

**AN ADDRESS BY  
PROFESSOR MICHAEL BROYLES**

**on the Occasion of a**

**SESQUICENTENNIAL  
RE-ENACTMENT**

**of the**

**FIRST PROFESSIONAL  
CHAMBER MUSIC  
CONCERT IN BOSTON**



**Originally Presented by the  
HARVARD MUSICAL  
ASSOCIATION  
in 1845**



An Address to  
The Harvard Musical Association  
By Professor Michael Broyles  
October 23, 1995

I am especially honored to be here tonight particularly since a lecture in conjunction with the annual meeting is one of the oldest traditions of the HARVARD MUSICAL ASSOCIATION. They were begun in 1840, some four to five years before the first chamber music concerts, and some of the earliest speakers were George Cleveland, William W. Story, and as you might guess John S. Dwight. So I feel that I am following in a very hallowed tradition. You will be happy to know, however, that there will be one major difference between my talk tonight and these earlier lectures. Mine will be much briefer.

Tonight I would like to sketch briefly what the musical world was like in America when these concerts were first conceived. Only then does it become apparent what a bold and innovative event the first chamber music concerts were. If we were to be plopped down in the Boston of the 1840s via the Enterprise Transporter or Dorothy's Tornado or whatever means, we would, in terms of music, think we had arrived at some alien planet. First of all the idea of classical as opposed to other kinds of music was essentially unformed. Concerts were quite different. You would not attend a chamber music concert or a symphony concert or a piano recital. Instead you would hear a pot-pourri of the most disparate elements.

I have here a program of a concert that was given in Boston in the 1830s. This was called "Grand Secular Concert," and it is divided into two parts. I will read some of the featured works: [reads from old program] Part One begins with A Grand Overture by Auber for full orchestra...then a duet, "Yes, He is Free" Miss Alexander and Mr. Webb, accompanied at the pianoforte by Mr. Webb...This was followed by a solo on the

pianoforte entitled, "Il Divertimento di Londra" or The Grand Argyll March and Harmonic Waltz...This was followed by a solo on the clarinet of "The Copenhagen Waltz with variations" ...after that we have something listed only as solo flute, Mr. Downe...after that we had something listed only as divertimento, guitar, Mr. Coupa...followed by a song, "Be Silent Now Ye Merry Strains" with orchestral accompaniment, sung by Miss Alexander...the first part closed with a piece for the pianoforte called, "Waltz of the Boston Graces," composed and performed by the Log House Composer. I won't go through all of the second half, but I thought two things might be interesting: it began with an Overture to Freishütz by Weber...followed by more piano variations...and then we had the first item on the program that we might identify as a chamber music piece, Quintetto for two violins, two tenors, and cello by Krommer...however, that was followed by the song "The Soldier Tired," Miss Alexander again...and then my favorite piece from this, a song, "Dean Swift's Recipe to Roast Mutton" dedicated to all the cooks in the country, but most respectfully to Dean Swift, esquire...and then we have a comic glee in the German language...followed by something entitled "Finale."

A second difference in the musical life in antebellum Boston was who participated in musical activities. It was not the upper class or the elite if I may use those terms. Music traditionally was a middle-class experience in America. It tended to be either church music or dance music. And the two were not always separated. The most important musical activity, which was an outgrowth of the Puritan church music tradition, was the singing school. Singing schools were originally formed at the instigation of Puritan ministers to reform church music. But the clergy quickly lost control of them. By the late eighteenth century the singing schools were anything but religious institutions. First, they met as often in a tavern as a church. And of course if you met in a tavern, you did not want to insult your host so you certainly partook of the resources. And third, usually after the singing school the tavern owner or someone else would pull a fiddle down from the wall, start playing, and everyone would dance. It is not hard to figure out who attended the singing school. At that time puritan traditions were still very strong, and opportunities for young people to socialize were few and far between. It's thus no surprise that singing schools were attended mostly by single young men and women, and as you might guess not necessarily for religious purposes.

