

**Vaillant, Derek. *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, viii-xiii + 401 pp., maps and illustrations**

**Michael Dennis**

Volume 34, numéro 1, fall 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016056ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016056ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Dennis, M. (2005). Compte rendu de [Vaillant, Derek. *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, viii-xiii + 401 pp., maps and illustrations]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 34(1), 120-121.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016056ar>

**Vaillant, Derek. *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873–1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, viii–xiii + 401 pp., maps and illustrations.**

Progressivism has long been considered a many-headed hydra, but according to Derek Vaillant, historians have inexplicably neglected its musical manifestations. By examining boisterous and multi-ethnic Chicago from the Gilded Age to the Depression, Vaillant tries to correct this oversight. In these years, the author contends, public musical performances were neither exercises in cultural uplift nor examples of commercial pandering. Instead, they were sites of conflict over civic participation and national identity. According to Vaillant, musical progressives imagined modern America “not as a society of isolated individuals, but as a web of interconnected lives and human needs” (p. 7), which the right music could cultivate and sustain.

But what was the right music? In the 1870s and 1880s, Chicago offered a musical cornucopia ranging from ethnic singing societies to “summer nights” concerts that drew literally thousands of Chicagoans to the Exposition Building for symphonies providing “relaxation [and] gentle uplift.” (p. 34) Chicagoans of German, Bohemian, and Czech extraction joined their Anglo-American counterparts in celebrating classical music in public surroundings that were communal, non-hierarchical, leisurely, and egalitarian. At the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, John Philip Sousa’s rousing military marches competed with gypsy band performances at a Hungarian café for the attention of pleasure-seekers on the Midway Yet public performances pitted purists, impresarios, and the cultured elite against audiences seeking lighter arrangements and more fun. While the German beer garden atmosphere was standard fare at Sunday afternoon “Turner Concerts,” its appearance at the stately Exposition Building disturbed elites by threatening the connection between culture and authority. Concerts in Lincoln Park and Garfield Park brought together Chicagoans from across the social and ethnic spectrum, with the notable exception of African Americans. There, they forged a “hybrid form of musical recreation...whose intentional uplift features would prove to be surprisingly amenable to the varied aesthetic and social needs of participants.” (p.69) In essence, Vaillant suggests that Chicago provided the crucible in which competing musical traditions eroded the high-brow/lowbrow distinctions of the Gilded Age. From this crucible, progressives forged a new musical compound that fused ethnic diversity and populist entertainment to the project of democratic citizenship. For progressives, the ‘right’ music would uplift, entertain, but also foster civic inclusiveness and social cohesion.

The progressive project was conspicuously evident at Jane Addams’ Hull House. Under Addams’ guiding hand, musical director Eleanor Smith used Sunday concerts and individual lessons to promote what Vaillant describes as a “new democratic cultural politics for civic music that would spread far beyond the confines of the immediate neighborhood.” (p. 95) Mirroring the park commissioners who bent to popular tastes

for Ragtime over classical, Addams, Smith, and choral director William L. Tomlins incorporated ethnic folk songs into a coterie of musical selections that “promoted individual and group development and civic enrichment.” (p.106) While the Hull House crowd never freed itself from paternalistic assumptions about Anglo-Saxon cultural uplift—a conviction illustrated most clearly by the exclusion of African Americans from any of its programs—it sponsored a school that produced the likes of Benny Goodman and Art Hodes while churning out music coordinators for Chicago’s proliferating public parks. According to Vaillant, here was musical progressivism at its best, generating “lasting models for public efforts to make music an agent of cultural politics and democratic social change.” (p.124) Progressives applied the Hull House model of commercial and ethno-cultural accommodation to field house parks, where young people from diverse backgrounds danced in carefully controlled circumstances rigidly demarcated by Jim Crow exclusion. The private but public-minded Civic Music Association extended the reach of musical progressivism by promoting European classics in the parks. There, the toiling masses would enjoy the “redemptive features of cultivated music in civic life” (p.151) But the racial boundaries which the Civic Music Association and the West Chicago Park patrolled could not withstand the upheaval of war, the expansion of the African American population in the city from the Great Migration, and the resultant racial violence that put Chicago on the map as one of the most racially-repressive cities in the North.

