

What Can “Classical Music” Learn from American Music Before the Late 19th Century?

Claire Davis | March 23, 2021

Content warning: Mentions minstrelsy.

I recently read the second chapter, “The Sacralization of Culture,” from Lawrence Levine’s book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Levine covers a vast amount of information as he maps the division between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture which developed during the second half of the nineteenth century, including the classist, racist, gendered, and Austro-German nationalist foundations of modern conceptions of classical music laid by conductors, philanthropists, critics, and musicians. In this post, I want to focus on one characteristic of American music during the first half of the nineteenth century which struck me: its “eclecticism,” as Levine calls it, or its flexible approach to genres and performance. In the ongoing discussion and movement to make classical music entities—musicians, conductors, composers, venues, philanthropists, schools, and so on—meaningfully inclusive and representative, I offer these examples to demonstrate that classical music has not always existed as it does now and can be flexible and truly engaged in communities. Before the late nineteenth century, Americans perceived “classical music” within an interrelated network of musical styles.

For reference, Levine defines “popular” or “lowbrow” as deriving “great pleasure from [an activity]” while experiencing it “in the context of [one’s] normal everyday culture,” and he defines “elite” or “highbrow” as deriving “both pleasure and social confirmation” from an

activity.¹ Though I will be discussing examples of open-mindedness in early-nineteenth-century American music, it is important to highlight that open-mindedness in one aspect of society does not mean inclusivity or equality in others. A division in concert-going practices did exist between “upper and middle classes” and lower classes.² Levine also neglects to explicitly address how race and gender intersected with performance practices and how people experienced music in the early nineteenth century. The examples in the chapter make it clear that the music industry was dominated and managed by white men. Finally, there were tensions among American nationalism, anti-foreign sentiment, and cultural deference to western Europe that already existed by the nineteenth century.³ Keeping all of this in mind, I believe that we can learn from positive aspects of historical practices—the openness to mixing different styles and art forms as well as the general attitude of sharing and expression rather than presentation—and choose what we may wish to apply to our current practices.

Levine’s discussion of the mid-nineteenth-century tours of the three most popular European artists—Viennese ballerina Fanny Elssler, Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, and Swedish soprano Jenny Lind—stood out to me in particular.⁴ Today, much of these artists’ programs would be considered classical music and associated with highbrow society. But in the early nineteenth century, genre and class lines in music were not strictly defined, and these three artists toured “without an aura of exclusiveness... They were welcomed and admired by people from all

¹ Lawrence Levine, “Two: The Sacralization of Culture,” in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 96.

² Levine, 96-97.

³ Levine, 94-95, 100.

⁴ Levine, 108.

segments of the society and ‘owned’ by none.”⁵ Further, Elssler, Bull, and Lind treated their performances as a place to share music *with* the audience rather than as a place to authoritatively present *to* the audience. As was the norm, they had no issue mixing other styles with their “classical” music and dance: Bull played American songs such as “Yankee Doodle” along with classical solos; Lind mixed Swedish folk songs, American songs, and operatic arias; and Elssler danced classical ballet, English hornpipes, and Spanish folk dances.⁶ Essentially, early-nineteenth-century artists interacted with their audiences the way most artists—but not many classical institutions—would today. Classical music was not treated as an innately different music.

I also found it interesting how opera (mostly Italian and usually in the English translation) was presented on early-nineteenth-century American stages.⁷ It was common for opera companies to insert “popular airs of the day either as a supplement to, or as a replacement for, certain arias. (This was not unique to the United States... Such composers as Rossini would leave places in their operas for [additions or changes]).”⁸ In addition to the flexibility of content and a range of musical styles, a typical performance featured a mix of art forms, such as comic plays, vaudevilles, strong men, jugglers, animal acts, and minstrelsy.⁹ (For discussions addressing minstrelsy, a widespread and racist entertainment form of the nineteenth century which stereotyped and repressed Black people, please see a recommended resources list at the end of this post.) Such variety and shared artistic “ownership” of the music would make for a

⁵ Levine, 108.

⁶ Levine, 108.

⁷ Levine, 108.

⁸ Levine, 90.

⁹ Levine, 91.

fascinating concert, and it would be an interesting performance practice to implement in classical music today. I also believe that it would foster a greater sense of community engagement in classical music because it would broaden the possibilities for exciting collaboration as well as relevance of the ensembles and musical styles. It would humanize live classical music and bring it into the everyday.

Levine's examples of cross-genre collaboration reminded me of a relatively recent episode of *Classically Black Podcast* hosted by Katie Brown and Dalanie Harris. In "Live at SphinxConnect 2021: What About the Quality? | Episode 118," they addressed meaningful change, community engagement, and antiracism. As an example of how orchestras could affirm that Black people are part of classical music and share in its history, Brown suggested doing a pre-concert talk with Lizzo because she is a flutist.¹⁰ Building on that, it would also be very exciting for an orchestra and Lizzo to perform together.

Looking forward, by shifting how we think of genre and of classical music as a part of music as a whole, and by recognizing classical music as musical styles within a rich network of musical and community relationships, we can make classical music more meaningful, representative, and engaged. Classical styles and ensembles—with adaptability, collaboration, and an attitude of artistic exchange and innovation—can be shared and enjoyed as a part of everyday life.

¹⁰ Katie Brown, "Live at SphinxConnect 2021: What About the Quality? | Episode 118," *Classically Black Podcast*, 36:30-37:46.

Sources

Brown, Katie and Dalanie Harris. "Live at SphinxConnect 2021: What About the Quality? | Episode 118." *Classically Black Podcast*.
<https://www.classicallyblackpodcast.com/episodes>.

Levine, Lawrence. "Two: The Sacralization of Culture." In *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Recommended Resources

"#267 The Faces of Racism." *Backstory Radio*. <https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/the-faces-of-racism/>.

"#272 Burnt Corks & Cakewalks." *Backstory Radio*.
<https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/burnt-corks-cakewalks/>.

Barlow, Bill. "Minstrelsy." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* vol. 12, 89-91. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616667_malone.

Zapata-Rodríguez, Melissa M. "Minstrelsy: Iconography of Resistance during the American Civil War." *Music in Art* 41 (Fall 2016): 111-127. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90012991>.