Mention of the fiddle brings up another point, having to do with musical instru-

ments themselves. Musical instruments at that time were highly gendered. Men played certain instruments, and women played certain instruments and there was practically no mixing. Women mostly played keyboard instruments, the piano. The piano in the parlor by 1850 was becoming more and more common as more and more families could afford pianos. Men played wind instruments, women did not. What was the favorite instrument for a man, if he was a gentleman? If he played anything at all, and keep in mind the idea of a gentleman participating in music was not universally accepted, it would have been (believe it or not) the flute. Maybe the clarinet, that was OK, but not much else. Other instruments like the trumpet and oboe, they were a little tougher to play, and a true gentleman did not have that much time to practice; or at least it would be unseemly if he let on that he did. Look at a band today and most of the flutists are female. Why were the flute and the clarinet so male at the time? Because the most prominent instrumental ensemble in America up to about 1840 or 50 was not the symphony orchestra, was not chamber music but the military band. Wind instruments were associated with the military band. Church music, dance music, and military music; that was what you would have been familiar with had you lived in antebellum Boston.

What about violins? Today a violin is held up as the instrument of respectability, the violin family being the very symbol of high culture. It is the very backbone of tonight's concert. No one of any respect played the violin in the early nineteenth century. I think that is the most striking difference between then and now. The violin was considered not so much less a violin than a fiddle. Prior to the 1840s it was associated with popular dance and looked upon with disdain. In a review of the concerts of the 1839-40 season, Dwight referred to the "dancing master's fiddle," and connected it with the minstrel song Jim Crow, Harrison's Melodies, and waltzes. In the proposal to form the Harvard Musical Association in 1837, Dwight distinguished those 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." The German visitor to the United States, Francis Grund, observed that he did not hear a single amateur performer on the violin in the entire ten years he was in the states. Most of that time, he lived in Boston.

The best examples of this attitude about the violin come from HARVARD itself. In 1808 a group of undergraduates formed the PIERIAN SODALITY, the parent society of the HMA. They organized not for any sort of high-class music but simply to have fun. All of their records exist and the secretaries were most loquacious in writing their min-

utes. When you read them you discover that their main raison d'être was to serenade young ladies late at night, which being college students wouldn't surprise any of us too much. Being selected by the PIERIAN SODALITY was considered an honor. And if you look at the membership it was mostly flutists and a few other instruments. It was clearly not violins. The minutes mention briefly a couple of undergraduate violinists. 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. We don't know what happened to the cellist but the Pierians persuaded the violinist to set his instrument aside and take up the flute. He was lucky. Earlier, in 1837, the organization "Voted that a nondescript freshman, who was heard scraping a fiddle be neglected."

The prevailing attitude about the violin changed totally in the 1840s. Musical journals such as the *Music Magazine*, and the *Musical Cabinet* emphasized the importance of string instruments, both as solo instruments and in ensembles. Most important, however, was the flood of concerts featuring string instruments. In the 1840s a number of violin virtuosi such as Ole Bull and Vieuxtemps came to America and demonstrated to Americans that the violin could be more than a lowdown hoe-down instrument. Prior to that time most Americans had no idea what true violin playing was. The style and ability of these foreign performers was unprecedented, and for many it was a revelation. Only then did perception of the instrument change. The concentration of European violin virtuosi in America in the critical years between 1840 and 1843 probably did more to establish the viability of a musical style based on string instruments than any other single development. And with it the notion of a high musical culture began to grow.

Interest in the string quartet as a chamber ensemble closely paralleled the emergence of this idealistic attitude toward instrumental music. Theodore Hach, a German émigré who started the *Musical Magazine*, began lobbying as early as 1839 for the inauguration of string quartet concerts in Boston. Hach called the string quartet "the most perfect instrumental music that can be imagined," and observed that the most eminent recent composers had "thrown their genius" into the genre. Hach also argued that the string quartet was a fashionable genre, at least in continental Europe.

Then Dwight took up the call. He pleaded that "a few of the most accomplished and refined musicians institute a series of cheap instrumental concerts." Dwight realized that such a project would not attract a large audience, at most two or three hundred, and the effort probably would not be profitable at first. More important than num-

bers, however, was the role that the audience for the concerts would play in the musical life of Boston. He believed that the concerts would eventually secure an audience that would form a nucleus of music lovers and supporters in Boston.

