Battle Hymns, Poignant Parlor Tunes, and Militant Minstrelsy: Vocal Music in the Union and Confederacy

Often considered the “bloodiest conflict in the history of the United States,”¹ the Civil War of 1861-1865 was fought “between the United States and eleven Southern States that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.”² This brutal war, largely fueled by opposing economic concerns and “growing sectional friction over [the issue of] slavery”³ in the North and South, had serious social and economic repercussions that left the country reeling in the following decades. Although this painful era has left a crimson stain on the pages of American history, an “extensive repertoire”⁴ of beautiful vocal music emerged from the chaos, suffering, and massive loss of life. Both Union and Confederate troops sang on and off the battlefield, and numerous folk songs and ballads were composed and circulated throughout the war. This rich musical tradition has been, and continues to be, the focus of intense study, for it paints a realistic picture of daily life amidst the harsh realities of warfare. Additionally, the vocal music of this era helps prevent modern Americans from solely viewing the war through a “binaristic” lens of “abolition [vs.] proslavery, [or] North [vs.] South.”⁵ Rather, the music of the Civil War serves as a reminder that commonalities did, in fact, exist in an extremely divided country. Despite their political differences, songs of the Union and Confederacy were quite similar, and much of the repertoire was popular on both sides. True, both parties often altered the texts of such songs to suit their respective causes, but many of the most popular songs of the Civil War—songs centered on universal themes of love, loss, and nostalgia for one’s home—were unsullied by militaristic propaganda and

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
cherished in both the North and South. Thus, the songs of the Civil War highlight the complicated nature of human conflict; they reflect a people torn apart by ideology and hatred, but united by shared human experiences of pain, courage, love, and hope.

19th Century American Music & Its Influence on Civil War Repertoire

When studying Civil War songs, it is important to keep in mind that during the nineteenth century, there was much less of a distinction between popular music and art song than exists in the field of music today. In many ways, classical vocal music was synonymous with American folksong during this period. In fact, “many of the same [types of] songs occur[ed] in sheet music, in books and songsters, and in oral tradition.” Additionally, “more people, regardless of sex and social station, sang out loud in front of other people than is customary today, and more in wartime than in time of peace.” Today, songs are often performed in public by both professional and amateur musicians, and people listen to songs for entertainment purposes, but rarely does one find gatherings of “regular folk” singing out loud purely for enjoyment’s sake. However, in the nineteenth century, singing was a form of leisure, self-expression, and fellowship; it was a way to bring people together to achieve a common goal or reflect on shared experiences.

The importance of singing in everyday life is one of the reasons that such an extensive collection of Civil War songs exists. “What we, [in the twenty-first century], call ‘Civil War Songs’—patriotic and sentimental songs published during the war”—were simply the popular songs of the time—songs “mentioned in the diaries and letters of…soldiers,” and sung frequently by both black and white communities in the North and South. Some of these songs were classical “parlor songs,” most of which were written by European musicians.

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6 Moseley, “Irrepressible conflict,” 45.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 48.
composers in the 1830s-1850s. Others were American folksongs, taken from the minstrel shows of the 1840s-1850s, or from the “traditional songs of Afro-American slaves” and “Anglo-American immigrants.” This plethora of American popular song was often reworked, so that many different texts were associated with a given tune. During the Civil War, hundreds of new songs—composed to rouse support for Union and Confederate causes and reflect on the suffering experienced on both sides of the battlefield—were added to this vast antebellum repertoire.

With the advent of the war, popular demand for such music dramatically increased. The booming publishing industry of the time ensured that the ballads, parlor songs, and battle hymns of the Civil War were musical staples in the homes of every American. George F. Root, of the prominent Root and Cady publishing firm in Chicago, stated in 1864 that if one were to “stret[ch] [their music] out sheet by sheet,” it “would bridge the entire State of Illinois from Chicago to the Mississippi River.” “The growth of our business after the war commenced was something remarkable,” he later said. Sheet music advertisements, such as one found on the back of an 1864 tune, “Jenny Wade, the Heroine of Gettysburg,” which bore the words, “No disappointment is ever experienced in buying this song,” indicate that music publishers capitalized on the political and emotional

