

The Foundations of Musical America

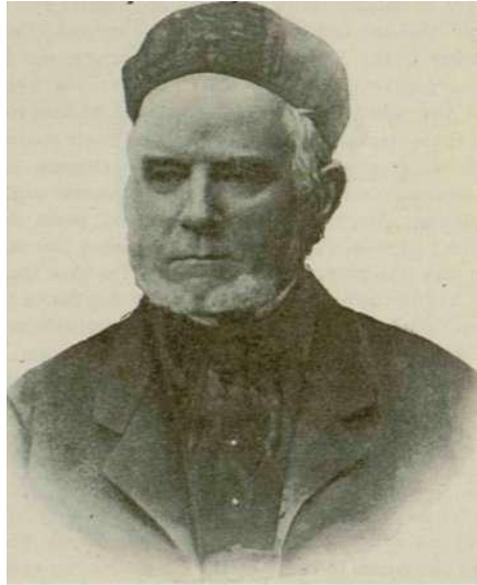
Mathews, W. S. B.

THE present condition of musical art in America is the result of a vast amount of seed-sowing by musical amateurs and professionals, all of whom were enthusiasts, since about the beginning of the present century. The limits to which I am restricted in the present writing make it impossible to do justice to all of these earlier workers, and the only course left me is to mention the more important of them, and indicate the far-reaching results of their activity.

The musical life of this country is very active along three planes of work: first, elementary instruction, which is now vastly more universal than at any previous period in our career ; second, the wide diffusion of popular music of every sort; third, the almost universal cultivation of art-music, such as the works of the great composers for piano, organ, chamber instruments, symphony, oratorio, and opera. As a natural result of this encyclopedic musical work we are beginning to have a great deal of original composition by native writers. My place in the present number is to point out the principal sources from which these several lines of activity have sprung. In doing this, I shall dwell more fully on the musical history of Boston, since in Boston musical enthusiasm showed itself at an early time, and some very commanding figures in our history have made their first appearance there.

As might have been expected, the beginning of music in New England was strongly influenced by Puritan and English taste. Almost at the same time there began to be some local collections of psalmody, and the foundation of a great and long-lived society for the study of sacred music as an art. This society was the Handel and Haydn of Boston, a mixed choir founded in 1815. In the early days of this society its activities were purely amateurish, and the president of the society was the conductor *ex officio*. The president himself was merely a choir leader, a little more popular than his competitors. The chorus of the society for the first five years consisted of about one hundred voices, and was extremely indifferent in quality, about two-thirds of all the singers being sopranos, very few of whom could read music. The next part most numerous represented was the bass, the alto next, and the tenor was often wanting altogether. Very soon after this society was established they secured a very good English musician to act as organist, Dr. G. K. Jackson. Dr. Jackson knew something about music, although he was much addicted to spiritous incitation. It is told of him that on one occasion, when the chorus was practicing a Handel composition, the president and conductor desired the organist to play the piece inverted—that is, the tenor uppermost and the soprano in place of the tenor. As this particular work was not written in double counterpoint, the organist, declined, and, on being sharply ordered again to do the work, he made a most irreverent and unbecoming answer, to the effect that he would see the society in a place where sacred music is not practiced, before he would do such a fool thing. In 1822 a young man named Lowell Mason, a native of Medford, Massachusetts, came up from Savannah with a manuscript book of psalmody, for the publication of which he desired to secure the sanction of the Handel and Haydn Society. The society delegated Dr. Jackson to examine the work, which he did, and, on his favorable recommendation, it was accepted and published at the expense of the society, under the name of the "Handel and Haydn Society Collection." A few months later Lowell Mason was invited to make his home in Boston and take charge of the music in several important churches and direct the Handel and Haydn Society. He performed his work with great success and improved the chorus very much, but after a

few years his musical ambition took a wider range. He recognized the necessity of better early training for singers and musicians, and also the value and place of secular music in life. It was found, however, that the charter of the Handel and Haydn Society restricted



Dr. Lowell Mason

their work to sacred music, in the narrowest sense. Accordingly, in 1830, Lowell Mason withdrew from the leadership and established what was known as the Boston Academy of Music. This institution was chartered as a combination of a practical school of music and as a musical missionary society, and one of its first efforts was to introduce music into the public schools as a regular part of the education ; it also promoted the cultivation of a public taste for music and the awakening of a public interest in the higher kinds of music, both sacred and secular. Lowell Mason formed a new chorus entirely independent of the Handel and Haydn Society, consisting largely of young voices from three large chorus choirs which were under his direction. He trained the parts at subrehearsals and, from that time on, instead of one series of oratorio concerts, Boston had two. While the older society maintained the prestige due to its longer existence, the new society was held to sing with more spirit and with much better balance of parts. Nor were the concerts of this choir confined to oratorio music. At the very beginning of the Boston Academy two professors were appointed, the one Lowell Mason, the other George James Webb, a very highly accomplished English organist and musician, and he very soon introduced a number of good English glees.

The Boston Academy also established an orchestra and played the first Beethoven symphonies ever heard in Boston, mostly under the direction of Mr. Webb. For many years Mr. Webb was active in this way and as a teacher of music ; he also acted as concert organist. His tours in this line extended as far west as Albany, whither he went 200 miles by stage, in winter, to play an organ concert on the principal organ there.

