

Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Kristina Marie Guiguet. *The Ideal World of Mrs. Widder's Soirée Musicale: Social Identity and Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. Mercury Series, Cultural Studies Paper 77. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2004. xvi, 154 pp. ISBN 0-660-19344-2 (paperback)

Robin Elliott

Volume 24, Number 2, 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014585ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014585ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (print)

2291-2436 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Elliott, R. (2004). Review of [Kristina Marie Guiguet. *The Ideal World of Mrs. Widder's Soirée Musicale: Social Identity and Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. Mercury Series, Cultural Studies Paper 77. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2004. xvi, 154 pp. ISBN 0-660-19344-2 (paperback)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 24(2), 84–87. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014585ar>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes, 2005

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Kristina Marie Guiguet. *The Ideal World of Mrs. Widder's Soirée Musicale: Social Identity and Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. Mercury Series, Cultural Studies Paper 77. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2004. xvi, 154 pp. ISBN 0-660-19344-2 (paperback).

The phrase “Soirée Musicale” likely evokes for many readers associations of rigid social conventions, dilettantish amateurism, and outmoded customs. But in its heyday during the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the Soirée Musicale was a widespread and well loved feature of social and musical life throughout the English-speaking world. It provided an opportunity for professionals to display their prowess, hoping perhaps to gain new pupils thereby, and it afforded amateurs the chance to entertain their friends in a socially approved setting. Despite the ubiquity of this phenomenon, there exists almost no scholarship on it. This book, an engaging and well written interdisciplinary study that concentrates on a single such event that took place in Toronto, thus fills an important need and represents a pioneering attempt at understanding the various social, musical, economic, political, and cultural ramifications of the Soirée Musicale.

The book is an edited version of the author’s MA thesis in history, which in 2003 won Carleton University’s Medal for Outstanding Graduate Work at the master’s level. The author is a professional singer by training, with credits ranging from classical recitals to the original Canadian cast recording of *Phantom of the Opera*. She is also a tireless historical researcher. Drawing on scholarship in Canadian history, musicology, women’s history, cultural studies, and the local history of Toronto, Guiguet has pieced together a comprehensive account of the many shades of significance folded into a Soirée Musicale that took place on March 12th, 1844 at Lyndhurst, the residence of Frederick and Elizabeth Jane Widder (the house was on Front Street and later became the mother house of Loretto Abbey; the site is currently occupied by the offices of the *Globe and Mail*).

The program of this event was first brought to notice by Michael J. Rudman in an article on James Dodsley Humphreys, a professional musician who took part in, and may have organized, the Widders’ event.³ According to Guiguet, this event was “the earliest-known domestic Soirée Musicale in what is now Ontario” (p. xiii). She first defines the Soirée Musicale as “a posh, private party at which a formal concert, complete with printed programs, was performed” (p. xiv). By the end of the book, a more detailed description emerges: it was “a concentrated form of music making which placed a spotlight on each of its constituent features: amateur performance by ladies, amateur performance by gentlemen, professional performance by male musicians, the combination of unlike musical genres, and the domestic venue for a formal concert. Each feature existed elsewhere in the musical life of the period, but juxtaposed in the same program, they created the Soirée Musicale as a form” (p. 116).

³Michael J. Rudman, “James Dodsley Humphreys: A Look at Musical Life in Mid-Nineteenth Century Toronto,” *The York Pioneer* 96 (2001): 8-26.

Drawing on Christopher Small's concept of "musicking,"⁴ Guiguet observes near the start of her book that "Music itself is pure abstraction, but every time it is heard, the words of its songs, the visual aspect of its performance, and the imaginative worlds of those who participate in making and hearing it, imbue the sound of music itself with layers of social meaning" (p. 14). Elaborating upon this idea, Guiguet provides here a minute analysis not just of the program of musical selections heard in this Soirée Musicale, but also of the performers and their inter-relationships, of the musical and social aspirations of Elizabeth Jane Widder, and of the business goals of Frederick Widder and how these may have been furthered by the Soirée Musicale. Guiguet manages to extract a world of meaning from this particular grain of sand, and in doing so she throws light not just on the Widders and their social circles, but also on the Soirée Musicale phenomenon itself.

Frederick Widder was a key player in the Canada Company, which in 1844 was angling to wrest the Clergy Reserves away from public control in order to privatize them and entice immigrants to settle on them. This brought him into direct conflict with the formidable Bishop John Strachan, who wanted the Church of England to retain control of its share of the lands. Strachan attacked Widder and his plan in a series of open letters, and ultimately Widder's plan was turned down by the colonial powers. In Guiguet's analysis, the Soirée Musicale (and more generally the whirl of social activities that took place at Lyndhurst) was a carefully calculated gambit on Widder's part to further his business goals. Prominent members of both Family Compact and Reform families were invited to perform, perhaps for Widder to demonstrate that his plan transcended day-to-day political considerations and simply made sound business sense. As Guiguet points out, several of the musical selections emphasize "self-sacrificing civic duty by unelected leaders" (p. 42), such as Widder himself hoped to provide through the Canada Company.

The music heard on that March evening in Toronto included operatic selections (both solo and ensemble) sung in Italian and English as well as ballads, glees, and songs sung in English, and a single piano solo. The composers included Bellini, Bishop, Donizetti, Haydn, Mozart, Rossini, and Weber, but also now quite obscure figures such as Harriett Abrams, Leonhard von Call, Frederick Nicholls Crouch, and Stephen Glover. In the course of her research, Guiguet combed through 200 bound volumes of sheet music that were owned in Canada between 1835 and 1900, and in the end she managed to track down every selection that was performed on this occasion (some of it now only available in special collections abroad).⁵

⁴Guiguet cites the web page "Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space" (a lecture given at the University of Melbourne on 6 June 1995): <http://www.musekids.org/musicking.html>. Small has elaborated upon this lecture in his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing of Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

⁵"Dermot Astore," the selection by Crouch that was sung at the Widders' Soirée Musicale, is available in a fine digital version online from the National Library of Australia at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.mus-an9782821>.