12 Ibid., 45-46.

13 Minstrelsy was a wildly popular form of nineteenth-century American musical entertainment that eventually spread to Europe, as well. Minstrel shows, which were performed well into the twentieth century, were variety shows, in which white performers in blackface would sing, dance, and perform comedic skits. Although minstrelsy has significantly influenced many modern American musical genres, such as American musical theater, it must be noted that the majority of the content in minstrel shows served to degrade, deride, and dehumanize African American people. Although the portrayal of black culture in the vocal music of the Civil War is not the focus of this paper, it is important to recognize that minstrel shows were incredibly successful in both the North and the South. Thus, Civil War music once again blurs the distinction between Union and Confederate ideologies, highlighting the fact that American history, particularly American musical history, is complex, emotionally charged, and, at times, quite painful.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 46-48.

18 Ibid.
Although the publishing business was much less developed in the South, whose “languishing agricultural economy” paled in comparison to the “flourishing industrial economy of the North,” music publishers in both regions went to great lengths to heavily advertise the latest war songs to the American people. In an effort to keep up with the greater output of published songs in the North, Confederate companies often republished Union tunes to suit Southern purposes, taking care to hide this fact from their consumers, of course. Nevertheless, song publication thrived during the antebellum and Civil War years.

**Warring Musical Ideologies**

As anyone with a basic understanding of the Civil War might expect, many of “the popular songs sung by the North and South during the war” often “reflected and reinforced perceptions [of regional distinctiveness], strengthening each side’s identity and firming its resolve against the other.” Patriotic songs of the North often portrayed both white Southerners and African Americans as “comic figures,” used “nasty,” derisive humor to portray the Confederate “rebels” as “cowards,” and lampooned black culture. Northern songs also championed lofty notions, such as the “[fight] to preserve the national union.” In contrast, Southern songs expressed the Confederacy’s desire to “[fight] for its rights, although specific rights were not [usually] mentioned.” Additionally, Confederate songs also highlighted the genteel and refined aspects of Southern life. Nineteenth-century Southerners typically prided themselves on maintaining a culture rooted in “chivalry and feudalism,” often claiming to have been descended from seventeenth-century English cavaliers and Norman knights. Thus,

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 45.
23 Ibid., 49-54.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 49.
many Southern songs celebrated the noble blood of its people and “disdain[ed] the impurity” of “Yankee blood”—often describing Northerners as “mercenary” and uncouth. The notions of gentility and fighting for freedom are often found in songs about “protecting helpless maidens,” in which Southern women are “closely identified with country and with flag.”

**“Dixie”: A Musical Blurring of Battle Lines**

While some of these one-sided, patriotic battle hymns were original works, written by notable composers in each camp, “many of the war-inspired patriotic and sentimental songs dwelled comfortably on either side, perhaps with a slight change of lyric.” A unique example of such a song is “Dixie,” which was composed in 1859. Now considered a “Confederate anthem” and cited as “the first use of the word, [Dixie], to denote ‘the southern United States,’” the original version of “Dixie” was written in New York City, by Daniel D. Emmett, for a theatrical troupe, known as Bryant’s Minstrels. In keeping with the conventions of minstrelsy, the song was “originally performed in blackface and published in ‘Negro dialect.’” The lyrics, as shown in the excerpt below, “offered a complex image of African-American longing for the plantation South”:

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I wish I was in de land ob cotton,
Old times dar am not forgotten,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.
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In Dixie Land whar I was born in,

Early on one frosty morning,

Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.

Den I wish I was in Dixie, Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray!

In Dixie land, I’ll took my stand to lib and die in Dixie;

Away, away, away down south in Dixie,

Away, away, away down south in Dixie.\(^{35}\)

The song, which was presumably sung by a “‘black’ speaker in the North who longs”\(^{36}\) to return home to the South, where he would have been a slave, blurs the lines between stereotypical Northern and Southern ideologies, and is certainly troubling to the modern listener, for obvious reasons. However, “Dixie,” which became an immediate hit when it debuted in New York,\(^ {37}\) is indicative of the negative portrayal of African Americans, slavery, and Southern culture as a whole, in the patriotic vocal music of the Union. Additionally, “Dixie,” like many Northern minstrel songs about Southern life, was probably written with the aim of “tak[ing] the Southerners down another peg” by having the singers perform in blackface.\(^ {38}\)