Much of the rest of *Sounds of Reform* examines the contest between an increasingly African American-inflected popular culture and a social order presided over by defenders of racial stratification and bourgeois decorum. Black-and-tan cabarets, taxi-dance halls, and jazz clubs fostered a vibrant counter-culture that subverted middle-class norms and periodically challenged the racial boundaries that defined the Gilded Age. Together, these expressions of musical liberation “shattered the illusory claims of musical progressives to being able to control music as a democratic activity.” (p.232) The advent of radio offered a dual opportunity to broadcast the “sound of whiteness” as Vaillant describes it and simultaneously to dissolve racial and ethnic barriers, demonstrating once again the contested character of popular culture in urban industrial America. While local radio stations pumped out tunes that appealed to white ethnic Chicagoans and broadcast Jazz Age frivolities from white-only ballroom fantasylands, they also provided African Americans “room within musical publics that challenged the geographical fixity and hierarchies of music and urban social and cultural space” (p. 268) Until major networks and federal regulators homogenized and narrowed radio’s menu, independent local broadcasters provided working class, immigrant, and ethnic Chicagoans with a medium for refashioning their identities and asserting their equality.

What Vaillant has presented us with is an intriguing analysis of popular culture as an arena of ethnic and racial integration, accommodation, and antagonism. Clearly, music—and

more generally popular entertainment—became sites of intense conflict over the character of American culture in the early twentieth century. More than this, public spaces and airwaves offered unique opportunities for pushing the envelope of acceptable behavior, acceptable music, and acceptable identities. As Vaillant demonstrates, racial and cultural hierarchies were never safe in public spaces where working class and minority Americans increasingly tested their claims to representation. What is less clear is what this has to do with progressivism, a movement which is never clearly defined. With the notable exception of the Hull House reformers, most of Vaillant's progressives sound more like Anthony Comstock and the morality police fighting a rearguard action against the assault on Victorian manners and morals than like Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley. What was progressive about the West Chicago Park Commissioners decision to expand the parks' repertoire to include ragtime music? Sensitivity to popular taste seems responsible for this decision. For that matter, when park commissioners decided to curb the ragtime tide by elevating "the taste of those who frequent the playground" (p.86) through symphonic classics, how different were they from the genteel Victorian uplifters who anguished about immigrant workers unschooled in Byron and Tennyson? As Vaillant concedes, the commissioners were preoccupied with maintaining "order and decorum" in the parks (p. 87) In their determination to uphold bourgeois respectability, they echoed the South Park supervisors who proscribed open dances in field houses that might have "democratized park and neighborhood space in positive ways" (p. 148.) If Vaillant does not resolve the question of whether progressives were agents of social control or deeply flawed but sincere proponents of democratic reform, he performs an equally important task. He documents the struggle of average people to diversify and democratize the public forum at a time when private economic interests sought to make it their own.

Michael Dennis  
Department of History, Acadia University.

---

**Deligne, Chloé. *Bruxelles et sa rivière. Genèse d'un territoire urbain (12<sup>e</sup>-18<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. Turnhout, Belgique : Brepols Publishers, Studies in European Urban History (SEUH), 2003, Pp. 1, 272. Illustrations, bibliographie, cartes, plans, index.**

Histoire d'une ville et de son hinterland ou histoire d'un cours d'eau, la Senne, et de ses affluents? L'ouvrage *Bruxelles et sa rivière* de Chloé Deligne présente ces deux histoires pour n'en faire qu'une : Bruxelles aurait fait la Senne et la Senne aurait fait Bruxelles. L'eau, nous dit l'auteure, est « tout autant un enjeu qu'un moteur de changement » (p. 10). Dans cette étude couvrant plus de 600 ans d'histoire, l'auteure montre comment Bruxelles (et son hinterland) et la Senne (et ses affluents) sont tour à tour initiateurs et produits des changements qui les caractérisent l'un et l'autre.

