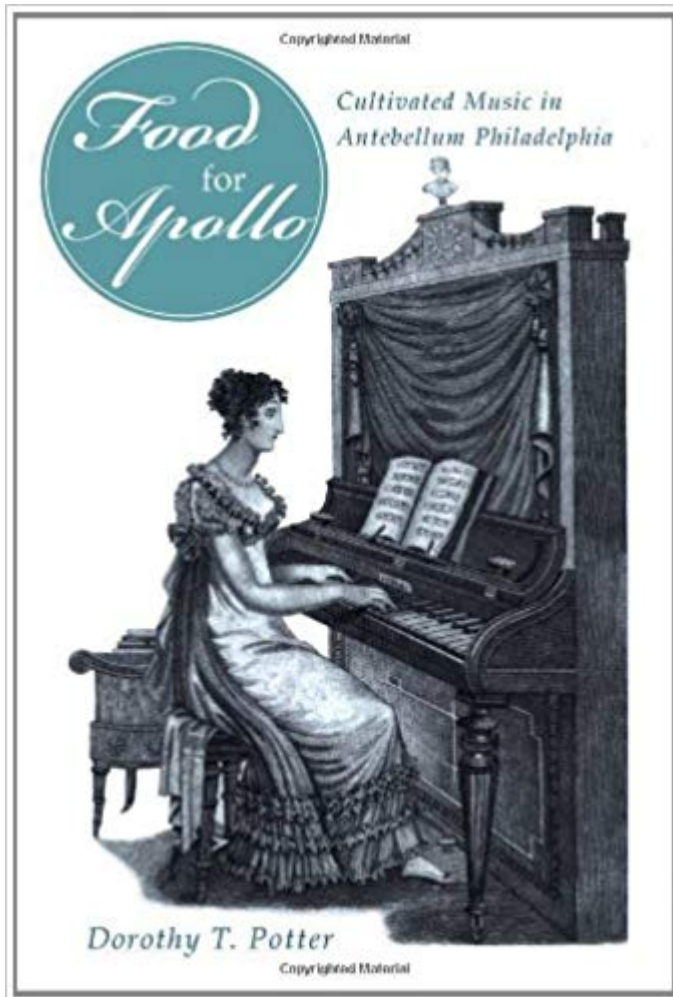


Mozart in America



✘ Dorothy T. Potter, *Food for Apollo: Cultivated Music in Antebellum Philadelphia*. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Lehigh University Press, 2011. 236 pp., \$65.

On January 28, 1856, Philadelphians celebrated the centennial of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's birth with a blowout event. There was a concert, the program stuffed with pieces by the beloved German composer, and a speech on "The Life and Genius of Mozart" delivered by local newspaper editor Thomas Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald hyped the event in *Fitzgerald's City Item*, donnishly labeling Mozart's music "food for Apollo" suited to "the taste of an enlightened audience" (70). Together the concert, address, and publicity indicate a broad shift in U.S. cultural history, as Americans began consciously to distinguish between music they believed to be elite, uplifting, and sophisticated on the one hand, and the popular and folk music of the masses on the other. Yet the distinction between "cultivated" and "vernacular" traditions, to use the terms coined by musicologist H. Wiley Hitchcock in 1969, was not absolute: as

historian Dorothy T. Potter states in the introduction to *Food for Apollo*, “[p]re-Civil War musicians and audiences would find this [distinction] puzzling, since they saw nothing amiss in a popular march or sentimental ballad being on the same program with works by Handel, Mozart, Haydn, or Beethoven” (12). Nothing was amiss because all of this music was, in fact, “popular.” A song like “Home, Sweet Home” was as welcome an encore as an opera aria.

Today classical music carries a lot of baggage. Despite the fact that some classical music has become truly popular—think of “Eine kleine Nachtmusik,” the “Hallelujah” chorus, or “Für Elise”—entrenched cultural hierarchies mean that higher prestige is attached to classical music than other genres. Even as scholars pinpoint how elitism developed in the nineteenth century, they often struggle to ameliorate the division between high and low that is that century’s musical legacy. In *Food for Apollo*, Potter picks a path around the questions of why classical music has been set apart. Instead, she documents how cultivated music thrived in Philadelphia, an important cultural center in early America. She traces the careers of influential publishers and critics, entrepreneurs, European immigrant composers and composers born in the United States, and touring musicians, charting a course through more than one hundred years of American musical life. From the days when sacred music dominated to the rise of genteel domestic music making in the mid-nineteenth century, Potter shows how porous the boundary between “high” and “low” actually was.