However, despite the apparent sentiments behind the creation of “Dixie” in the North, the Confederacy “took it up and claimed it for its own,” starting with its first Southern printing in New Orleans in late 1859.\(^ {39}\) “Multiple, competing ‘Dixies’ circulated before, during, and after the Civil War;” numerous versions circulated via oral tradition, and “at least thirty-nine versions…appeared in print between 1860 and 1866.”\(^ {40}\) Notable versions include the 1860 version by P.P. Werlein, who “replace[d]” the “‘Negro’ dialect” of the minstrel tune

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 606.

\(^{38}\) Moseley, “Irrepressible conflict,” 49-54.


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 607-608.
with “‘standard vernacular,” thus allowing white Southerners to wholeheartedly adopt the song,\(^{41}\) and the 1861 version by Hermann Arnold, who “change[d] the tempo…from a marching tune to a military quickstep in honor of Jefferson Davis’ inauguration as the President of the Confederate States of America.”\(^{42}\)

“Dixie” is also an example of the ongoing musical battle that occurred in tandem with the actual fighting of the war. During the war, the text was altered by both parties, in the hopes of rallying people for their respective causes. Arnold’s version of the song features “eight verses of red-blooded, patriotic bombast” and serves as a “nationalistic call to arms.”\(^{43}\) The text, as seen in the excerpt below, urged the Southern people to join the fight against the Union:

Southrons, hear your Country call you!
Up! Less worse than death befall you!
To arms! To arms! To arms! in Dixie!
Lo! All the beacon fires are lighted,
Let all hearts be now united!
To arms! To arms! To arms! In Dixie!\(^{44}\)

In contrast, a “Dixie for the Union,” was written by Frances J. Crosby and published in New York\(^{45}\) in the same year that Arnold’s arrangement became the “battle hymn of the Confederacy.”\(^{46}\) Perhaps in response to the nationalistic tendencies fueled by “Dixie” in the South, this Northern version went to great lengths to stress the supremacy of the Union—the music was even printed in color, with pictures of U.S. flags, and later

\[^{41}\] Ibid., 613.
\[^{42}\] Ibid., 606-607.
\[^{43}\] Ibid., 615-616.
\[^{44}\] Ibid.
\[^{45}\] Ibid., 617-618.
\[^{46}\] Ibid., 606-607.
publications of the text include allusions to George Washington, liberty, and sacrifice for one’s country. The music of this version stayed true to Emmett’s original melody, but the text, as seen in the excerpt below, was completely rewritten in order to highlight the Union’s military prowess and discredit the actions of the traitorous Confederacy:

On! Ye patriots to the battle,
Hear Fort Moultrie’s cannon rattle,
Then away, then away, then away to the fight!
Go meet those Southern Traitors with iron will,
And should your courage falter, boys,
Remember Bunker Hill,
Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
The stars and stripes forever!
Hurrah! Hurrah! Our Union shall not sever!

Interestingly, while the “Unionized” version was certainly popular, the Confederate version of “Dixie” was still enjoyed in the North. It is said to have been a personal favorite of President Lincoln, and the song was played at his inauguration, as well as the Union’s official celebration of General Robert E. Lee’s surrender.

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47 Ibid., 617-618.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 617-618.
51 Ibid., 606-607.
52 Ibid., 606-607, 604.
Musical Propaganda At Its Finest: The Union’s Committee Upon A National Hymn

The role of “Dixie” as a Confederate battle hymn also made the Union keenly aware of and “acutely embarrass[ed]” by its lack of one single “national anthem” to celebrate its cause. The Union was so disturbed by this discovery that, in 1861, The Committee Upon A National Hymn was created for the express purpose of selecting a song that would “stir the heart of every true American and…give a lyric expression to patriotic feeling.” Recognizing that nationalism “always seeks expression in verse and music,” the committee of prominent politicians, writers, critics, and artists began a short-lived search for a song of excellent musical quality that espoused patriotic sentiments and could be easily sung by the people. The committee essentially sought something between “Yankee Doodle,” which was considered simple, but “ludicrous,” and “The Star-Spangled Banner, which “though a noble and spirited air,” was considered too complicated to be performed by the masses and thus deemed “quite unfitted for popular singing.”

