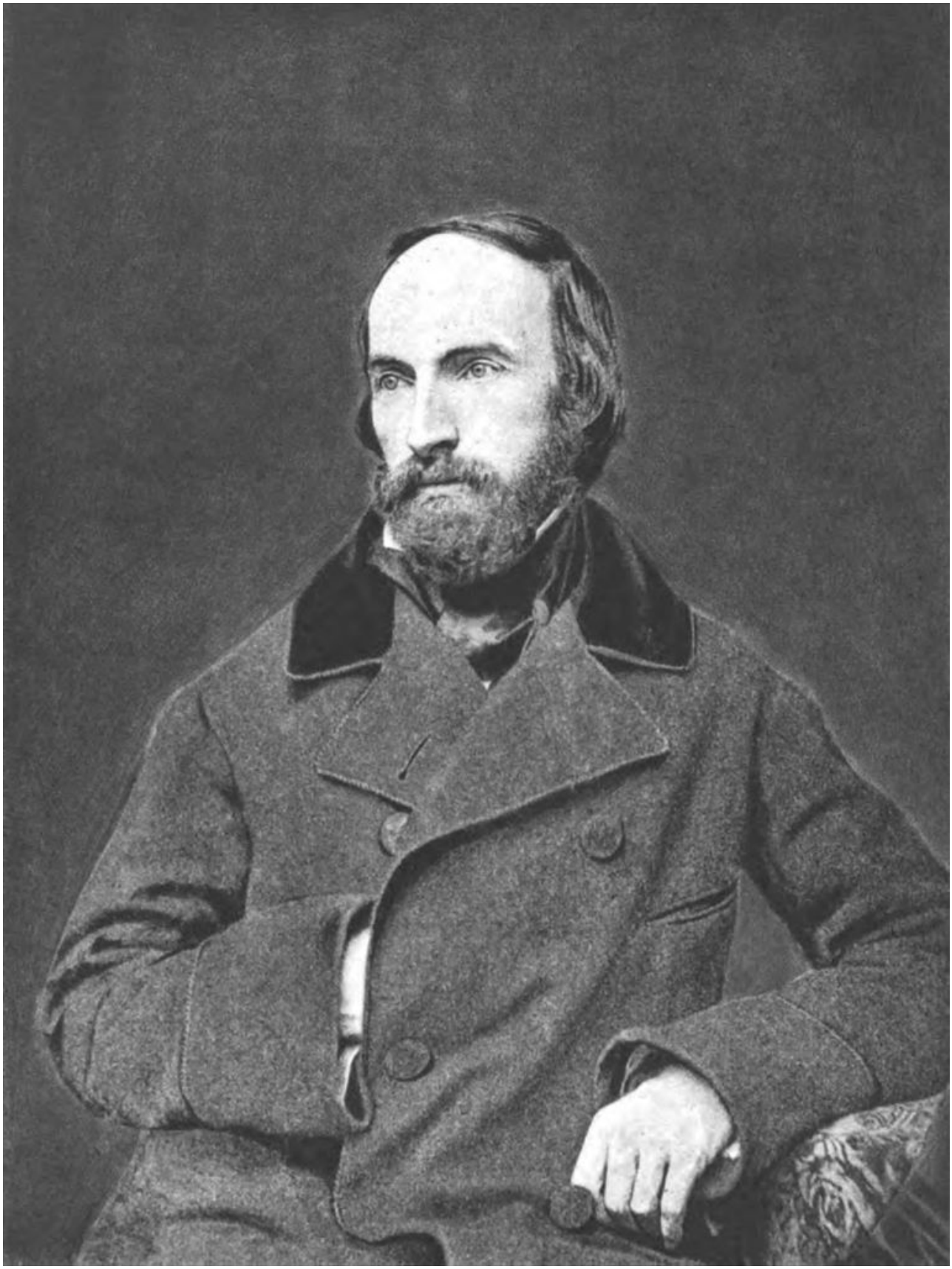
Alive with the Sound of Music



Digitizing the manuscripts of Philadelphia composer William Henry Fry

Reading rooms are never silent. They host countless imaginary conversations between researchers and the voices creaking out of the friendly confines of the archival box. At times, though, the walls come alive in a special way: with the sound of music. It is a distinct pleasure for musicologists to unearth manuscripts for works that have not seen the light of day—or reached open ears—since they were first composed. I recently experienced this pleasure at the Library Company of Philadelphia, a repository known mostly for its rare books but which also holds the music manuscripts of William Henry Fry (1813-1864), a composer whose music is rarely heard today.

Next to Stephen Foster, William Henry Fry was arguably the most important American composer working before the Civil War. A native of Philadelphia, Fry's career was, curiously enough, a tale of brotherly love: his closest collaborators were two of his brothers, Edward and Joseph. Beginning in the mid-1830s, the Frys composed and wrote the words for three full-length operas and produced a translation for a fourth, Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*. In 1845, they staged *Leonora*, one of their original works, and it was the nation's first production of a grand opera written by an American composer. For nearly a decade, this trio almost single-handedly developed the city's interest in opera.

