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## Puritanism, Democracy and the Establishment of Musical Idealism in New England

1831 was a good year for instrumentalists in Boston. The veil of anonymity under which orchestral musicians labored was suddenly lifted. Almost every concert program for that year listed the members of the orchestra, something that had never occurred before and would not occur again soon.

We do not know why this happened nor why the practice was abandoned. Its occurrence, however, provides us information about instrumentalists and about instrumental ensembles available from no other source. We suddenly know how large the orchestras were, who played in them, and what their instrumentation was. We are also allowed to witness, in much more detail than would otherwise be possible, the birth of a wind band. On February 12, James Kendall gave a benefit concert, which included, for the first time in Boston, a new Military Band. The Kendall brothers, James and Edward, would become fixtures in the Boston musical scene for the next two decades.<sup>1</sup>

The Boston Band, as it became known by April, was considered in every way on a par with the orchestras. It played the same music and was welcome to share the stage. In fact its presence was considered a plus for anyone organizing a concert in Boston in the early 1830s. This cozy relationship extended through at least 1835, as concert programs attest. After that, wind bands are seldom mentioned as parts of the principal benefit concerts or concerts of other organizations.

By the mid-1840s public perception of wind bands had changed dramatically. In his *Musical Magazine* in 1839 Theodore Hach associated bands with bad taste: "*music by the brass band in a concert room is not and will never be to our taste.*"<sup>2</sup>

Other writers picked up Hach's theme. When the Boston Philharmonic Society was formed in 1843, its concerts featured a large orchestra of between thirty and more than forty musicians, led by James J. Kendall with his brother, Edward featured on the bugle. The presence of the Kendall Brothers immediately suggests band rather than orchestra. Three years later when the journal, *The Harbinger*, looked back on that season, it confirmed that: "*What they called an orchestra was only a wind-band, [notice the only] principally of brass instruments, which by turns brayed out noisy overtures, or murdered unmeaning solos.*" *The Harbinger* noted with disgust: "*The impression*

<sup>1</sup> James and Edward Kendall first appeared in Boston in 1831. In addition to their solo performances, for which they were known well beyond Boston, one or the other led at times the Boston Band, also known as Kendall's Band, (J. early 1830s), the Boston Brass Band (E. 1834-44 intermitently), the Boston Cotillion Band (E. 1835), Kendall's Brass Band (E. 1845), the Boston Brigade Band (E. 1849-50), the Boston Brigade Brass Band, a merger of the Boston Brass Band and the Boston Brigade Band (J. 1849), as well as various quadrille bands (E. 1839, 1843).

<sup>2</sup> *Musical Magazine* 2 (28 March, 1840), 112.

was so sickening to whatever soul of music we had in us, that we have not been able to overcome the associations of the place enough to enter it again."<sup>3</sup>

Thus band music, accepted and welcomed on the concert platform in 1831, became an object of embarrassment by 1846. What happened in the interim?

Between 1830 and 1845 public attitudes toward instrumental music underwent a revolution in New England, and with them changing ideas about musical idealism and the democratic nature of American music. Those fifteen years form the most critical period for classical instrumental music in the history of America.

To place this in perspective: In 1829 Lewis Ostinelli, leader of the Tremont Theatre Orchestra in Boston, one of the largest orchestras ever assembled in the United States, was fired for attempting to program orchestral music that was too serious. An article in the Boston Daily Transcript observed: "*The theatre is a place of popular amusement, and the first thing to be remembered by the leader of the Orchestra, is, that he does not play to an assembly of musical dilettanti [...] That was the great fault with Ostinelli; he was ambitious and erred in judgement; his object seemed less to please the public than to please himself. The consequence was that many praised, whilst few listened to his music.*"<sup>4</sup>

By 1845 the Boston Academy of Music and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra were both regularly presenting heavily subscribed orchestral concerts featuring Beethoven symphonies; the Harvard Musical Association in Boston had launched the first successful string quartet series in America; and instrumental virtuosi found themselves awash in demand up and down the East Coast. And the idea of a classical canon of instrumental music, unimaginable in America in 1830, was rapidly taking shape.