The committee asked for song submissions from “gentlemen of well-known taste, culture, and loyalty” throughout the Union, offering a five hundred-dollar prize for the best composition. The committee also planned to “submit[t]” the top contenders “to public criticism,” in order to determine which song would be most heartily taken up by the “Loyal States.” However, after studying and performing “nearly twelve hundred [submitted] manuscripts,” the committee dissolved on the grounds that “with comparatively few exceptions, the

53 Ibid., 620.
58 Ibid.
hymns sent in proved to be of interest only to their writers as rhymed expressions of personal feeling or fancy.”

Despite their fruitless attempts to select a Northern battle anthem, the Union still engaged in musical competition with the Confederacy. Both sides continued to produce vocal music that glorified their cause and discredited the opposition—sometimes with borrowed music and altered texts, and sometimes with completely original compositions. Specifically partisan songs included the popular Confederate tune, “The Virginian Marseillaise,” and the Union’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Songs that originated on one side, but were then rewritten and incorporated into the repertoire of the opposition, included the Southern tune, “Bonnie Blue Flag,” and the Northern song, “Battle Cry of Freedom.”

Nostalgia vs. Harsh Reality: Common Themes In Civil War Parlor Songs

Although the politically charged music of the Union and Confederacy highlighted the seemingly irremediable division of the nation during the Civil War years, numerous parlor songs of the time focused on the shared experiences of soldiers and civilians in both the North and the South. Some of these pieces, such as “Aura Lea,” “Annie Laurie,” and “Lorena,” were simply cherished love songs and folk tunes that allowed the country to escape the trials of the present and relive a much less painful antebellum past. Such songs were particularly comforting to the soldiers, who “passed much of [their] leisure time singing,” and mentioned many of these songs in their diaries and letters to friends and family. Some troops, such as those under Confederate

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64 “Aura Lee” was a particularly popular folk song that was arranged by many composers even after the nineteenth century. Elvis Presley later used the melody for his popular hit, “Love Me Tender.”


General J.E.B. Stuart, even organized folk tune performances for their own enjoyment, as well as for the entertainment of the communities through which they passed on their way to battle.\[^{67}\]

While the aforementioned songs served as reminders of the tranquility of life before the war, other Civil War folk songs were comic tunes that addressed everyday problems on the battlefield and satirized the notions of chivalry, honor, and nationalistic splendor that were often espoused by the musical propaganda that existed on both sides. For example, “Goober Peas” was a popular song among Southern troops, who were forced to live on peanuts, due to a severe food shortage in the Confederate army, and serious economic problems in the South, as a whole. The soldiers probably relieved their frustration with their meager diet through this sarcastic tune, whose jaunty rhythms and tongue-in-cheek text suggested that the life of a soldier was far from grand:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Sitting by the roadside on a summer’s day,} \\
\text{Chatting with my messmates, passing time away,} \\
\text{Lying in the shadows underneath the tree,} \\
\text{Goodness, how delicious, eating Goober peas.} \\
\text{Peas, peas, peas, peas, eating Goober peas.} \\
\text{Goodness, how delicious, eating Goober peas.}\end{align*}\[^{68}\]

Although songs like “Goober Peas” served to make light of difficult situations, some of the most popular Civil War parlor songs, such as “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” and “Weeping Sad and Lonely,”\[^{69}\] were more somber in nature. These wistful, yet candid ballads reflected upon the grim experiences of soldiers in the battlefield and the concerns of families on the home front, capitalizing on the heartache that was certainly felt on both sides. One of the most popular songs of this style was “Just Before the Battle, Mother,” a Union

\[^{67}\] Ibid.  
\[^{68}\] Ibid.  
\[^{69}\] Ibid.
parlor song by George F. Root, which expressed the thoughts of a soldier who is forced to come to terms with his own fate, far away from the comforts of home:

    Just before the battle, Mother,
    I am thinking most of you.
    While upon the field we’re watching,
    With the enemy in view.
    Comrades brave are ‘round me lying,
    Filled with thoughts of home and God,
    For well they know that on the morrow,
    Some will sleep beneath the sod.
    Farewell, Mother, you may never
    Press me to your heart again;
    But, oh, you’ll not forget me, Mother,
    If I’m numbered with the slain. 70

