

## BOOK REVIEWS

Candace Bailey, *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010). xvi + 256 pp. \$29.95.

With *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer*, Candace Bailey makes an important contribution to American cultural studies by considering the musical, and specifically composing, practices of a select under-researched region and demographic: women of the South. She further narrows her focus by limiting the subject to a circumscribed period of time: the immediate antebellum period and the Civil War years, stopping her study with 1865. Bailey argues that the Civil War changed the willingness of southern 'ladies' to acknowledge their musical creativity and achievements: by revealing their identities, they indulged in self-empowerment, announced their allegiance to the South, and 'risked their reputations in order to become useful to the Confederate cause' (p. 6). Bailey bases her case upon what she detects is an increase in the number of piano works and songs that bear the full names of their 'elite' women composers.

To support her claim, Bailey provides numerous tables listing variously attributed works from before the war, although the ambiguity of what or who qualifies as Southern is problematic, which she acknowledges. The large role played by Baltimore publishing houses in disseminating women's compositions in the antebellum period additionally complicates the question of what is Southern, as Maryland sided with the Union states when war was declared, despite its slave-holding practices and the pro-Confederacy sympathies of large numbers of its citizens. Within the Appendix are lists of southern women composers who published in Northern venues; those whose pieces appeared in widely-circulating national magazines (*Godey's Lady's Book* is an oft-cited example of a favourite magazine among Southern women although it was published in the North); non-Southern women composers whose work was disseminated in Southern publications; Southern women whose works were issued by Southern publications; and unknown women whose works appeared in Southern publications. For each category, Bailey offers percentages of the total number of women who are identified partially and those who are fully named. In a summary table of pre-war Southern Women Composers, Bailey identifies only four women who are fully named, although using Bailey's standard, one of them, 'Mrs. V. G. Cowdin', seems less definitively identified than the other three women who include first names in their markers. In a final table, titled 'Music Composed by Women and Published in the South during the Civil War', Bailey lists 37 composers, though among these are 'A Lady of Richmond', 'A Lady of Baltimore', 'Mrs. E. B.', 'The Veiled Lady', 'A Lady', and four 'non-southerners' (see pp. 196–7). Reflecting the war's new alignments, none of their works was published in Baltimore. The criteria for inclusion in these final two tables are not always obvious, and sometimes appear at cross purposes, but the point remains that, based upon the evidence presented, more Southern women appear to have claimed ownership of their musical works during the Civil War than before.

Questions remain, however, regarding how much to rely upon numbers and what, exactly, they tell us.

Bailey anchors her work in broad-ranging research that includes the consultation of hundreds of pieces of music, personal letters, published reviews, journal entries, school records and brochures, concert programmes, song collections, census records and all manner of secondary scholarly sources. She uses Anya Jabour's notion of Southern women's 'culture of resistance' and Joan E. Cashin's reading of Southern women's 'culture of resignation' to build the lightest of frames for her study, but she doesn't allow over-simple or dichotomous thinking to burden her own reading of events.<sup>1</sup> Bailey casts her net widely as she endeavours to develop the fullest picture of the gradually enlarging experiences of young Southern women at a critical time in the region's history. And this is all to the good; studies of groups outside those populating the northeastern corridor and its most-researched cities – Boston, New York, Philadelphia – are needed if American music culture is to be understood with anything approaching the completeness it deserves.

More interesting than the many lists of women, compositions, publication houses, and percentages that Bailey provides is her discussion of the notion of a Southern woman's proper (read 'passive') role, which was to please. Education of girls was undertaken as preparation for conversation with men rather than for self-improvement or edification. Mere displays of intelligence were understood as a sign of poor taste and a woman's confusion over her real role in life. Bailey reminds her readers on numerous occasions that the 'perfect woman' found happiness in making others, and most especially men, happy.<sup>2</sup> And this saw its most focused enactment in the realm of music. Although there were exceptions, the majority of young women were taught to play piano, but not 'brilliantly', which was considered unseemly, and to sing 'sweetly', rather than operatically, and not for personal satisfaction or professional gain, but in order to 'soothe the men and entertain; to please others' (p. 13). As Bailey points out, many of them ignored their own preferences and temperaments when they complied with the requests of family and friends for parlour performances; to do otherwise would have been construed as rude. Bailey acknowledges that some young women took great personal satisfaction in musical accomplishment, but as this doesn't advance her thesis regarding the centrality of pleasing men, the topic is not stressed. One wonders whether Bailey makes her Southern woman prototype more homogeneous than she really was. Young Southern women understood that musical skill was the most important accomplishment they could possess. It and a woman's beauty were highly prized above all. Thus, accomplishments in these areas redounded to a young woman's family and reflected its economic station and status. They proved a woman's suitability for marriage, motherhood, and the continuation of a Southern moral code.

An issue that permeates Bailey's study is how one construes identity. Although central to deciding in which table a woman appears, it is never fully discussed. While we can all agree a 'Young Lady of Georgia' (p. 195) is vague and can refer to any one of thousands of musical 'belles', the names listed under

<sup>1</sup> See Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and Joan E. Cashin, *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women of the Old South* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Mention of a woman's 'pleasing' role occurs throughout the book. See pp. 13, 14, 44, 51 and 63 for a few instances of this recurring theme.

