notably from Latin America and the Far East, and wonder how our music catalogers might ever distinguish their music from “New Age.” The essential difference must clearly reflect on a concept of community: one music rationalized through its spirit of barriers, the other through giddy togetherness; one with the intent of challenging, the other with the effect of stupefying. Next we must of course wonder how such matters, truly important, might be usefully accommodated in any possible MARC (machine-readable cataloging) record field.

The United States has been proud of its diversity: all of mankind minus one person, regionalism, states’ rights, community in the context of society, the Gemeinschaft in the larger environment of the Gesellschaft. If our country’s libraries have been rather quick to serve the majority needs—in books and in music—they have done so for several reasons. The very mission of libraries is service. Fiscal responsibility, unless it is rationalized in terms of special outreach efforts, fosters the tyranny of the majority. Qualitative considerations may indeed often intrude; but when conceived in musical terms the result is a better collection of Denkmäler and Gesamtausgaben, or when conceived in bibliographical terms the result is rare books. Thus, in Chicago, the musical treasure of the city’s notable Polish population is probably the personal papers of Ignace Paderewski. Chicago’s inner-city groups are left to wonder what to do with it, while its atavistic Polish community plays bingo in the suburbs.

This paper has mentioned our host university rather often, not so much to suggest that Harvard should feel any anger or guilt for any specific neglect of our country’s immigrant heritage, but rather with a larger current agenda in mind. An endowed chair for its music librarian recognizes a special challenge. Our country is unlikely ever again to be so richly infused with immigrants—unfortunately. Yet, even acknowledging the power of mass media, our musical life is unlikely ever to be so thoroughly homogenized as to form one single society, to the exclusion of various deviant communities—and in this case, we think, fortunately. Indeed, specialties seem to be proliferating, at a staggering rate. One has only to look at the

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current music periodical shelf to recognize the Ellis Island of today, its huddled immigrants with wondrously strange exotic names like the *Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Association Newsletter*, the *Journal of the American Liszt Society*, the *Journal of Research in Singing and Applied Vocal Pedagogy; Diva; ClariNetwork*; for guitar the *Review and Magazine*; for opera, the *Guide, Journal, News, Quarterly*, and *Fanatic*. Each is written for a special community, in its own patois, and with other signals that announce, “if you love Brahms, we’re not quite for you.” Each journal exists in its distinctive physical medium so as to convey outreach, almost in a Madison-Avenue sense. At the same time, each journal also conveys a message that, with varying militancy, reflects a spirit of what earlier periods called “Balkanization.”

I should like to think that there is a lesson for the music library community to learn from its spotty encounters with immigrant music. It is appropriate that the endowed chair we are honoring should be designated as a librarian rather than a professor, since the proper role of the music library is complementary to that of its music faculty. A librarian’s duty to faculty and students must be to recognize communities that no faculty or student body, however diverse, learned, and cosmopolitan, can possibly accommodate. In contrast, the music librarian’s responsibility to the general library, equally unpopular, must be to plead the cause of one special community within the world of learning. Perhaps the basic point is that the appropriate title for the position we are celebrating should be neither that of professor nor librarian, but Richard F. French Music Alchemist.

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9 The dichotomy is nicely developed in Archie Green, “Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (1947), 293–308, a work that deserves to be better known than it is.