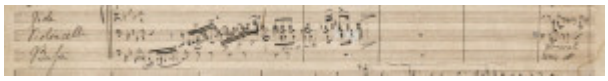
In addition to musical talent, the brothers clearly displayed a literary proclivity. Their father, William (1777-1855), was a successful printer and newspaperman who operated Philadelphia's *National Gazette and Literary Register*. The younger William followed in his father's footsteps by writing music criticism for local newspapers. In 1846, while working for the *Public Ledger*, he sailed for Europe to be a Parisian correspondent. His letters to the *Ledger*, a notorious organ for the Whig party, eventually caught the eye of fellow reformer Horace Greeley, who hired Fry to be a Parisian correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. In the meantime, one of his brothers had become an opera impresario in New York, where he was unsuccessful in his attempts to produce *Leonora*.

Upon returning to the United States in 1852, William joined the *Tribune*'s editorial staff, a post he retained until his death. In an effort to counter the bad publicity brought by his impresario brother's bad luck, he gave a series of musical lectures in New York's Metropolitan Hall, which, for better or worse, immediately raised his public profile in the city and the region. Late in 1853, his reputation received an unexpected boost. The Barnumesque French conductor Louis-Antoine Jullien agreed to have his London-based virtuosic orchestra perform some of Fry's symphonies. These wildly popular performances, including one infamous rendition of Fry's *Santa Claus: A Christmas Symphony* (with sleigh bells, whip, and all), sparked a critical firestorm, but Jullien was undeterred. His orchestra continued to perform Fry's works on tour around the United States and in London.

After Jullien left New York for London in 1854, Fry focused more exclusively on music criticism. It would be ten years before he produced another large-scale original work. That opera, *Notre-Dame of Paris*, was performed in 1864 at Philadelphia's Great Central Fair for the U.S. Sanitary Commission. What Quasimodo has to do with wounded soldiers is anyone's guess! William died of tuberculosis in December of that year, and his brother Edward eventually donated his music manuscripts to the Library Company, where they now reside.

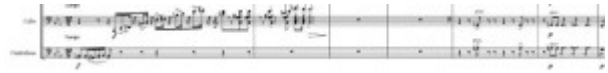
There I was, 142 years later, looking at these same manuscripts and wondering what to do with them. They are not like letters or diaries, which, if you are lucky, explicitly reveal the writer's most intimate thoughts and feelings. Nor are they like public records, which give us all sorts of raw data. The only biography of Fry is hopelessly outdated, and the author transcribed so little from the manuscripts that it is difficult to get a sense of how Fry's music actually sounds.

First things first: transcription of the scores into a usable format. Blessed by technology, musicologists today can painstakingly transcribe manuscripts note by note into electronic notation software—in my case, a program called Finale. In short, the process moves from this:



Sacred Symphony no. 3—Hagar in the Wilderness by W. H. Fry, from the Manuscripts Collection of The Library Company of Philadelphia. Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia

to this clean copy of Finale score.



Finale transcription.

Transcription into the software is largely a mechanical process, but it does present challenges similar to those presented by any handwritten document. For example, what do you do when the notation is unclear, or how do you interpret a lengthy passage of empty measures? As in verbal sources, context provides valuable clues. A composer will rarely depart from idiosyncratic musical procedures (harmonic, melodic, etc.), so it is easy to determine if a note fits into the composer's standard musical syntax. Composers also develop idiosyncratic working methods. In Fry's case, he typically used empty measures to direct a hired copyist to repeat a given passage in the performing score and parts. Final transcription choices thus require interpretive judgments, but like any critical scholarly endeavor, these decisions must be defended.

In addition to creating legible copies of scores, Finale also allows the user to play back what has been entered. Although the sound reproduction is not as

realistic as one would like, it does give an idea of how a piece actually sounds. And, of course, the alternative is not usually feasible. Researchers rarely have musicians on call.

In the evenings of my fellowship residency at the Library Company, I transcribed pages from Fry's manuscripts into my laptop. More specifically, I worked on an art song, "Orphan's Lament," and a symphony, *Hagar in the Wilderness*. Eager to share the results with the library staff and other fellows, I offered to attach a speaker to my computer and let Finale play the music. What a treat! We were hearing this music for the first time in nearly a century and a half.

Since Finale does not reproduce voices very well, I decided to score the work for piano and viola, my own primary instrument. Mission accomplished. Or was it?

Although transcription and listening provide a certain degree of intellectual satisfaction, deeper musicological investigation probes the relationships between musical production, reception, and broader cultural trends. Why does a composer write in a particular style, and what is accomplished by doing so?