Après un chapitre introductif dans lequel sont posés les objec-

tifs et les limites de l'étude, Chloé Deligne nous apprend dans le chapitre premier (« Les moulins de la Senne ») que l'emprise anthropique sur l'eau bruxelloise était déjà bien amorcée au 12<sup>e</sup> et au 13<sup>e</sup> siècles, au profit de l'établissement des moulins à des fins énergétiques et des activités brassicoles. Ce chapitre met en lumière la présence d'une zone urbaine intermédiaire entre la ville et la campagne, soit la banlieue. Enfin, ce premier chapitre permet de démontrer que la gestion des cours d'eau à l'échelle régionale s'inscrivait déjà à cette époque dans une dynamique compétitive (entre princes, entre détenteurs de « parts » de moulin).

Dans le chapitre second intitulé « L'émergence des villes », l'auteure s'intéresse à la gestion de l'eau mais cette fois à l'échelle des villes, afin de retracer les conditions de leur développement. Après avoir réalisé un rapide survol de l'histoire de cinq villes du bassin de la Senne, l'ouvrage présente une analyse plus approfondie des cas de Vilvorde et de Bruxelles. L'implantation et le développement des villes, et de Bruxelles en particulier, ne tiendraient pas du concept de « noyau isolé » mais bien de l'émergence d'un réseau de villes, calqué sur la cartographie de l'eau. En outre, ces villes se trouvent en compétition les unes avec les autres. La ville de Bruxelles domine ce réseau urbain car elle devient le « terminus de la navigation et la Senne la rivière de Bruxelles » (p. 222).

Dans le chapitre 3, (« Le réseau intra-urbain bruxellois »), Chloé Deligne s'attarde à l'étude de l'eau au quotidien. L'auteure y analyse les conditions de la présence des eaux de surface (ruisseaux, rigoles, etc.) dans la ville des 12<sup>e</sup> et 16<sup>e</sup> siècles en retraçant les enjeux soulevés par ces dernières en matière de salubrité urbaine, de gestion des ordures, de nettoyage des rues, etc. L'auteure présente aussi les métiers de l'eau que l'on retrouvait dans la ville et s'attarde sommairement sur différents thèmes comme les eaux ménagères et la construction des réservoirs. En fait, ce qui est intéressé davantage Chloé Deligne ici, c'est l'usage des eaux de surface et la perception qu'en ont les populations bruxelloises et, à terme, celles de tout le bassin de la Senne : « Le changement du rapport à l'eau, observable au 15<sup>e</sup> siècle, semble bien plus lié à un changement de perception, développé dans le sillage des pestes, qu'à l'irruption de nouveaux procédés de fabrication plus polluants ou à l'édification de fortifications qui auraient fait régner une atmosphère malsaine dans et aux abords des villes » (p. 128).

Au chapitre 4, « Les viviers clef des eaux », Chloé Deligne quitte en quelque sorte les eaux en mouvement au profit des viviers et de la pisciculture dont la principale espèce en culture était la carpe. La pisciculture aurait connu ses plus belles années pendant le 15<sup>e</sup> siècle, bien qu'elle fut présente du 12<sup>e</sup> au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle. Outre l'ensemble des informations historiques propres au cas bruxellois, l'intérêt de ce chapitre réside dans l'analyse de la constitution d'espaces économiques aquatiques.

Le cinquième chapitre (« Captages, canalisation, inondations ») présente les grandes transformations qu'allaient connaître la Senne et ses affluents entre les 16<sup>e</sup> et 18<sup>e</sup> siècles. En fait,