Dwight, by the way, was a much more cagey politician than most give him credit for, as the actual birth of the HARVARD MUSICAL ASSOCIATION demonstrates. In July, 1837 three alumni and former members of the PIERIAN SODALITY, John S. Dwight, Henry Gassett, and Henry Pickering, suggested to the Pierians that a “General Meeting of Past and Present Members of the Pierian Sodality” be held on graduation day, August 30. A committee was formed to prepare for the meeting. The committee was charged with determining the purpose of the new group. It worked independently of the Pierians as a whole, and on August 28, met with the immediate members and explained the objectives to be presented at the forthcoming general meeting. Dwight was the spokesman. He was the motivating force behind the idea and wrote the document that was ultimately presented. It was a very idealist document, presenting a serious vision of music that contrasted sharply with the fun loving approach of the Pierians. The undergraduates, however, had serious reservations about the general meeting, as the secretary's minutes confirms. Their chief concern: how on earth could they afford to properly outfit the refreshment room, with tuna and “...the very, very best wine.” Dwight was astute. He presented a petition with the signatures of fifteen honorary members pledging financial support for the expenses of the general meeting, e.g. refreshments—at the same time he explained his purposes. Needless to say his document met with a very favorable reception.

Such is history. For a time the fate of the HMA itself hinged on who bought wine and tuna.

Dwight also played a significant role in organizing the chamber music series, including accepting the responsibility for its success. He was the vice-president of the HARVARD MUSICAL ASSOCIATION at the time and President of the Board of Directors, the body that oversaw the day-to-day operations of the society, although management of the concerts, themselves, was placed in the hands of Bernard Roelker and Robert E. Apthorp. Tickets were priced at \$2.00 for the series, which sold out. Audience was limited to 150, the size of Chickering's room.

These concerts were not the first public string quartet performances in America. Probably the first attempt to establish a string quartet series occurred in 1843 in New

York. Uriah C. Hill presented a series of four string quartet concerts in March and April. But New York was not ready for them. The series was not well received, and neither Hill nor any other New York musician attempted similar chamber music programs until 1849. In contrast to Hill's short series, the HARVARD MUSICAL ASSOCIATION'S first series extended throughout the entire season, eight concerts being offered, and was successful enough to have been continued throughout the 1840s, although not in every year.

Dwight discussed the philosophy behind the concerts in two articles that he later wrote for the *Harbinger*. They were much more than entertainment. Dwight portrayed them as more a sacred assembly. Religious metaphors abounded. He called the string quartet the “quintessence of music” and “the purest and favorite form of musical communion.” In it music stands “in its naked beauty,” in which “no original sin or weakness can escape detection.” On hearing Mozart's quartets “you are in the celestial world, disembodied . . . The material world which separated him from the world of spirits, was the thinnest possible... .” He argued that for such presentations “the audience must be small and select, since the music is not on a scale sufficiently grand for great halls, nor must its sphere be disturbed by the presence of incongruous and un-sympathizing elements.”

In another article Dwight continued to speak in religious terms, referring to the efforts of the society toward “deepening, and purifying and informing of the general taste for music,” and of the “ministry of music,” through which will come “more and more believers.” Dwight described the small, select, audience of the first chamber music concerts as “those best qualified to enjoy it in Boston,” by which he meant those with proper taste and understanding.

By 1850 the HARVARD MUSICAL ASSOCIATION had, in three relatively successful seasons, not only established the string quartet as a viable public medium but also in approximately five years drastically altered the musical landscape of America. By 1850 the idea that instrumental music could stand as art with the best of literature and the visual arts was firmly in place. This was a radical notion at the time as I hope you can see from what I have sketched, and the concert that you will hear tonight played no small part in that geological upheaval.

SECOND CHAMBER CONCERT

OF THE

HARVARD

MUSICAL ASSOCIATION,

Tuesday Evening, November 26,

AT THE

MUSIC ROOM OF MR. J. CHICKERING, 334, WASHINGTON STREET.

PROGRAMME.

Part 1.

- 1.—QUARTETT IN G MINOR, OF . . . MOZART.  
Allegro.  
Adagio con moto.  
Rondo finale.
- 2.—DIVERTISSEMENT FOR FLUTE, OF . . . BOEHM.  
Theme by CARAFFA. . . . MR. WERNER.

Part 2.

- 1.—RONDO FOR PIANO FORTE OF ALOYS SCHMITT.  
with Quartett accompaniment. . . MR. LANGE.
- 2.—QUARTETT IN G OF . . . J. HAYDN.  
Allegro moderato.  
Allegretto.  
Menuetto and Trio.  
Finale Presto.

PERFORMANCE WILL COMMENCE AT 7 O'CLOCK.

⌈ Holders of Tickets are requested to show them to the person in attendance at the Door.