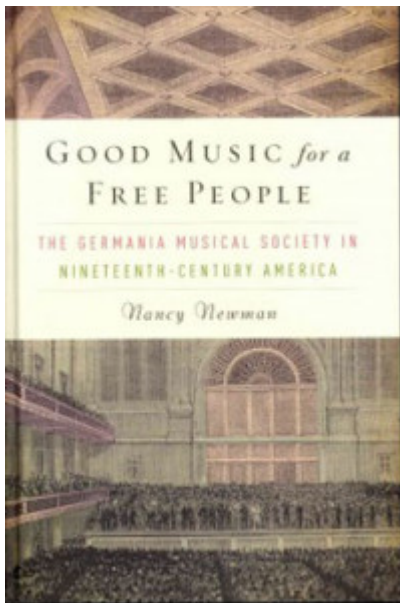


The Orchestra as Social Utopia



Nancy Newman's *Good Music for a Free People* is the first book-length exploration of the Germania Musical Society, a small but gifted private orchestra from Berlin that settled permanently in the United States in 1848 and toured the nation extensively until 1854. Turning away from earlier tendencies to treat musical life in the U.S. as an isolated cultural phenomenon, contemporary scholars of American music have increasingly adopted transatlantic perspectives in order to illuminate the rich cultural interfaces between Europe and the United States, especially before the twentieth century. Newman has adopted this approach in her book and ably demonstrates the direct influence of European politics, social theories, and musical values on the Germanians and their American audiences.



Nancy Newman, *Good Music for a Free People: The Germania Musical Society in Nineteenth-Century America*. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010. 332 pp., \$80.

Readers of *Common-place* may be familiar with the Germania through the work of the late cultural historian Lawrence Levine, whose influential *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1990) includes a brief discussion of the ensemble. Levine suggests that the Germania's staple repertoire of canonical pieces by famous composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven and Felix Mendelssohn represented an early instance of a gradual "sacralization" process that overtook American culture in the course of the nineteenth century. Levine's book critiques this process. Newman rejects the simplicity of Levine's argument, which she correctly claims is based on outdated research on the Germania. She attempts instead to see the world through the eyes of the Germanians themselves, and what emerges is a sympathetic portrayal of the ensemble's rise and fall that allows the reader to understand the group's historical and symbolic importance within the larger

scheme of German-American cultural relations at midcentury.

The Germanians were among a diverse group of "Forty-Eighters," or immigrants who left the German-speaking lands for the U.S. during or shortly after the 1848-49 insurrections and for whom the United States and the freedom afforded its citizens represented an ideal, or at least a more promising, political and social future. What distinguished these musicians from other immigrants and political refugees, however, was their firm belief that music, particularly the large instrumental works of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, not only symbolized the ideals of social harmony and equality, but also instantiated these ideals in performance. The Germanians thus believed that they created a sound print, or an aural image, of a model society through the act of musical performance. This confluence of political, social, and musical values animating the orchestra's career makes the group a particularly inviting case study in immigration history.

The book itself comprises five chapters followed by three appendices. The unusual structure of the five main chapters is neither chronological nor thematic, though given the complexity of Newman's subject, it is difficult to imagine a better way of arranging them. The exterior chapters, one and five, present Newman's argument concerning the importance of European social theory to the life of the Germania and assesses the Germania's potential contributions to our understanding of immigration history. The interior chapters, two through four, describe the trajectory of the group's career—from its formation in Berlin in 1848 to its dissolution in Boston in 1854—and then interpret its programming choices in the light of new understandings of mid-century musical taste. Finally, the appendices greatly increase the book's value for future research. They provide a wealth of new and carefully cataloged factual information about the Germania's touring schedule, programming, and membership as well as a handful of archival documents related to the society, which Newman has translated into English.

