
Michael Dennis
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 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.


Après un chapitre introductif dans lequel sont posés les objec-