The performers included Humphreys (the only professional musician), Mrs. Widder, John McCaul, Frederick Barron, Clara Boulton and Mary Jane Hagerman, among others. McCaul had recently stepped down as the principal of Upper Canada College to assume his new duties as the vice-president of King's College (University of Toronto) and was in effect its leader, given that the president, Strachan, was busy with his duties as the first Bishop of Toronto (McCaul became president when Strachan resigned in 1848). Barron had succeeded McCaul as the principal of UCC in 1843. Mary Jane Hagerman was the daughter of Christopher Alexander Hagerman, a prominent (and widely despised) Family Compact judge and politician; in 1847 she married John Beverley Robinson (Jr.), another Family Compact lawyer and politician. Clara Boulton was the daughter of Henry John Boulton (Jr.), a Reform politician, though son of a scion of the Family Compact. It was certainly an interesting mix of backgrounds and political persuasions—though all were united by the wielding of power and influence in the colonial society in which they lived.

The *mélange* of genres and the important matter of who performed what type of music are scrupulously studied by Guiguet to cast light on the subtle nuances of class, gender, and social standing that the program reveals. Seen in this light, the fact that Mr. Widder did not sing speaks volumes – as Guiguet notes, “Men who held, or could reasonably aspire to hold, real political or economic power in the upper middle class or aristocracy, did not devote time to developing a professional level of musical skill, nor did they perform music for others” (p. 51). McCaul and Barron were highly positioned educators in Toronto, but both sang in the *Soirée Musicale* and thus they were in a slightly different social position from the truly powerful figures such as Widder, who might attend such an event, or even host one, but could not or would not perform at it.

Issues of class and gender are brought into sharp focus in chapter five, which is devoted to a consideration of the career of Mary Jane Hagerman. As the daughter (and later wife) of a powerful and prominent politician, her role as a musician was circumscribed—she could perform as an amateur, but not a professional. She was a pupil of Humphreys and by all accounts had a lovely singing voice. Intriguingly, she did appear as a professional musician just once—in 1852 in Buffalo under an assumed name. After that she withdrew from the public stage for two years—likely because “social tolerance seems to have snapped” (p. 84) after the Buffalo concert—and thereafter she only sang in public for benefit concerts and other charitable events as a dignified “Lady Amateur”. As Guiguet notes, “amateur” could be “a code word for superior class status” (p. 101) but it could also imply “a performer who combined nearly professional proficiency with the pristine spiritual authenticity of ‘true womanhood’” (p. 69). It was women such as this who swelled the ranks of the burgeoning women’s musical club movement later in the nineteenth century; indeed, Mary Jane Hagerman’s daughter Augusta, who was also a talented singer, was one of the founders of the Women’s Musical Club of Toronto.

Guiguet demonstrates conclusively that the “ideal world” of the *Soirée Musical* in mid-nineteenth century Ontario was a complicated mix of music and politics, social hierarchy and gender control, professional and amateur performers, and much else besides. She has gone a long way here towards decoding the arcane mysteries of this ritualized behaviour. Anyone with an interest in the social, economic, political, or musical history of Ontario will find much to instruct and delight them in this book.

Robin Elliott

David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint*. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism, ed. Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcomb and Ruth Solie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi. 257 pp. Plates, musical examples, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-521-80346-2 (hard-cover).

Until recently, counterpoint has typically been the purview of music theorists. Regarded as a self-contained musical system, counterpoint and particularly Bach’s strict counterpoint, was long held to be an arcane intellectual pursuit with little or no extra-musical reference. Recent investigations into tonal allegory and symbolism have begun to explore the possibility of meaning in Bach’s learned compositions (Chafe, 1984; Marissen, 1995). Continuing this line of inquiry, David Yearsley asks what counterpoint might have meant to the musical intelligentsia of the early eighteenth century. Inspired by the belief “that Bach’s most complex music might be better understood by trying to grapple with it as one of his contemporaries might have done, that is, as someone for whom Bach’s contrapuntal insights retained a very real currency and vivid significance” (p. 237), Yearsley unravels a complex web of “highly malleable meanings from which it [counterpoint] has derived so much of its cultural potency” (p. 210). Counterpoint, Yearsley reveals, was anything but an abstract and recondite technique. As his six diverse chapters ably demonstrate, Bach’s counterpoint may be understood as religious, hermetic, political, and aesthetic discourse.

Yearsley presents a multi-faceted picture of Bach, revealing the composer’s humour, wit, and political acumen. Hardly a contribution to Bach’s hagiography, the volume rather exposes Bach to be a man of his times—a participant in his social, religious, and intellectual culture of which counterpoint is shown also to play a part. In fact, five out of the six chapters have as much to do with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century codes and practices as they do with Bach’s music. The first chapter, in particular, is an important consideration of music and seventeenth-century Lutheran eschatology. Counterpoint, with its appeals to higher intellectual faculties and by extension higher metaphysical planes, could serve as a reminder of the music of heaven and as a contemplation on death and dying—a musical extension of Lutheran *ars moriendi*. Although the practice of steadfastly contemplating death began to recede in the eighteenth century, Yearsley demonstrates how the contrapuntal chorale *Vor deinen Thron*