

American ethnic musics from ethnomusicological or cultural studies perspectives extensive material for thought-provoking discussions of musical stereotypes and their social and historical impact. Furthermore, this book provides a foundation for future studies of Indianism in music, including the roles that Native artists have played in either overturning the stereotypes or further manipulating them in popular, film, and art music.

Victoria Lindsay Levine



Journal of the Society for American Music (2010) Volume 4, Number 4, pp. 527–529.
© The Society for American Music 2010 doi:10.1017/S1752196310000441

Votaries of Apollo: The St. Cecilia Society and the Patronage of Concert Music in Charleston, South Carolina, 1766–1820. By Nicholas Michael Butler. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.

Oscar Sonneck would be elated to read Nicholas Butler's comprehensive study of the St. Cecilia Society and its place in the life of the residents of South Carolina between 1766 and 1820. Because all of its corporate property and records were lost during the Civil War, this organization has never been fully recognized for its importance, except more recently as a purely social group that sponsors elite balls. Butler has scoured local archives, scattered newspaper issues, and tax and property records, and has followed myriad other passageways to coax out a brilliant history of the Society, its founders, the musicians who performed in Charleston, the venues, and the music.

Although Sonneck states that the earliest public concert in the colonies occurred in Boston in December 1731, he decries the fact that New England has been "unduly overestimated" at the expense of the southern colonies.¹ A mere three months later, in mid-April 1732, a concert was held in Charleston as a benefit for a local musician. Several concerts followed, and in July another benefit was held, featuring vocal and instrumental music. As we know from theater histories, benefits are usually held at the end of a season of public appearances, when the individual has earned the support and adulation of the public. Thus, Charleston might possibly claim the rights to the first concert if the *South Carolina Gazette* had been publishing a year earlier, rather than starting up in January 1732. The fairly well-documented subsequent history of Charleston's support and participation in theater, dance, and concert life was the fertile ground on which the St. Cecilia Society came into being.

The organization of this book is chronological by broad topic, the easiest way to understand the complex picture that the author has drawn. On each topic, Butler presents a vast amount of detail and gives comparative information to

¹ O. G. Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life in America (1731–1800)* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907), 10.

pull those details into focus. Although organizing a concert series might seem a fairly simple activity, the 258 pages of this narrative demonstrate the complexity involved. *Votaries of Apollo* is divided into the following chapters: Economic and Cultural Background, British Subscription Concerts and the Meaning of St. Cecilia, Rise and Fall of the Concerts, Management, Finances, Venues, Performers, Musical Content of the Concerts, and the End of an Era. Appendices include a calendar of St. Cecilia concerts, the rules of the Society (1733–1831), and a list of the known members (1766–1820). The final ninety-seven pages are filled with footnotes, an extensive bibliography, and an excellent index.

Butler begins his narrative with a detailed history of the founding of Charleston and the social and economic trends that led up to the “golden age” of the city’s prosperity, the 1760s. Because of its geographic isolation, Charleston needed something special to entice talented performers to come to South Carolina. In the North, a day’s journey could take a violinist from Philadelphia to Baltimore, where a new audience awaited his skills. Charleston was many days from other cultural centers; therefore a core of wealth and cultural refinement was necessary to attract needed performers. At that point, conditions were ripe for the elite of the area to create a private association that would set them apart from the lesser merchants and lower gentry. They had the leisure to cultivate musical performance, and by joining their efforts, they could attract better professional musicians to Charleston as performers and instructors. Patterning their society on similar British groups, they created the St. Cecilia Society, and for a half century, Charleston was the setting for many wonderful, albeit exclusive, concerts.

Naturally, Parnassus has its ups and downs, and Butler spares no one in his revelations of the interpersonal quarrels about payment of dues, fines for nonattendance, and arguments over who could and could not attend the concerts. The Society felt the need for a detailed set of rules in 1773, which echo those drawn up by colonial dancing assemblies. The music historian looks in vain for specific information in these rules about the repertoire or the performers, mostly finding management details and fines. Over the fifty-four years of the Society’s existence as a concert presenter, the various managers faced many challenges, both personal and institutional, which are traced here in great detail.

The venues played a large part in the activities of the Society and were a constant headache for the managers. Butler discusses the concert spaces of Charleston, locating and illustrating plats and ground plans of long-gone concert and assembly halls. In this effort he has corrected a number of inconsistencies and misunderstandings about the various spaces and their use.

In his discussion of the performers, the author divides the time span into the founding period (1766–92), when the Society was an association of amateur performers with professionals joining occasionally as they were available to fill out the band, and the later years (1793–1820), when the opening of the theater provided incentives for performers to stay longer in Charleston, and the concerts of the Society therefore became more professional.

Butler next tackles the “form and musical content of the concerts.” Lacking the support of extant concert programs, he presents an analysis of the British models that influenced local tastes. As Sonneck put it plainly, it would be “suicidal” for

local forces to introduce “any innovation not sanctioned by London society.”² With detailed supporting evidence, Butler demonstrates Sonneck’s point throughout this book. However, it was in this section that I missed Sonneck’s tidy layout of programs and lists of composers. The author presents his evidence in paragraph form, a challenge to the reader interested in the specifics of repertory.

The St. Cecilia Society appeared during the relatively peaceful and affluent times following the close of the French and Indian War. Although the waning of the Charleston theater in 1817 and the Panic of 1819 can be construed as the death knell of the Society, Butler’s analysis of the end of its concert era goes beyond these external events. As he has throughout this volume, the author seeks the personal, cultural, and social motivations behind the actions of the Society’s members. The founders sought to create their cultural identity by replicating elements of sophisticated English culture in an exclusive setting. Attendees came to be seen, spent the evening conversing and moving about the room while the music was playing, and conducted much interpersonal business, both social and commercial, during concert events.

By the turn of the century, such concerts had gradually acquired more reverence. Conversation was discouraged, and there was more intellectual engagement with the performance by the audience. The original founders were replaced by younger scions who found the dancing assemblies more to their liking. Gradually, support for the concert series dwindled. In the years after the American Revolution, the rise of democratic representation in politics disrupted the old traditions of social stratification. Opportunities in politics and business opened doors to individuals who would never have been admitted into the social circles of earlier times. Thus by 1820, changes in the cultural environment of Charleston rendered the purposes of the St. Cecilia Society obsolete.

This study of the rise and fall of the St. Cecilia Society goes beyond a mere recital of disparate scraps of evidence. It is a detailed exposition of the social and cultural forces in play as the colonial era came to an end and a new Republic, a new century, and the Romantic period began. Although this book is packed with information in long paragraphs and dense type, Butler sets a good example for other local historians by seeking the motivations behind the facts of music making and music appreciation. It is as much a history of the culture as a history of the music made in Charleston between 1766 and 1820.

Kate Van Winkle Keller

² *Ibid.*, 12.