'Initials or incomplete marker[s]' (to use Bailey's category) are not similarly so. 'Mrs. J. M. C. of Virginia' and 'Mrs. C. McConnell', for instance, reveal themselves to different degrees. That many married women to this day identify themselves using their husband's initial and name complicates the question of who is forthcoming about claiming authorship and who is not. Mrs. C. McConnell might have thought of herself in just those terms; that was her identity, fully revealed.

Range of circulation is another factor that plays into identifying oneself, and potentially challenges drawing too many conclusions from the fragmentary nature or absence of what we consider today to be a full name. For whom were these women writing? While it is clear that a Southern woman having her work published by a Northern publisher was thinking beyond her hometown, within a narrower compass, one might not need more than a few initials to claim ownership. More information about the scope of any work's dissemination or an individual woman's aspirations for her music would help clarify the potential meaning and effectiveness of partial attributions and reinforce the author's argument.

The foregoing observations are not intended to negate Bailey's general observation that identifying oneself as the composer of a musical work occurred less frequently among elite women prior to the Civil War than during it, which appears to be the case. More problematic, however, the same holds true beyond the South, although perhaps for different reasons. In fact, many of the behaviours and values that Bailey aligns with Southern culture are not so different from those practiced in the Union states. This is not an argument to ignore Southern practices, but only a reminder to understand them in relationship to larger trends and traditions regarding women's roles and domains.

As a case in point: elite young women in the Northeast were also raised to be first and foremost helpmates to their husbands and moral heads of households. Social circles, especially among the highest classes, were tight-knit exclusive orders that adhered to highly prescriptive codes of behaviour. Southern finishing schools such as those Bailey describes in her book had Northern equivalents. Miss Porter's School, founded in 1843 in Farmington, Connecticut, focused upon educating young women of the same elite class and preparing them for service to others. Like the institutions Bailey discusses, the school strove to replicate a home environment, complete with opportunities for 'parlour' performances where the young girls could practice their pleasing skills.<sup>3</sup>

While there seems to have been less emphasis on personal beauty as an essential attribute in Northern culture, many of the social strictures Bailey identifies as Southern thrived throughout the nineteenth century in the North as well. One need only think of the restrictions placed upon Amy Beach, and her complete subservience to her husband's wish and broader societal expectations that she curtail her public performing career, to appreciate the widespread understanding of a woman's domain. Given Bailey's focus on names as identifying markers what are we to make of 'Mrs. H.H.A. Beach?' Does such a

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<sup>3</sup> The current webpage for Miss [Sarah] Porter's School includes the following statement regarding its historical mission: 'Sarah Porter emphasized traditional values and the importance of educating women. She recognized the value and importance of service to others, and believed that women must be prepared to shape the future by educating their own families and running their households. As such, she made certain that the school was welcoming and homelike'. See <http://www.porters.org/podium/default.aspx?t=105906>. Accessed 23/5/2011.

name obscure her identity? Did she abdicate ownership of her own works when she used this name? Again, such questions are not meant to undermine Bailey's central thesis, but to question Southern exceptionalism. Her findings have even greater resonance than the present study indicates. Women were confined, musically and otherwise, on both sides of the MasonDixon line.

As with every book, there are a few problems. Bailey summarizes an 1862 diary entry by Sarah Ida Fowler Morgan claiming that Morgan 'writes that she has low self-esteem' (p. 15), which seems an unfortunate application of contemporary psycho-talk to a nineteenth-century situation. Deep within a discussion of female college graduation recitals, which are presented as ideal forums for displaying what girls have learned, Bailey includes a programme whose sixth number is a song 'I'll Be No Submissive Wife' (p. 77); a reader cannot help but wonder how this piece slipped in, or whether Southern culture wasn't quite as restrictive or monochromatic as has been portrayed.

A more vexing problem is the repetition of information, as that regarding 'Isabella Hannah Hunt McGhee, known familiarly as "Belle"', which might be forgiven as the similar lines appear on pages 10 and 97, although this reader recalled the prose. The discussion that while playing piano 'young women were not to raise their arms about the waist' hardly needs repeating within five pages (see pages 102 and 107). Similarly, information on Marie Petit, 'a professional musician from Belgium', is repeated almost verbatim on pages 71 and 111. All authors working on projects over a period of years run the risk of revisiting information and prose, and so it falls to editors to save us from ourselves.

A final issue has to do with the book's subtitle, which promises a study that takes readers 'from accomplished lady to Confederate composer'. Bailey spends the majority of the book providing insights into the training and cultivation of the accomplished lady, but only gets to the Confederate composer on page 136 of a 187-page book. I wanted another chapter that discussed what became of this daring woman once the war was over. I craved some kind of summary that placed Bailey's findings within a larger context, both temporal and geographic.

Claiming authorship of a musical piece may very well have been anathema to the rarefied group of Southern 'elite ladies' for whom acknowledging achievements of any kind signalled unseemly aspirations, poor judgment, and a lack of taste, as it was in the North as well. Nineteenth-century women across the nation had limited options for public creative expression. But the war changed that for many women in the South, as wars historically change the roles of women everywhere. The conflict that claimed over 250,000 Confederate lives created opportunities for the women left behind to demonstrate their commitment to something of greater consequence than individual glory. Many elite women used their compositional skills to bolster the Southern cause and contribute to what they envisioned would be the culture of a new Confederacy of Southern States. For a period of a few years, music composition provided a group of Southern daughters with the opportunity to insist upon themselves, to shape their nation, and to enact 'the divinely-appointed goal – womanly usefulness' (p. 166) – on a new level and in full view of the public. And their sisters up north, no doubt, applauded those efforts.

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