

# Music in Nineteenth-Century America



**F**OR THE MOST PART, NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICANS remained in awe of European culture and art. Naturally inclined toward romanticism themselves, they had fervently expressed their own individualism during the American Revolution and were now aggressively expanding their young country's frontiers and settling its wide-open spaces. Perhaps influenced by the lack of geographic boundaries such as confine small European states, as well as by the social, political, and religious freedoms with which they are richly endowed, Americans have often shown a romantic expansiveness in their approach to art.

For example, America had its share of Romantic literary figures: James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) wrote historical novels; Washington Irving (1783–1859) told the fantastic tale of Rip Van Winkle in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*; Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) filled his writings with Romantic symbolism and supernatural themes; and Bret Harte (1836–1902) wrote sentimental stories idealizing frontier life.

While early Americans had made no great distinction between popular and art music, by the late nineteenth century they discerned important differences between

folk and popular music on the one hand and art, or concert, music on the other. Dedicated patrons built concert halls and opera houses; formed choral societies to perform the music of Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven; and established music conservatories, where Americans received professional training in the composition and performance of (European) art music. Music first entered the American college curriculum at Harvard in 1875.



## MUSIC IN AMERICAN LIFE

At home, people enjoyed playing simple “parlor music” on their pianos and singing sentimental songs. Tuneful Civil War songs could be heard in village band concerts or on the lips of people of every age and circumstance, and hymns and psalm tunes retained their popularity at home as well as in church.

### **Bands**

Concert bands provided popular entertainment during the late nineteenth century, as instruments that had been used by military bands during the Civil War

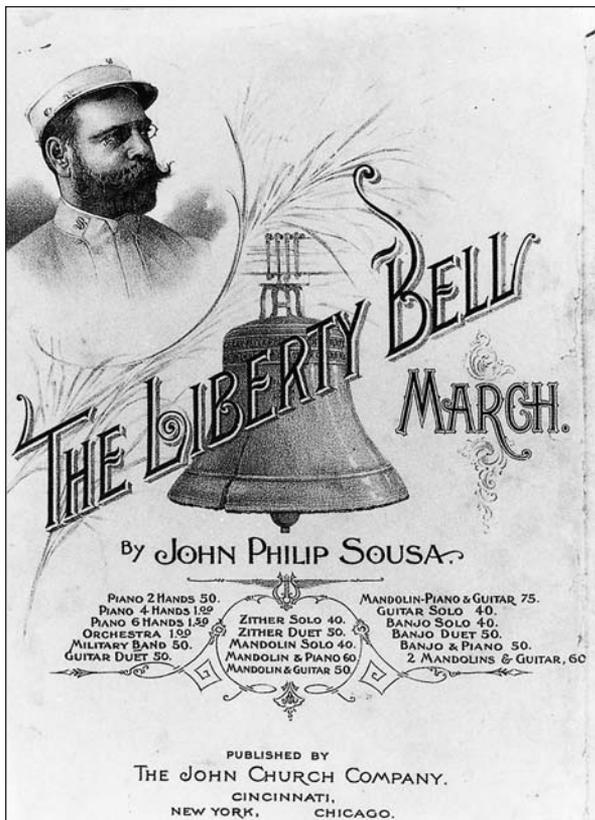


figure 24.1  
John Philip Sousa on a sheet music cover.

EKM-Nepenthe: 78 (Jean-Claude Lejeune)

became readily and cheaply available, and more and more people had the time, money, and inclination to learn to play them. **John Philip Sousa** (1854–1932, Figure 24.1), director of the United States Marine Band for many years, wrote stirring marches that soon became popular all over the Western world, where he was known as the “march king.” (Sousa’s march “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” an Optional Listening Example, may be heard at the Online Learning Center.) Sousa organized his marches according to the well-established European march form, which would become even more familiar to Americans as the form of piano rags (see pp. 370–372).



## Orchestral Music

Americans in the early years of the nineteenth century did not yet widely appreciate orchestral music. However, as the quality of orchestral performances improved and orchestral concerts became more widely available, American audiences became increasingly enamored of the glorious orchestral sound. Schools and civic organizations in cities and towns across the country soon began to form their own symphony orchestras, and Americans grew to love orchestral music as Europeans loved opera.

## Musical Theater

The United States experienced a great deal of musical activity around the time of the Civil War (the 1860s). **Minstrel shows** (Figure 24.2), a form of musical theater, featured the antics of white men, their skin darkened by cork or coal, caricaturing stereotypical African American figures. This form of entertainment that we find appalling today nevertheless enjoyed great popularity even as tensions rose between whites and free and slave blacks. Notwithstanding its offensive nature by today’s standards, minstrelsy produced songs and dances (such as “Dixie” and “Turkey in the Straw”) whose tunes remain as enchanting as ever.

Other forms of music theater besides the minstrel show flourished in nineteenth-century America. Women, readily admitted to newly established music conservatories, participated widely in opera and concert performances. Popular **vaudeville** shows, unsophisticated productions including jokes, dog acts, and juggling as well as highly entertaining songs and dance routines, provided career opportunities for many entertainers, male and female, black and white. Though Americans admired and often imitated Italian opera and English music theater, throughout the century the American theater became increasingly independent of foreign styles, and a number of American entertainments actually traveled to England and received acclaim there.



