Nineteenth-Century Music Review, 17(2020), pp 173 –178.

Digital Resource Review
American Vernacular Music Manuscripts, ca. 1730–1910: Digital Collections from the American Antiquarian Society and the Center for Popular Music

The *American Vernacular Music Manuscripts, ca. 1730–1910: Digital Collections from the American Antiquarian Society and the Center for Popular Music*[1] comprises American music commonplace books, in most cases compilations of single-line treble tunes made by aspiring young musicians working either from published anthologies of the day (or from acquaintances' own commonplace books). A majority of compilers whose identities are easy to establish were teenage boys or young men (of relatively prosperous families), generally players of the flute or violin or clarinet; there are a fair number of young-women's manuscripts also, usually for piano and/or voice. Although the title of the composite digital archive asserts a time span of nearly two centuries, a majority of the over-350 manuscripts were antebellum, clustered between 1805 and 1850. This was the heyday of the music commonplace book in the US just as in Europe (particularly in England and in German-speaking areas). Published collections of popular music for miscellaneous treble instruments were more available than previously, but they remained expensive, and press runs remained short. A given publication might be purchased by just one person in a circle of acquaintances, then lent out repeatedly. By the second half of the century, published compilations of vernacular instrumental music became much larger and dramatically more affordable: in the United States, we can think of the many massive collections of tunes for treble instruments issued by Elias Howe. As a direct result, the arduous penning of music commonplace books faded – although pianists and vocalists still gave us indications of personal repertoires through their assembling of sheet music items in binder's volumes.

This assemblage of over 350 manuscripts is an NEH-sponsored visual replication of the outstanding collections of music commonplace books held by the American Antiquarian Society and by Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Popular Music.[2] These manuscripts were recently and very carefully scanned for this project, and they are newly accessible through the project title, or through the sites of the Center for Popular Music, the American Antiquarian Society, or archive.org, where the images are housed. The manuscripts are of interest for the individual items they contain, for the way the items are grouped provide evidence of taste and of repertoire formation, and for the broad aesthetic or social issues they expose. Scholars of nineteenth-century art music may be interested in commonplace books for a variety of related reasons. The art music we love is the tip of the iceberg of musical life. These manuscripts represent personal visions of much more of the iceberg. From another angle: while printed collections of secular melodies tell us what businessmen thought a substantial number of customers would purchase,

[1] http://popmusic.mtsu.edu/ManuscriptMusic/.
[2] This reviewer wrote in support of the grant financing the project.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409818000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these commonplace books illustrate those potential customers' actual preferences. We can learn more about tunes' lifespans, about the shapes of interaction of music repertoires, and about the interactions of these repertoires in these individuals' lives.

Each manuscript is a partial musical biography of its owner(s): these are pieces the writers intended to learn. Why just partial? Religious tunes had their own life, in hymnals and in group performance; a few commonplace books have a substantial sacred component, but only a few (the AAS contribution is especially strong in such manuscripts). And parts of vernacular music life stayed almost completely in oral tradition, for example lullabies. But commonplace books do present impressive mosaics. A typical book includes a large measure of pop songs – with or without their texts – dances, marches, and perhaps some instructional material. The descriptor 'pop' has to be understood as encompassing considerable nuance. Many or most of these melodies came out of contemporary or recent stage performances and would fade away swiftly, making room for another crop of parallel evanescent items. Such tunes fit readily into common definitions of popular music as it flourishes today. But turnover was overall much slower back then, and, indeed, the percentage of items that were 'pop' in origin but that would persist for decades or longer either in oral tradition or as oft-republished 'old standards' was higher. Also, the pop sphere of that time dipped out of the modern commercial cliché by including among the dance tune component a number of fiddle tunes that were already in or were in the process of entering oral tradition, and, on the other end of the social-aesthetic spectrum, hit tunes from the art sphere.

The entry page of this collection of digitized manuscripts makes clear what the designers of the site believed would be its primary function: finding examples of given tunes.[3] Searching is by title. One may opt for a straightforward search ('Flowers of Edinburgh') or a more general keyword search (just 'Flowers' or just 'Edinburgh', which will bring up 'Flowers of Edinburgh' and other titles). Perils immediately become evident, the most maddening of which results from variant spellings, a problem not addressed in the mechanical search process. For instance, if one is looking for tunes with titles referencing given persons, some individuals' names are almost always spelled the same (Washington, Duke of York, Lafayette) and others not. The name of Baron von Steuben, the German military figure who was so important in the Revolutionary War, is spelled 'Stuben' more often than 'Steuben' in this collection of manuscripts, and there is no cross-referencing of obvious variant spellings or for any other reason. To find all examples of the familiar tune most commonly entitled 'Handel's Clarionet' in American published sources throughout the nineteenth century, one must also search 'Handel's Clarinet', 'Handels Clarionet', and 'Handles Clarionet'. The opening in the *Woburn Fife Book* (Fig. 1) includes these titles: 'Baron Stuben's March', 'Handel's Clarinet', and 'Durant's Hornpipe' ('Durang's Hornpipe', a well-known oral-tradition fiddle tune then and today) and two other tunes. My favourite variant spelling so far: 'Heaving the Lied' (*Music Manuscript Belonging to J. M. Merrow*, opening 26), an untexted version of 'Heaving the Lead', a seafaring song in an age when a safe return to port could not be taken for granted.