The first three chapters survey music in Philadelphia from 1700 to 1861. Chapter 1, “Philadelphia’s Musical Beginnings, 1700-1786,” provides an overview of the remarkably diverse musical life of the colonial period, when Protestant psalmody thrived against a backdrop of Quaker silence, complemented by the prodigious musical accomplishments of Moravian communities to the west. A confluence of commercial and social trends in the middle of the century supported the growth of secular music in Philadelphia, including the establishment of music stores, concert series, and performance venues, a growing demand for dance and music instructors, and a more lenient religious culture that permitted performances by theatrical touring companies before and especially after the Revolutionary War. In the second and third chapters Potter exhaustively documents musical activity on stage and in print from 1786 to 1861, using the death of publisher Benjamin Carr in 1831 as a dividing point between two eras—first an era in which cultivated music found its footing in the early republic, and then one in which musical life grew more complex, even as Philadelphia’s cultural status slipped behind New York and New Orleans. In these chapters Potter highlights the increasing importance of touring European performers, such as charismatic French bandmaster Louis A. Jullien and singers Maria Malibran and Jenny Lind, while also crediting the accomplishments of home-grown musicians such as composer William Henry Fry. Also noteworthy is Potter’s attention to African Americans’ musical contributions, which she examines through the career of composer and bandleader Francis Johnson. Cultivated music permeated the domestic realm as well as the world of public entertainment throughout this period. The role of the taste-making publishers and instrument makers who brought music into middle-class homes is taken up in

chapter 4, "Music for the Masses: Publishers and Piano Makers, 1786-1861."

Food for Apollo raises an important question: how should we understand the major role European classical music has played in American cultural history? This is a question that has long vexed musicologists, who typically frame it as a debate about what constitutes "American" music. While this is not a question Potter sets out to solve, what is clear in her book is that European émigrés, lured by the commercial possibilities in the United States, played a pivotal role in the both the dissemination and popularization of cultivated music. Yet given the high profile of many European musicians who worked in the United States, it is curious that the figure Potter returns to throughout the book is Mozart, a German musical luminary who never traveled to America, and whose fame in the Anglo-American world was surpassed in his lifetime by George Frederic Handel, Joseph Haydn, and composers whose names are less familiar today. Potter lists two reasons for singling out Mozart: his music proved to be especially adaptable, continuing to satisfy the tastes of Philadelphians even as the music entertainment environment became increasingly competitive; and because of "his unique standing as a cultural icon, in the print literature of the time" (13). Her argument makes a certain amount of sense: that Mozart's music was literally adaptable can be seen in the many recycled versions of his melodies that appeared regularly in (often pirated) sheet music and in concert. The claim that Mozart occupied a special status as a cultural icon is more difficult to prove, especially since works by the composer, who died in December 1791, were not the most frequently performed or published in antebellum America—a fact Potter forthrightly admits.

Potter turns her full attention to the book's lodestar in the final chapter, "Historians, Critics, and Romantics: Mozart in Literature, 1803-1861." Here she tackles the (largely posthumous) transformation of Mozart's reputation, painstakingly reviewing the English-language biographical and pseudo-biographical studies that began to appear during Mozart's life. She outlines the emergence of a Mozart mythology that depicted him as a tragic genius, but she also illuminates a lesser-known side of his reputation as a man indebted to the support of his family—appealing character traits for readers steeped in the romantic and sentimental tropes of the antebellum period. In this chapter the book's themes synchronize, as Mozart's rising reputation is hitched to the overarching influence of European musical taste in America and the popularity of commercialized cultivated music. Indeed, according to Potter, Mozart's fate was synonymous with that of cultivated music: in the figure of Mozart, "musical idealism and mass entertainment" were united (159). She shows that the border between cultivated and vernacular music was slippery indeed, while reaffirming Mozart's central place in the canon of Western classical music. Despite the strength of her argument in this chapter, Potter's habit of turning to Mozart for examples in previous chapters can be a bit misleading, giving the impression that the composer's pieces were more ubiquitous than others' works. Moreover, the chronologically organized book covers a period before Mozart's iconic reputation was solidified (including the half century before he was even born in 1756), leaving one to wonder if the composer would garner such lavish

attention from a writer less enamored of his music.

Potter ventures into the territory of musicologists in *Food for Apollo*. In the introduction she wonders why music is so often neglected by historians, given the fact that “music is surely the most inclusive of the arts” (11)—a statement whose precise meaning is elusive, but surely speaks to the author’s own passion for the topic. Yet while Potter’s subject matter may be traditionally in the domain of music scholars, her approach is strictly historical: she brings her discipline’s research habits and interpretive instincts to bear on a considerable quantity of data (exemplified in the ample appendix listing of libraries with Mozart titles and Philadelphia publishers who issued the composer’s works in the antebellum period), and steers clear of the musicological methods of musical analysis and hermeneutics. In documenting the activities of key performing groups and individuals, critics, institutions, composers, and publishers, Potter makes good use of the bibliographic scholarship that represents most of musicological inquiry into this period. Works by Richard Wolfe, Oscar Sonneck, and Donald Krummel appear to have been especially useful for her research. *Food for Apollo* elucidates meaningful cultural trends as ever-increasing commercialization made music more widely available to Philadelphians, and European influences mixed with the efforts of local talent. Potter’s work will be useful to those interested in the details about performers, publishers, composers, critics, entrepreneurs, and inventors in this period.

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