*figure 24.2*  
Scene from a minstrel show.

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**Stephen Foster** (Figure 24.3), one of the world's greatest melodists, was born into the musically unsophisticated society of mid-nineteenth-century America. He had little formal music training and faced formidable opposition to his desire to become a professional composer, falling victim to the so-called genteel tradition of the mid-nineteenth century: a polite, superficial, conventional middle-class approach to life and art. His family appreciated music as a pleasant diversion from serious business but could not conceive of a respectable man devoting his professional attention to it.

Foster's songs about love (including "Beautiful Dreamer" and "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair"), home ("My Old Kentucky Home" and "Old Folks at Home"), and the Civil War were well received by his family and peers; but even he felt ashamed of his own favorites, such nonsense songs as "Oh! Susanna" (an Optional Listening Example included at the Online Learning Center), "De Camptown Races," and "Nelly Bly," written for the minstrel stage. Foster gave away some of his best songs to enterprising publishers, who realized their worth as he did not; and he allowed other composers to claim some of his songs in their own names.



Foster's sensitive and sympathetic songs about plantation life—which he never experienced—tugged



## STEPHEN FOSTER (1826–1864)



*figure 24.3*  
Stephen Foster.

Oil on canvas, 76.2 × 63.5. © National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY

at the heartstrings of Europeans and Americans, northerners and southerners alike. Simple in structure, with uncomplicated rhythms and harmony, Foster's songs have some of the loveliest melodies ever conceived and continue to be of nearly universal appeal. Stephen Foster died, alone and impoverished, at the age of thirty-seven

## PIANO MUSIC



Nineteenth-century Americans enjoyed piano music, especially light concert pieces of an entertaining nature. Famous nineteenth-century American piano virtuosos included a number of women, who toured and concertized throughout the United States as well as Europe. Among the best-known pianists in America and abroad was a virtuoso from New Orleans, Louisiana, named Louis Moreau Gottschalk.

### *Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869)*

A dedicated Romantic from the New World, **Louis Moreau Gottschalk** (Figure 24.4), became the first American composer-performer to establish an important reputation in Europe, where he lived and performed for several years. Surprised and impressed by the talent of this exotic young American, European aristocrats took him to their hearts; and upon his return home, Americans

*figure 24.4*  
Louis Moreau  
Gottschalk.

© The Granger  
Collection, New York



deemed his extensive stay and welcome abroad to have rendered him worthy of their attention as well. He traveled widely across the United States, introducing light concert music to inexperienced but enthusiastic Americans.

A handsome man and an effective showman (in the Romantic tradition), Gottschalk understood how to gauge his audiences. Knowing that they admired showy pieces, he played his own highly virtuosic works, including some based on appealing Creole tunes he had heard as a child in New Orleans. His audiences responded with wild adulation comparable to that afforded rock stars today. Gottschalk's delightful music, largely forgotten for a while, has enjoyed a strong revival in recent decades. (Gottschalk's "Bamboula" and "Le bananier" are included at the Online Learning Center as Optional Listening Examples.)



Although still largely dependent on Europe for guidance in the arts, America in fact was coming of age culturally. Music, which had been taught in American public schools since the early nineteenth century, became an important part of life for many Americans, even though most of the country's professional musicians were still Europeans. Toward the end of the century more and more Americans traveled to Europe—especially to Germany—to study composition, and they soon began to contribute serious works of their own to the concert repertoire.

The so-called **Second New England School** of composers (so named with respect to an eighteenth-century group called the First New England School) included a number of talented musicians who studied their craft in Europe and wrote quantities of serious music of every sort. They included a highly accomplished woman composer and virtuoso pianist, **Amy Cheney Beach** (Figure 24.5).

### **Amy Cheney Beach (1867–1944)**

Mrs. H. H. A. Beach, as she preferred to be called, was a brilliant pianist who performed with Theodore Thomas's orchestra and other prestigious ensembles in the United States and, after her husband's death, in Europe as well. Her own compositions were performed and generally well received on both continents, but she could not escape references to her gender in reviews of her work: reviewers sometimes criticized her for trying to write



## AMERICAN MUSIC COMES OF AGE



*figure 24.5*  
Amy Cheney Beach.

© Corbis



**figure 24.6**  
Edward MacDowell.

© Bettman/Corbis

music that sounded masculine, while praising her graceful melodies and more gentle symphonic passages as properly feminine in style.

Thus, although she handled the symphonic medium very capably, it is little wonder that Amy Cheney Beach composed more art songs than any other form, since they were readily accepted by her peers as fitting examples of feminine creativity. (“The Year’s at the Spring,” an Optional Listening Example, remains one of her best-known songs.)