Apart from the stumbles regularly occasioned by adventures in orthography (and from the indexers' occasional questionable readings of handwriting), the act of searching yields a list of manuscripts containing the item sought, but does not give the page or opening number within the source. The searcher selects a manuscript, and is presented with its table of contents, then must scroll down to find the name of the item. Although this process has the advantage of showing the tune in its context, it does take

[3] http://popmusic.mtsu.edu/ManuscriptMusic/guidelines.aspx.

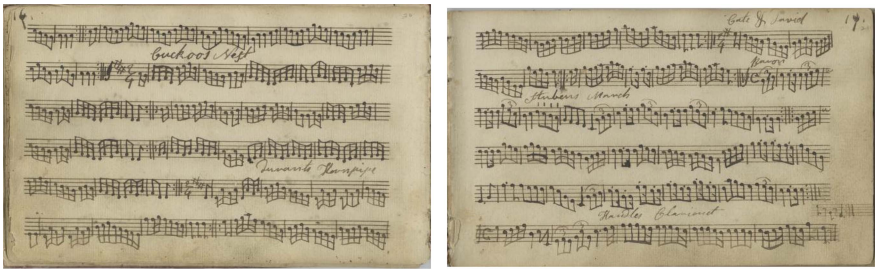

Figure 1 A typical opening in a music commonplace book, from the Woburn Fife Book

time. And of course, there are a fair number of tunes without titles in the manuscripts (search 'untitled' for access to this bounty of small mysteries; search 'music' for a list of the manuscripts). Last, a few tunes regularly went by several titles, the commonest example being 'President's March', which is the same melody as the song 'Hail Columbia'. Nearly every American music commonplace book of this era contains this march and/or a handful of others. This should not surprise us, since the era of music commonplace books in the young United States wasn't simply antebellum, it was self-consciously postbellum, too. In fact, marches constituted the first substantial assembly of tunes with titles referencing American topics, that is, names of military leaders or organizations or specific battles. However, young American musicians avidly gathered marches named for British generals, too: no national grudge prevented tunes like the ubiquitous 'The Duke of York's March' from being anthologized and performed here.

Many of these marches were written as independent pieces, but quite a few others came out of operas (such as a march from Bellini's *Norma*) or ballad operas ('March in Blue Beard') Or they might be from other multi-section pieces: the very common 'Slow March in the Battle of Prague' was indeed from Frantisek Kotzwara's piano extravaganza depicting that 1757 event. Like many marches excised from large works, this 'Slow March' had been popular first in London (where this Czech composer lived). Unsurprisingly, titles for this tune vary: 'March in the Battle of Prague' is the commonest, followed by 'Slow March in the Battle of Prague' (the 'slow march' was its own genre) and, simply, 'Prague'.

The popular songs making up the bulk of the contents of these commonplace books are generally about love, often portrayed in language that seems stilted today. Some are venerable – 'Over the Hills and Far Away', featured in *The Beggar's Opera*, remained well known and appears several times in these manuscripts – others are quite new. Some were retextings of older tunes. For instance, 'The Soldier's Return' is a new texting of the oral-tradition tune 'The Mill, the Mill, O'. The lyrics of this 'new' popular song tapped into the recurring themes of faithful love and of lovers parted by war (or water, since ship voyages were perilous). In this case, the returning soldier, poor in material possessions but rich in honour, gets the girl.

Figure 2 shows the first page of another fairly typical example of a young man's book. Tunes tend to be clumped by use in most of these manuscripts, though the overall order is governed by which tunes a youngster found to his liking in a given source publication. However, Mr. M.E. Eames deliberately organized his music commonplace book (dated 22 August 1859) by genre, leaving groups of pages blank in order to have room for this plan to work. The first sections are devoted to dances, in turn reels, strathspeys (just two), hornpipes, jigs, waltzes, polkas, a schottische, and several gallops. Then he entered song melodies (lacking lyrics), quadrilles, variation sets, and a handful of duets in various genres. Every opening has its own

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409818000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interest in terms of both individual pieces and broader issues. This first page contains four reels. The 'Opera Reel' seems to be American, but the other three are venerable Scottish ones, each printed numerous times during the late eighteenth century, all still in regular circulation in Eames's time. This illustrates that the fascination for things Scottish by art music composers of the early nineteenth century also extended to the popular sphere. Then, as a small sample of focusing more tightly, it's interesting to see that the ubiquitous and long-lived reel 'Money Musk', almost always in A major today, remains in its original key of G major here.