“Just Before The Battle, Mother,” is a quintessential example of the Civil War ballad, particularly because it is a “sentimental song,” centered on “faded dreams” and “hallowed visions of home.” 71 One of the hallmarks of nineteenth-century American ballad composition was the use of nostalgia to create a “sentimental mood” and convey “bittersweet emotions stimulated by the contemplation of something lost to the narrator.” 72 Like many other nostalgic Civil War songs, “Just Before The Battle, Mother” “juxtaposes an idealized past and an alien present.” 73 While the sweet, plaintive music is reminiscent of the warmth and love that the soldier has

70 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 146.
73 Ibid.,
left behind, the blunt, bitter text reminds the listener of the soldier’s bleak current situation—he may very well end up as another body “beneath the sod,”⁷⁴ lost and forgotten.

The song is also typical of Civil War ballads in that it “literally and figuratively…center[s] music on the home,” relating “womanhood and domesticity to the broader national experience.”⁷⁵ Many Civil War ballads romanticized the concept of one’s mother, using her not only as a symbol of the loving home to which each soldier hoped to return, but also as an emblem of peace, unity, and antebellum life. Additionally, while “Just Before The Battle, Mother,” originated in the Union, its text—like the texts of many Civil War ballads—is decidedly apolitical. The song could have, and probably did, exist with equal popularity on both sides, because the men in both the Union and Confederate armies could identify with the themes it addressed. Despite their political, regional, and socioeconomic differences, all soldiers understood what it meant to fear death, long to return home, and watch one’s comrades die before one’s eyes. Likewise, all families on the Southern and Northern home fronts felt the same anguish upon receiving news of a loved one who had been killed in action. In this way, ballads like “Just Before The Battle, Mother,” served as the most honest portrayal of wartime life—stripped of bombastic rhetoric and glorified nationalistic sentiments, these songs reflected a divided people who were united by their shared pain.

**Case Study: John Hill Hewitt’s Reflections on the Civil War**

A discussion of the most heart wrenching Civil War ballads—songs that underscore the common experiences of soldiers and civilians in the North and South—would not be complete without mentioning the works of John Hill Hewitt (1801-1890). A “dramatist, poet, historian, publisher, artist, essayist, songwriter, and composer,” Hewitt’s limitless creativity, talent, prolificacy, and passion earned him the title of “Bard of the Confederacy.”⁷⁶ His works include over “300 songs, at least eight musical stage works, over 40 plays, two

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published volumes of poetry, hundreds of short poems, and three complete works of fiction,” and, in addition to writing and composing, he also taught, edited newspapers, managed theaters, and founded academies. Hewitt is also considered to have been “the most popular [American] songwriter before Stephen Foster.”

A Northerner by birth, Hewitt grew increasingly enamored with the charm of Southern life in his early adulthood, and not only took up residence in several major southern towns, including Augusta, Savannah, Norfolk, Columbia, and Richmond, but also became an avid supporter of the Confederacy. Despite a failed attempt to join the Southern army, Hewitt’s “uncommon talent [for] gauging…the popular tastes of the day and mirroring those tastes in his music” allowed him to champion the Confederate cause from an artistic angle. Some of his larger, more politically driven musical dramas include *The Scouts, or The Plains of Manassas* (1861) and *King Linkum the First* (1863). The *Scouts* was a particularly significant work, as it was the “first play about the war, celebrating the first major Southern victory.” *King Linkum* was also an important contribution to American musical drama, but for an entirely different reason—it was a “hard-core political burlesque” that ultimately “reveale[d] the extremes to which Southern propaganda went during the [Civil War].” Hewitt portrayed President Lincoln as a “henpecked, bungling drunk,” and used the production to mock Union soldiers and discredit abolitionist efforts. Hewitt also published several war songs, such as “The

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77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 31-32, 56.