Assuming there was a change in taste toward more refined instrumental music, what caused it, and how was it manifested? The change may be traced to two developments: the first more philosophical, the second more practical. First, musical idealism, apparent in earlier hymnists' attempts to reform sacred vocal music in America, extended to instrumental music. Second, public perception about string instruments changed dramatically. Regarding the first, by the late nineteenth century moral associations were attached to some instrumental music. Paul DiMaggio used the term "the sacralization of culture" to describe this tendency.<sup>5</sup> It did not appear in America until the late 1830's. The anonymous writer of the article about Ostinelli quoted above was clearly aware of a duality in his musical culture. His definition of that duality, between music for the cognoscenti (the dilettante, or the musician himself) and music for the people, was not that different from conceptualizations of the late nineteenth century, but his attitude was: He disapproved of a musician who was too ambitious, who was more interested in his art than in entertaining the public. The idealistic as-

<sup>3</sup> The Harbinger 4 (9 Jan., 1847), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Boston Daily Evening Transcript 29 Sept., 1830.

<sup>5</sup> Paul DiMaggio: *Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America, and Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston, Part II: The Classification and Framing of American Art*, in: *Media, Culture and Society* 4 (1982), 33-50, 303-22.

pect is totally absent. There is no suggestion that music, at least for the orchestra, should have any moral value beyond providing pleasure for the listeners. In 1830, the public might allow its taste in Psalmody to be improved but would have none of it in regard to secular music.

Part of the change in perception of the band had to do with repertoire. Through the mid-1830's band repertoire differed little from the orchestral repertoire. Almost all concerts involving a band or orchestra presented a variety of popular songs, dances, concertos and symphonic excerpts. The principal differences between band and other concerts were the prominence of dances and the tendency to feature instrumental rather than vocal solos. Band concerts ironically represented the most sustained attempts to present all-instrumental concerts in New England.

The idealistic reformers faced the problem of providing music that was consistent with their goals and free of improper associations. The music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven was relatively unknown in America, and where it was known, it was associated with exalted sacred choral music. The symphony as an idiom had only a sketchy history in early Federal America. As bands proliferated in the 1830's, playing for dances became one of their principal sources for income, and they became closely associated with dance music. This, as much as anything, tainted their position in the eyes of the idealists.

New England's Puritan heritage had much to do with the change. The principal advocate for a sacralized high musical culture was John S. Dwight. After giving up a career as a Unitarian minister, he argued, in a series of journals, the cause of the Classical canon of Haydn, Mozart and especially Beethoven in terms that any New Englander of Puritan lineage would understand. To Dwight all instrumental music was sacred, its very abstractness an advantage. Sacred music was "*elevating, purifying, love and faith-inspiring*," and absolute instrument music represented the highest type of sacred music because it existed purely on its own terms, uncorrupted by language. Beethoven was the prime example: "*Are not some of the adagio movements of Beethoven's instrumental music almost the very essence of prayer? – not formal prayer, I grant, but earnest, deep, unspeakable aspiration? Is not his music pervaded by such prayer?*"<sup>6</sup>

Dwight provided a definition of instrumental music that placed it in a realm it had never before occupied in American culture. Yet when Dwight spoke of instrumental music, he meant orchestral, or chamber music, not band music. The change in perception regarding orchestral and band music that occurred around 1840 depended on another development, in the manner in which string and wind instruments themselves were regarded. Prior to 1840 wind instruments were favored in America, principally because of the prevalence of the military band. The flute was considered the favorite instrument of gentlemen, and the violin, in particular, was held in disrepute. It was associated with popular dance.

<sup>6</sup> John S. Dwight: *Address Delivered before the Harvard Musical Association, August 25, 1841*, in: *Musical Magazine* 3 (1841): 263-64.