Quite a few nineteenth-century operas – and also a fair number of multi-movement instrumental works in certain genres – produced one or a few 'hit singles': striking and memorable and broadly accessible melodies that flourished independently of the parent works. These included the marches already mentioned as well as numerous opera arias and even more songs from ballad operas. Sometimes the composer was mentioned – when the megahit 'Hear Me, Norma' was written out in commonplace books, Bellini's name was often attached – but more often not. One of the most frequently anthologized melodies drawn from an opera, 'Away with Melancholy', has the melody of 'Was klinget so herrlich' from *Die Zauberflöte*, but I haven't seen an example with Mozart's name mentioned. Many, many pieces repeatedly entered in these manuscripts started life in ballad operas. 'Duett in Rosina' is the first sung piece in William Shield's *Rosina* (1783), and the 'Favorite March in Blue Beard' was indeed a very popular excerpt from Michael Kelly's *Blue Beard* (1798). 'The Rose Tree', an old Scottish tune given new words and new life in Shield's 1783 ballad opera *The Poor Soldier*, was later beefed up rhythmically to become 'Old Zip Coon', which in turn furnished the melody for 'Turkey in the Straw'.

In another case of a skilled composer of art music producing a pop hit, Jan Ladislav Dussek, a Czech piano virtuoso residing in London during the years 1789–99, wrote 'In the Dead of the Night' (c. 1795). Swiss composer Hans Georg Nägeli penned the even more widely distributed 'Life Let Us Cherish' in 1795, but neither composer's name is regularly associated with these songs in commonplace

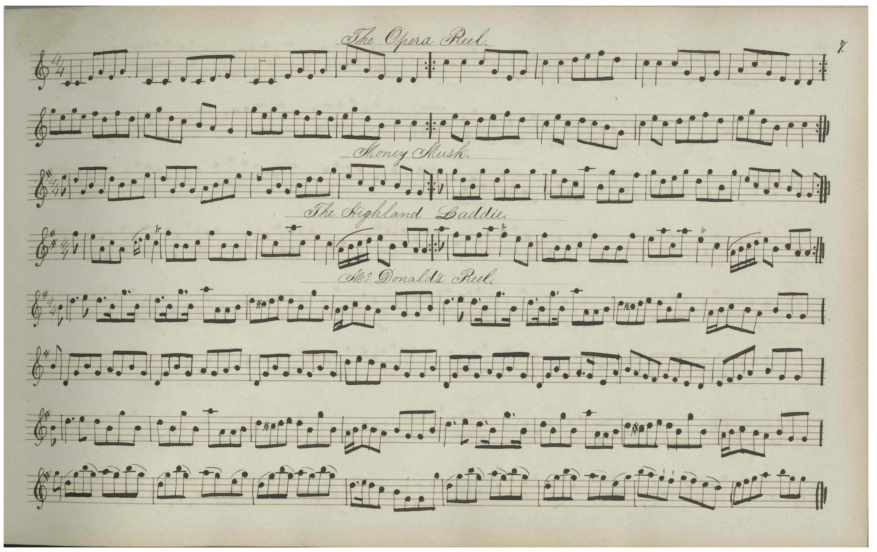

Figure 2 A page from the Eames manuscript

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409818000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

books. At the same time, it seems to have been desirable to occasionally cite a great composer in a tune title whether or not the tune was actually by that person: a handful of tunes bear the name 'Waltz by Beethoven'.

Looking further at the art edge of the dance repertoire in these books, I was struck by several aspects of entries of a waltz tune plucked from the first act of *Der Freischütz*. First, I was surprised (and I will admit, annoyed) at an indexing problem: It was inordinately difficult to locate the various versions of the waltz due to variant spellings of 'Freischütz', sometimes by the original writer of a manuscript and sometimes through errors introduced by the modern site indexers. 'Freyschutz' (as written by the nineteenth-century keeper of a commonplace book) became 'Freyschulz' in the hands of the indexer (*Manuscript Music Book Belonging to M.E. Eames*, opening 28). Similar perplexing decisions attended other versions of the tune; I found what I hope were all examples of this melody on the website by searching 'Der Waltz'. Second, it was interesting to see the differences among arrangements of the tune in terms of key, of barring (!), and even form: only one example of the tune contained more than two sections of Weber's original. Most examples had just the first two strains, two strains being the complement for most waltzes and other dances in these collections (excepting the much longer quadrilles); this was an example of recomposition-by-omission for the vernacular sphere. Most interestingly, it was not the Wolf Glen Scene of the opera, the part that we now focus on when teaching music history, that caught the attention of these young people learning music; it was this accessible, lovely waltz.