80 Ibid., 62.

81 Ibid., 56.

82 Ibid., 62.

83 Ibid.
However, in addition to his numerous works of musical propaganda, Hewitt was also a respected composer of ballads, which were popular among both Southern and Northern audiences. These songs, like other nostalgic ballads of the time, were centered on the common themes of heartache, death, and hope for an end to suffering—themes that made these songs musical staples in Union and Confederate homes. In fact, Hewitt’s first compositional success was an antebellum ballad of this style, entitled “The Minstrel’s Return’d from War,” which was published in 1825. This song remained popular during the Civil War years, probably because it did not feature any stinging, slanted political rhetoric. Instead, “The Minstrel’s Return’d from War” told the bittersweet story of a musician who leaves behind a lover to take his place on the battlefield, conveying a message that must have been keenly felt throughout the country, during a time when families were torn apart by the call to arms.

Two of Hewitt’s most popular ballads that were published during the course of the fighting include his setting of the stirring poem, “All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight,” which was published in 1863, and “Somebody’s Darling,” a moving song, with lyrics by Marie Ravenel de La Coste, which was published in 1864. “All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight,” a bitter ballad that addresses the abrupt disruption of tranquility by death and destruction, was “arguably, the best song to come out of the war,” and Hewitt’s careful musical craftsmanship of the piece “delivere[d] far more effectively than strident protests...the mordant observation that war often brings inglorious, solitary, and unnoticed death.”

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84 Ibid., & John Hill Hewitt, Papers, Manuscript Collection No. 31, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
86 Ibid., 38-39.
87 Ibid., 64-65.
88 Ibid., 64.
haunting song about the loss of innocence and youth on the battlefield, was so popular in both the Union and Confederacy that publishers “had difficulty keeping up with the demand [for the piece].”

Perhaps the song resonated so powerfully with the American people because it was written at a time when “the mounting casualties of war [had begun] to touch every household.”

Many of Hewitt’s unpublished and less-frequently circulated works also espouse similar themes to those addressed in “All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight” and “Somebody’s Darling.” In fact, an analysis of Hewitt’s sketchbooks, scrapbooks, and unpublished manuscripts, found in Emory University’s Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, suggests that Hewitt was attuned to the emotional turmoil of the time, and used his music to help Americans on both sides express their feelings and cope with their sorrow.

Hewitt was a “tireless chronicler of his time,” and his handmade scrapbooks contain thousands of newspaper clippings and pictures from the Civil War, plastered onto every inch of each page. Interspersed with humorous editorial pieces on the activities of elite Southern social circles, advertisements for Hewitt’s own concerts, and other frivolous literary tidbits, are draft announcements, lists of Confederate generals, articles describing the movement of Southern troops, updates on the outcomes of significant battles, and even an announcement of the capture of General Robert E. Lee by the Union. In his large scrawls, Hewitt deliberately penned the word, “History,” on nearly every newspaper clipping from 1861-1865, so that entire pages of his scrapbooks are covered with ink-stained reminders of issues that were important to Hewitt, and to all Americans during the terrible years of the Civil War. Hewitt’s own reactions to the increasing loss of life as the war progressed are seen in his own poems and reflections, which are often pasted next to the newspaper clippings. Many of these
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Poems are centered on themes of death, and several are even dated several decades after the war had ended, indicating that the effects of the war had long-lasting implications for the emotional state of the American people.⁹⁵

Hewitt’s careful chronicling of the Civil War and his own personal reactions to the events of his time allowed him to, at least subconsciously, empathize with people on both sides of the war. His artistic empathy is seen in several of his lesser-known ballads, including “The Bard’s Last Song,” “I’m Thinking of My Mother,” and “Let Me Kiss My Mother’s Picture.”⁹⁶ “The Bard’s Last Song” is an unpublished piece found in one of Hewitt’s sketchbooks, without any listed date. Although the writing is faded, tiny, and nearly impossible to read, one can conclude, after careful study, that the piece is about an old man who makes one final attempt to sing of a long-forgotten war in which he fought during his youth. An excerpt of some of the discernible text is as follows:

Hark of my youthful days!

Forever we part…old age now chills my veins…

Gone is the fire of youth, my hand trembles now.