Chapters two and three form the core of the book's plot. Far from providing an uninteresting blow-by-blow account of the group's extensive national tours (it performed nearly 1,000 concerts over six years), Newman skillfully crafts her narrative alongside a first-hand history of the ensemble written by one of its members, Henry Albrecht, here presented in full English translation for the first time. This approach is similar to that found in Vera Brodsky Lawrence's three-volume survey of music in New York City during the nineteenth century, *Strong on Music*, which presents and comments upon many excerpts from the famous diary of George Templeton Strong (1820-75). These two chapters offer the reader a wealth of information not only about the Germania's activities, but especially the personalities they encountered during their touring career. Through what must have been painstaking research, Newman has provided contextual biographical data about virtually every person whose name appears in the book (mostly musicians). This attention to detail alone gives the work great future value for historians of the period, especially musicologists. Readers will also undoubtedly be struck by anecdotes about performances for

famous political figures, including presidents, as well as the toll that such a grueling schedule of performances would have taken on these two dozen men.

Chapter four analyzes and interprets the Germanians' repertory choices, which, as Newman argues, contributed both to their success and to their ultimate failure. Here, too, she fleshes out her critique of Levine by suggesting that the processes of modernization, especially "the proliferation of mass media—public concerts, sheet music, and journalism," (117) provide a better model for explaining the bifurcation of music into "high" and "low" cultural categories during the later nineteenth century than does Levine's theory of aesthetic revaluation. Levine imagined concert programs as occupying an aesthetic spectrum: one side is meant to please the highest number of people possible while the other is meant to educate or to enlighten a select few. In Levine's narrative, the Germania typically occupied a space near this latter side of the spectrum, yet Newman demonstrates that this was not actually the case.

Programming directed toward diverse and eclectic audiences had been a central strategy in Europe and in the United States throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The Germania continued this trend by programming mixtures of dances, operatic numbers, marches, descriptive musical scenes, and, finally, large-scale instrumental works such as symphonies and concert overtures. By appealing to such a wide customer base, the group amassed huge successes in its first years. As the tour progressed, however, the musicians had come to believe that Americans were beginning to prefer "heavier" instrumental pieces by composers such as Beethoven and Mendelssohn; they were wrong. During the 1853-54 season, their last, they struggled to stay afloat as they offered two types of programs—one dedicated solely to "lighter" works and one dedicated to European masterworks. Far from pointing the way toward a sacralized future for American music, as Levine would have us believe, the Germanians instead caused their own demise by straying from their earlier eclecticism, which continued to have cultural capital well into the latter half of the century.

The gentle irony that an organization dedicated to communistic principles was brought down by the vagaries of the audience marketplace serves as a starting place for understanding Newman's broader argument about the ensemble's place within American cultural history. Chapter one situates the orchestra's move to the United States within the larger context of German immigration history. In addition to commenting on larger-scale interpretations of German transatlantic migration (e.g., by Veit Valentin, Carl Wittke, and Bruce Levine), she argues that the social dimensions of the 1848-49 revolutions, not the purely political, played a significant role in the decision of many Germans, including the Germania Orchestra members, to leave their homelands for the U.S. The American cultural landscape was, in turn, more receptive to social utopianism than post-revolutionary Europe. The Germanians immediately found welcome support among social reformers in the United States, especially in Boston, where former members of the Fourierist phalanx called Brook Farm, including the preacher-turned-music critic John Sullivan Dwight (1813-93), became some of

their most vocal proponents.

The book's final chapter follows this line of thought by tracing and tying together several other strands radiating from the life and ideas of the French utopian socialist Étienne Cabet (1788-1856). Not only did Cabet's social theories arguably spur the creation of the Germania Orchestra, but its unprecedented success in the U.S. was largely dependent on Americans' general receptivity to the ideals of European social reform. The Frenchman's pull on the Germania was so strong that even after the group's dissolution, Henry Albrecht continued to pursue musical relationships with utopian societies in the United States, including Cabet's own "Icarian colony" in Nauvoo, Illinois. Newman concludes by noting that traces of social utopianism and the Germania's drive toward self-determination as a musical ensemble have persisted in American culture despite their earlier and sometimes dramatic failures.

Newman's book offers a challenging new perspective on music's vital contributions to the discourses of modernization and social theory that emerged in the early part of the nineteenth century, and it implicitly posits that no understanding of musical life in the United States is complete without accounting for contemporaneous developments in Europe. In addition to readers interested in nineteenth-century music more generally, then, it should find a welcome audience among those with further interests in social theory, cultural history, immigration history, and the transatlantic exchange of culture occurring throughout the century.

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