A few especially popular pieces exhibit great variety in how they were notated, probably revealing that some versions were copied from published compilations of tunes for treble instruments, but others from more visually elaborate settings in sheet music. This is true of some examples of 'Life Let Us Cherish' and 'Garland of Love'. The former is an especially good illustration of this range of settings. Like nearly all songs included in these manuscripts, it is usually presented as a simple two-strain melody, without attribution, words, tempo indications, articulations, or ornaments. However, it can also be found as a simple treble tune with a verse of text underlaid (*F.W. Crocker's Book*, opening 44), in a piano version with a verse of text (*Manuscript Book Belonging to Lucy A. Baltzell*, opening 38), as a theme and five moderately strenuous variations for piano (*The Celebrated Air of Pleyels*, opening 72), and as a theme and four quite taxing variations for flute, replete with articulation markings, and attributed not to the actual composer, Nägeli, but rather to 'Buxton', perhaps the arranger (*Flute Music for the Pierian Sodality*, opening 94, the Pierian Sodality being the ancestor of the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra). Similarly, 'Garland of Love' appears in one source as a fully-texted song with piano accompaniment, tempo marking, ornaments, articulation markings, and even instrumental introductory and closing sections (*Manuscript Music Book Belonging to Maria Jones Tallmadge*, opening 66). Then on the least serious end of the spectrum, the tune was buried among a batch of jigs (*Manuscript Book Belonging to M.E. Eames*, opening 20). The variety of uses and the range of elaborateness of versions of many other tunes are just as broad.

In sum, these manuscripts contain melodies visiting the pop sphere from their established homes in oral tradition, pop tunes already in or on the verge of entering oral tradition, hits from contemporary commercial popular music with their sheet music-derived extra trimmings, and excerpts from fairly recent stage works ranging from Romantic opera and opera buffa to ballad operas. In terms of a census of genres, this website provides easy access to numerous songs, marches, dances, occasional hymns, a handful of didactic exercises, and plenty of tunes that

served multiple functions. The overall picture is one of multiple genres and multiple functions captured in a compact, unified musical language.

This offering of hundreds of music commonplace books is a valuable addition to the raw material for the study of nineteenth-century American popular music that is readily available through digital means. Overlapping on the early side is *The National Tune Index* and its modern incarnation, *Early American Secular Music and Its European Sources, 1589–1839: An Index*.[4] This consists of many thousands of coded entries shaped to accommodate sorting by text (title and, for vocal numbers, first lines), and by music incipits (by scale degree, by stressed notes – the pitches at the beginning and the middle of the first measures – and by interval sequence). The sources mined include American imprints and manuscripts, British and a few other European music and social dance sources and sources offering evidence from British musical theatre. This is a finding aid: the researcher uses it to ascertain the physical location of sources containing pieces about which they are curious, then can ask the host institutions about the items or travel to see them. Overlapping in a different way is Andrew Kuntz' *The Fiddler's Companion* and its ongoing reworking as the *Traditional Tune Archive*.[5] This pair of websites offers detailed histories of thousands of tunes that have been fiddled (played largely in oral tradition on the physical violin), indexed by title(s). The titles are cross indexed, and the comments about each tune provide musical cross indexing. The parent website includes tunes presented in a letter notation, while the new but currently incomplete website includes some musical notation.

The website under review is quite young, and to the best of my knowledge has not yet spawned publications. I have employed it while researching a book about antebellum fiddling that I am now finishing, and I would not be surprised if other projects using the website are at a similar stage. There are hundreds of other music commonplace books that one wishes were on this site, particularly those on deposit at the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library, though innumerable smaller libraries also possess one or a few. However, this digital offering of the extensive collections of music commonplace books owned by the American Antiquarian Society and the Center for Popular Music is a substantial start, and an unprecedented convenience. While the indexing of the individual items in these manuscripts is in some ways problematic, I know well how time-consuming (and expensive in time and travel costs) it can be to simply locate and page through the physical manuscripts. Now we can sample the numerous tunes anthologized in American commonplace books and the issues raised by their presence and their notation from anywhere.

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doi:10.1017/S1479409818000472
First published online 30 January 2019

[4] *The National Tune Index*. http://users.javanet.com/u/n/univmuseds/nti-1.html and *Early American Secular Music and Its European Sources, 1589–1839: An Index*, www.cdss.org/elibrary/Easmes/Index.htm.

[5] *The Fiddler's Companion*, www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/FCfiles.html, and the *Traditional Tune Archive*, www.tunearch.org/wiki/TTA.