In a review of the concerts of the 1839-40 season, John S. Dwight commented: "the Psalmody of the Country choir and the dancing master's fiddle, the waltzes and variations of the music-shop, Russell's songs, and 'Jim Crow,' and 'Harrison's Melodies,' are not apt to visit the popular mind with the deep emotions of true music." Few Americans may have understood Dwight's concern for the "deep emotions of true music," but many shared his view of the proper context of the violin. In the proposal to form the Harvard Musical Association, Dwight distinguished the proposals of his group, "the serious promoters of the best interests of the young," from "the killers of time only and those who scrape the fiddle for bread."<sup>7</sup>

The position of the violin is partly a remnant of Puritan influence, but is due even more to the absence of a violin tradition in America. There were few violinists, as opposed to fiddlers, and the split between a violin and a fiddle repertoire and style that emerged in mid-eighteenth-century Europe had, for a variety of reasons, bypassed the United States almost completely.

Francis Grund who lived in the United States from 1827 to 1836 observed that he did not hear a single amateur performer on the violin in the entire time he was in the States. Samuel Jennison reported that during his four years at Harvard, from 1835-39, he knew of only two string players, one violinist and one cellist. The Pierian Sodality, an undergraduate musical group at Harvard, persuaded the violinist to set his instrument aside and take up the flute before he could join them (most male amateurs in America played the flute). He was lucky. In 1830 the Arionic Sodality, a feeder organization to the Pierians, "voted that a nondescript freshman, who was heard scraping a fiddle be neglected." In his 1826 Address on Church Music, Lowell Mason advocated the use of instruments in church. In the absence of an organ, the instrument he considered the most desirable, Mason favored the violoncello. He admitted that he wanted to favor the violin, but could not because of its too many "irrelevant associations." To Mason "irrelevant" meant secular, profane or vulgar.<sup>8</sup>

The prevailing attitude about the violin changed totally in the 1840's. The principal reason was the appearance of many string virtuosi in America in the early 1840's. The virtuoso was received differently in America than in Europe. In Europe the virtuoso's reception progressed from astonishment to adulation and finally antagonism in some circles, as William Weber has documented.<sup>9</sup> This sequence began early in the nineteenth century, and the third phase was evident by the 1830's. Virtuoso concerts remained relatively uncommon in America throughout much of the federal period. As

<sup>7</sup> John S. Dwight, *The Concerts of Past Winter*, *The Dial* I (July, 1840), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Grund: *The Americans in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 85. Samuel Jennison: *Reminiscences of an Ex-Pierian*, in: Scrapbook at the Harvard Musical Association, Boston, Mass. *Records of the Arionic Sodality*. Cambridge: N. E. 1813, Manuscript book, Harvard Musical Association. John S. Dwight: *Music in Boston during the Past Winter*, *Harbinger* 1:155. John S. Dwight: *Report Made at a Meeting of the Honorary and Immediate Members of the Pierian Sodality*, 1837, reprinted in the *Boston Musical Gazette*, June 27 and July 11, 1838, 33-34, 42. Lowell Mason: *Address[sic!] on Church Music: Delivered by Request, on the Evening of Saturday, October 7, 1826* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1827), 19.

<sup>9</sup> William Weber, *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna* (New York: Holmes & Meyer, 1975), 19-20 and passim.

late as 1839, an instrumental virtuoso concert was still a novelty in America. I might add that even this situation was in large part due to technology. What made a virtuoso tour of America possible was the development of the railroad system in the 1830's and 40's. For instance, when the railroad line linking Philadelphia and Baltimore opened in 1838, it cut the travel time for the ninety-mile journey from three days to five hours.

Beginning in the 1840's, a number of violin virtuosos, the most famous being Ole Bull and Henri Vieuxtemps, came to America and demonstrated to Americans that the violin could be more than a dance fiddle. Prior to that time, most Americans had no idea what true violin playing was. In the connected cultural world of the twentieth century, it is hard for us to imagine just how deep that unfamiliarity was. The style and ability of these foreign performers was unprecedented, and for many listeners it was a revelation. Only then did perception of the instrument change. The concentration of European violin virtuosos in America in the critical years between 1840 and 1843 probably did much to establish the viability of a musical style based on string instruments, and with it, the notion of an instrumental high culture began to grow.

In this heady atmosphere of change, band music, at the very center of American musical life only some ten years earlier, was simply overwhelmed. Band music continued to enjoy a strong following throughout the nineteenth century, but in the emergent duality that had become apparent by 1840, it was associated with the vernacular. Orchestra music, however, enjoyed a new status: it was art, with a capital "A", it was the new sacred music of moral value to be distinguished from mere entertainment.