Vainly I try to sing the songs of the past;

Tears fill my feeble eyes, the strain is the last…

War raged over all the land, and struck down the strong;

Firmly…I gathered the brave,

Singing a Requiem over their grave…⁹⁷

One wonders whether this piece, of which only one copy seems to have survived, contains a reflection of Hewitt’s own personal views, buried in the fiery and stirring militaristic text. Although it is impossible to

⁹⁵ Ibid.  
⁹⁶ Ibid.  
⁹⁷ Ibid.
know for certain, it is reasonable to imagine that Hewitt, who lived for another three decades after the Civil War, could have used this piece as a creative reflection upon his own adult life, which was largely shaped by the Civil War. If this interpretation is correct, then “The Bard’s Last Song,” taken together with Hewitt’s detailed historical annals and personal reflections, suggests that the motives behind Hewitt’s ballads are genuine—they not only underscore the prevailing sentiments of the American people as a whole, but also represent Hewitt’s own feelings, as he grappled with the brutality of warfare.

In contrast, the other two pieces, “I’m Thinking Of My Mother” and “Let Me Kiss My Mother’s Picture,” are more directly in line with the typical ballads of the time, as both are centered on death and a longing for maternal “tenderness.”

“I’m Thinking Of My Mother,” which is believed to have been composed and circulated sometime during the Civil War, is a moving song about a dying soldier, whose last thoughts are of his mother’s love:

On my bed of straw I pine,
Nurs’d by strangers—wounded, dying;
Where’s the hand that fann’d my brow,
Cool draughts to my lips applying?
Where’s the form that knea’lt in prayer,
Angel pleadings—like none other?
Come and soothe my aching brow,
Come my mother, gentle mother?
Oh I’m thinking of my mother,
My lov’d, my cherish’d mother.

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“Let Me Kiss My Mother’s Picture,” which was probably published around 1870, and therefore serves as a post-war reflection, is centered on a similar theme, as seen in the excerpt below:

Let me kiss my mother’s picture
Ere my lips are cold in death;
Let me gaze upon her features—
Bless her with my latest breath.
Mother, oh how much I love you!
Oh how dearly love you now!
Do not chide me for my folly,
Death’s cold hand is on my brow.100

These poignant songs not only expressed the very real suffering of soldiers in both the Union and Confederacy, but also used the female as a “symbol of home, stability, and enduring love during an era when families lost men in battle and women often died young as well.”101 What sets these two pieces, as well as other ballads by Hewitt, apart from the works of Civil War composers, who wrote songs centered on similar themes? Perhaps it is the particularly “precious, mannered, and genteel style”102 of Hewitt’s music, which adds to the honesty of the text and makes his songs more relatable to the general human experience. Although these two songs did not gain as much prominence as “Somebody’s Darling” or “All Quiet Along The Potomac Tonight,” it would not be a stretch to imagine that people in both the North and South would have felt a powerful connection to both pieces. Perhaps Hewitt’s deep involvement in and understanding of the Civil War allowed him to create music that more fully voiced the thoughts and concerns in every American heart.

100 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 31-32.
Conclusions

The vocal music of the Civil War, much like the Civil War itself, cannot solely be analyzed by categorical means, as doing so either romanticizes the experiences of soldiers and their families on both sides of the battlefield, or polarizes the Union and Confederacy to such an extent that no similarities can be found between the two. Rather, all Civil War repertoire must be analyzed as a whole, in order to obtain a more authentic understanding of life during this crucial time in American history. Although musical propaganda did exist, and was used to aggravate existing tensions in two distinct regions of the country, Union and Confederate soldiers and civilians often sang the same songs—occasionally changing the lyrics to suit their political agendas, but more often enjoying the music regardless of the divisive rhetoric it featured. Additionally, numerous apolitical songs were also sung to pass the time on the road to the battlefield, reflect upon happier times, and express feelings of pain and longing when words alone were not powerful enough to do so. Civil War composers certainly exploited both the nationalistic and emotional aspects of the war, but the personal documents of prominent artists like John Hill Hewitt suggest that many Civil War songs were inspired by the genuine feelings of composers who were keenly aware of and troubled by the violence and hardship that they had witnessed. Thus, in the end, Civil War songs reflect what it means to be human—to be a part of a complex web of emotions and experiences, in which hate and love, peace and violence, and courage and fear exist simultaneously. Civil War songs represent the fact that, despite all the chaos that surrounds them, people continue to live—they continue to sing.

Bibliography:


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