In the case of "Orphan's Lament," the song's text provides an obvious clue. With the singer literally embodying the orphan's voice, Fry was able to give a realistic human touch to one of the nation's most pressing reform causes: orphan asylums. The startlingly dissonant and pulsating accompaniment heightens the text's sense of melodrama and urgency. This one-to-one correspondence between text and music is common in the European art-song tradition. As an active member of New York City's Republican Party, Fry had a personal political stake in the issue of asylums and indeed championed a variety of social reforms, including abolition. Although there is no evidence of a public performance of the "Orphan's Lament," it is entirely plausible that Fry performed the work himself at private parlor gatherings.

Instrumental music is harder to penetrate on an interpretive level. Why would Fry write a symphony based on the biblical story of Hagar, or Santa Claus for that matter? In a roundabout way, I believe Fry is also communicating a political message in his symphonies.

Beginning in the 1830s, politically liberal musicians and critics in German-speaking lands began to imbue the genre of the symphony with overtly political content. For them, the harmoniousness, or "symphony," of the orchestra's many instruments represented the possibility of social harmony and political unity. Symphonies, especially Beethoven's, increasingly became symbols for the political goals of republicanism and German unification, two central issues at stake in the revolutions of 1848-49.

This was precisely the period when Fry was in Europe immersing himself in the political and musical culture of the Continent. As early as 1845, just before he left, Fry noted the potential nationalistic significance of symphonies

written specifically by American composers. His printed letters from Paris reveal that he developed his ideas further while overseas. When Jullien's orchestra came to town just months after Fry returned from Europe, he jumped at the chance to have his symphonies performed before a live audience.

Santa Claus sounds like a hodge-podge of three different European musical styles: the lush orchestration of Hector Berlioz, the theatricality of French grand opera, and the melodies of Italian *bel canto* opera, a ubiquitous musical genre in American cities. Noticeably missing from this mixture are many techniques of the Austro-German symphonic tradition exemplified in Beethoven's symphonies. At times, Fry vilified Beethoven's style by calling it "aristocratic." Clearly he did not hear in Beethoven that much-celebrated spirit of republican unity.

What made Fry's works different? Unlike the Germans who more or less followed Beethoven's style (Schumann, Mendelssohn), Fry transplanted operatic gestures into the purely instrumental context of the symphony. By doing so, he could retain the monumentality and grandeur of the symphonic genre, which nearly all critics recognized, while at the same time offering audiences something stylistically new and, in his formulation, more democratic. Since Italian opera was so popular at the time, its resonances in Fry's music provided audiences with an immediate point of access.

Fry was also a firm believer in music's ability to represent, or depict, nonmusical scenes. A striking document in the manuscript collection—a printed synopsis of the *Santa Claus* symphony's musical story—opens a window onto his political vision for the symphony. The scenes are essentially taken from everyday life—a family gathering, a mother and child, a vagrant in the cold, etc.—but they also accentuate the condition of the working class. In other words, they suggest a reformer's sensibility. The scenes may seem like tawdry remnants of Victorian sentimentality, but in the context of midcentury European musical style and aesthetics, they carry a clearly discernible political message.

After the failed revolutions, radical Continental composers, such as Franz Liszt, tended to steer clear of Beethoven's style in their symphonic works, but they did not follow through on the genre's potential to express democratic ideals. Although he recognized this potential in his writings, Liszt based several of his symphonic works from the 1850s on lofty epic poetry. These two elements seem to be at odds with one another. Liszt, like so many other idealistic composers, saw himself as a musical prophet whose role was to bring great art to the masses. Unsurprisingly, Liszt's symphonic music was never popular.

Fry, on the other hand, based his works on scenes from everyday life and used the orchestra to transform them into something sublime. And he did not need complex musical theories or procedures to achieve this goal. For example, listen to a passage near the end of *Santa Claus*, a stunningly beautiful

orchestral arrangement of “Adeste Fideles” (“O Come, All Ye Faithful”) that mysteriously appears in the wake of Santa’s sleigh.

He has taken a popular Christmas carol, placed it in an everyday context (remember the synopsis), and musically transformed it into a representation of one of history’s greatest miracles, the birth of Christ. I would be hard pressed to think of a better way to valorize the American “democratic spirit” and to show an audience the true value of “the everyday” than this. The audiences, made up largely of regular people, loved it.

Further Reading:

The majority of Fry’s letters from Paris, signed “W. H. F.,” may be found periodically in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the *New York Tribune* from 1849 to 1852. His abolitionist writings are in Republican Party, *Republican “campaign” text-book, for the year 1860* (New York, 1860). For a discussion of the symphony’s political symbolism in prerevolutionary German culture, see Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven* (Princeton, N.J., 2006). The outdated biography of Fry is William Treat Upton, *William Henry Fry: American Journalist and Composer-Critic* (New York, 1954).

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