The only problem was, it was not democratic. And this was a problem. Practitioners of the time were explicitly aware that the orchestra was a visible symbol of a European hierarchy from which they wished to distance themselves. In 1840 Henry R. Cleveland lamented the state of music in the United States. His points are familiar: "*We have no tradition on which to build. There is no institution of patronage here of any kind (church or otherwise) and we do not enjoy the opportunity to hear fine music as in England. The habits of Americans are not conducive to the development of art, as most are engaged in business or some practical career; there is no wealthy class devoted to enjoyment.*"<sup>10</sup>

But what particularly concerned Cleveland was the danger that European practice posed. "*It may seem a strange assertion, that an art, which has ever been reared and fostered by wealth and aristocracy, can find a genial soil in this republic. Music, it will be said, is peculiarly at war with the spirit of democracy. There is not a more absolute monarch on the earth than the leader of the orchestra. The moment his divine right is disputed, the empire falls to destruction. For musicians, in the practice of their art, there can be none but an absolute autocracy, a pre despotism.*"

Cleveland advocated a music for the people: "*music must be in a considerable degree popular. That is, it must be addressed essentially to the people [...]* Music in

<sup>10</sup> Henry Cleveland: *Prospects for a National Music in America* in: *The Musical Magazine* 2 (18 Jan., 1840), 17.

*America must be surrendered to the people, must be domiciled among them, must grow up among them, or it cannot exist at all.*"<sup>11</sup>

This of course left out the orchestra, but other thinkers came to its rescue. The strongest advocate for instrumental music in antebellum New England was Samuel Eliot. Not only was he president of the Boston Academy of Music, but he held a number of political offices, including Mayor of Boston. He believed strongly in a Whig Republicanism, a political ideology prominent among the elite in early Federal America. Republicanism stressed civic duty, each person contributing to the common good according to his talents. It was not an egalitarian philosophy. The common good depended on a hierarchy in which each knew his place and stayed in it. And those at the top determined how each fit into the hierarchy. To Eliot, the orchestra was an ideal metaphor for this ideology. Individual flights of fancy must be subordinated to the needs of the overall ensemble: "*Music is the only art which, requiring the concerted action of numbers, in different spheres, can exemplify and enforce that principle of order and subordination of one man to another, without which harmony, whether in music or politics, cannot exist. It is a lesson not unimportant, surely, to young American to learn, that there are rules which must be obeyed. Every man must be willing to take the place for which nature has fitted him, and for which others, rather than he himself, think him qualified.*"<sup>12</sup>

And woe be unto him who is not willing to do so: "*The fate of him who neglects the part and the place in life for which he is fitted, for one to which he is not adapted, is failure complete and irreparable.*"<sup>13</sup>

Whig Republicanism was on the wane by the 1840's, as the older generation of colonial gentry died out, but by then it didn't matter. Bands and orchestras took on different social as well as aesthetic roles: The band was vernacular and democratic, most bands being essentially community organizations. The orchestra was, all concerns of democracy aside, hierarchical, even to some absolutist, but its political nature could be downplayed because of the idealism to which its music appealed.

In his argument that all music was inherently sacred – the more abstract the music, the more manifest its sacred qualities – John S. Dwight had not only taken the notion of taste one step further than earlier propagandists but had provided a means to allow Eliot's notion of taste to serve an elitist political agenda. Orchestra and chamber music were set apart. They possessed a quality that no other music did. From that principle, a musical hierarchy with a clear apogee was established.

Although few in the twentieth century today speak of the symphony as a moral force, remnants of that position remain. In almost every major city in America, the symphony orchestra is seen as the pinnacle of high culture and a source of civic pride, even though only a minute fraction of the population has any connection with its music. There is irony in that position. Most Americans frankly don't quite know what to make of the symphony, but they are convinced that it is good to have one. Yet in that

<sup>11</sup> Cleveland, 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel A. Eliot: *Music and Politics*, in: Dwight's Journal of Music 18 (1860): 345.

<sup>13</sup> Eliot, 345.