### **Edward MacDowell (1860–1908)**

Like so many Romantics, Edward MacDowell (Figure 24.6) was endowed with multiple talents but lacked the stamina and emotional stability to live a comfortable and healthy life. A fine painter as well as an outstanding musician, he had difficulty deciding on his true vocation. Having studied both painting and music in Paris, he finally chose music for his career and went to Germany to complete his music education.

Returning to America after several years abroad, MacDowell began a hectic schedule of teaching, performing as a concert pianist, and writing music. He often prefaced his compositions with poems, most of which he wrote himself. His symphonic

works include an orchestral suite based on American Indian themes but harmonized and orchestrated in the European way. MacDowell was at his best in the composition of exquisite character pieces for the piano, in which he captured the sounds, the moods, the very essence of nature as he loved it. Delicate, intimate, and unpretentious, these modest miniatures perfectly express the sensitivity of the vulnerable Romantic soul. (MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose” from *Woodland Sketches* can be heard at various sites on the Internet.)

Upon MacDowell’s death, his widow—a concert pianist in her own right—established the MacDowell Colony at their estate in Peterborough, New Hampshire. To this day, gifted painters, writers, and musicians meet in this nurturing environment to create art.

## **SUMMARY**

The distinction between popular and art music did not become significant in America before the latter part of the nineteenth century. However, musical activity began stirring in the young country in the 1860s. Audiences grew to love the sound of orchestral music, but for a long time they preferred the stirring marches of John Philip Sousa to the symphonies of Mozart or Beethoven.

The comic operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan and other forms of music theater were popular in America, where minstrel and vaudeville shows also provided light entertainment. The music of the piano virtuoso Amy Cheney Beach was generally well received, but the gender discrimination she perceived led her to devote most of her compositional efforts to art songs. The light concert music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk and the expressive character pieces of Edward MacDowell steadily gained popularity.

- Why do you think American orchestras are suffering a loss of audience and of revenue today, even as opera is becoming ever more popular? Is it the music they play, the quality of performance, competition from other kinds of performance, declining music education in the public schools, economic considerations—or all or none of the above? And why do the factors that you suggest affect orchestras not apply to operas as well?



**CRITICAL THINKING**

**minstrel show** Variety show, popular in the mid- and late nineteenth century, that included songs, dances, and comic repartee performed by white men who blackened their skin to resemble stereotypical African American figures.



**TERMS TO REVIEW**

**vaudeville** Variety show, popular in the late nineteenth century, including jokes, stunts, and skits, as well as song and dance.

**Second New England School** Group of late-nineteenth-century New England composers who studied in Germany and contributed to every genre of art music.

Authors *James Fenimore Cooper*  
*Washington Irving*  
*Nathaniel Hawthorne*  
*Bret Harte*



**KEY FIGURES**

Composers *John Philip Sousa*  
*Stephen Foster*  
*Louis Moreau Gottschalk*  
*Amy Cheney Beach*  
*Edward MacDowell*

**ENCORE*****Optional listening examples\****

- John Philip Sousa: “The Stars and Stripes Forever”
- Louis Moreau Gottschalk: “Le bananier;” “Bamboula”
- Amy Cheney Beach: “The Year’s at the Spring”
- Stephen Foster: “Oh! Susanna”

***Suggestions for further listening***

- Sousa: “Washington Post March;” “Semper Fidelis”
- MacDowell: “To a Wild Rose;” “Will o’ the Wisp;” from *Woodland Sketches*
- Beach: Symphony in E flat (“Gaelic”), op. 32; Mass in E-flat, op. 5
- Foster: Various Songs

\*You will find the music to the Optional Listening Examples at the Online Learning Center. You may access the Further Listening Examples through the Web site, [www.mhhe.com/ferrismusic](http://www.mhhe.com/ferrismusic).

## Connection

### Song in Native American Life

So far in our text, we have considered several kinds of song in Western music, including chorales, psalm tunes, madrigals, and art songs, as well as several opera or operetta excerpts. Song is important in Native American music, too, where it plays a more intimate role in everyday life.

As we have already observed, for Native Americans music is never an independent concept, conceived and performed for its own sake. Native Americans sing and dance for many occasions, including prayer, thanksgiving, veneration of the animals with which they coexist in nature, preparation for war, and celebration of victory. Song always is linked with ceremony, ritual, religion, magic, celebration, or play. American Indians think of songs not as composed, but as given to, or received by, an individual. Songs belonging to one person sometimes may not even be sung by anyone else without express permission.

The melodic phrases of many North American Indian cultures generally begin on a relatively high pitch and descend, much in the manner typical of speech. Scale patterns vary, and generally do not conform to those of Western classical music. Most melodic intervals are narrow, with few wide leaps in the melodic line. Song texts may be in one of the many Native American languages, or in English, or they may consist simply of a series of vocables, such as “hey,” “yeh,” or “neh.” Despite significant regional differences in style and performance practice, song unites people as Native Americans, authenticates important ceremonies, and helps keep people in balance with nature. When members of different cultures meet at powwows to socialize and share music and dance, English or vocables allow those who speak different languages to sing together in mutual celebration of their shared heritage.

You can find many examples of Native American music on the Web. Amazon.com, too, offers generous samples of various Native American music sounds.