During almost thirty years, from 1821 to 1850, Lowell Mason was an extremely active figure in Boston musical life. He published a large number of collections of psalmody and the first collection of children's music ever published. He made very great improvements in elementary teaching of music, following the Pestalozzian maxim of "the thing before the sign." At the same time he lectured widely before teachers' institutes and meetings for clergymen, not forgetting the worth of music as an instrument of culture. About the year 1837 the enthusiasm had reached a point where music was definitely established as a study in the Boston schools, and has so remained ever since. Lowell

Mason remained at the head of this work until 1850, when a board of aldermen came in which voted him out, in favor of a younger and rather unscrupulous assistant. The active part of Lowell Mason's life may be considered to have completed itself in 1850, although for twenty two years afterward, while he lived at Orange, N. J., he continued to publish elementary works and collections of psalmody.

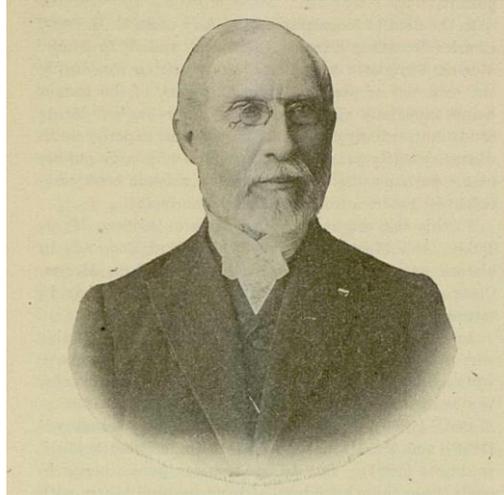
In his younger life Lowell Mason was a singularly beautiful young man, having a charming disposition and a pure and noble character. As the years advanced his presence gained additional dignity, and in his later life he was a venerable figure in any company where he might be. At a dinner of musicians in London, where he was an honored guest, Moscheles called attention to his striking resemblance to Beethoven, and the fact was recognized by many musicians present who had known that great master.

Another line of important musical influence was begun at Cambridge, Mass., about 1835, by the formation of a musical society for graduates, whose object at first was to keep alive the memory of their alma mater, and later to secure the establishment there of a musical professorship. This society was known as the Harvard Musical Association. At first its musical performances were amateur, like those of the Handel and Haydn Society. When they played concerted music, all of the boys wanted to play the first-flute part. One of the most enthusiastic of these flutists was a very lively and persistent but very bashful young man named John S. Dwight, who afterward became the famous musical critic and a star in the high-art symphony of Boston, from 1852 to 1880.

The Harvard Musical Association took on a higher range after about ten years, and gave chamber concerts of real master-works in Cambridge, and later on undertook symphony concerts in Boston. These were maintained first and last for fifteen years or more, their work being the foundation on which the present Boston Symphony Orchestra was afterward built. Their influence was sufficient to secure the establishment, in 1876, of a musical professorship, with John K. Paine at the head.

A very great influence has been given to music in America by the concert tours of great musical stars. The Italian opera was given in New York as early as 1820, and the celebrated Garcia was here, with his daughters, Pauline and Malibran, about 1825. The influence of these opera seasons, which were always short, was mostly confined to the locality and did not reach the country. In 1850, however, the great showman, P. T. Barnum, brought over Jenny Lind, and instituted for the first time on a large scale in this country the work of mission and "Passionate Press Agent." The newspapers from Boston to New Orleans ran over with anecdotes and gush about the "Swedish Nightingale." In Boston the choice of seats for her concerts was sold at auction, the highest seat bringing \$625, the bidder being Ossian E. Dodge, a singer of comic songs, who performed this act as an advertisement. Dodge was afterward secretary of the Board of Trade of St. Paul, Minn., in which position his talent as a press manipulator was of great advantage to the city. The advent of Jenny Lind, and all this talk about her, had the effect of gaining a great deal of interest in music and musicians all over the country, even where her voice was never heard. The immediate influence in Boston occasioned the erection of Boston Music Hall, which has still one year longer to stand just as it was built in 1851.

The orchestral activities of Boston and of the principal Cities of the country received a great impetus in 1849 and 1850 by the appearance of a small but extremely fine orchestra from Berlin, nearly all men who had become compromised in the revolutionary movements of that time. It was the Germania Musical Society, comprising twenty-four men, with four first violins. The leader was Carl Bergmann, who was afterward so distin-



Dr. George F. Root

guished as leader of the New York Philharmonic. The Germania Society came to grief in about two years, being disbanded at Baltimore. But it was called together again, and played an entire season in Boston, in 1851-'52, in the new Music Hall. Here they gave beautiful programs, many of which were played to crowded houses. The programs took much the same range as those of the present day.

Another society active in Boston at that time was the Musical Fund Society, a cooperative society of orchestral artists which gave concerts by subscription, the proceeds

being devoted to some kind of musical charity. It was in connection with this Society and the Harvard Musical Association, already mentioned, that the sixteen-year-old William Mason made his earliest appearances with the orchestra, playing a Mendelssohn concerto and some of those of Beethoven.

The first full orchestra which came to this country was that of which the Frenchman, Jullien, was the leader. Jullien was practically an orchestral virtuoso, or master, of the same kind as the present French directors, Colonne and Lamoureux. His orchestra was drilled to great finish, and he had all kinds of sensational effects ; he was the originator of the dodge of playing patriotic songs with the accompaniment of cannon and fireworks. He conducted with great spirit, and also with great show of enthusiasm. Behind him on the rostrum was a splendid easy chair, into which he collapsed after the performance of his important pieces. Delsartian devitalization was here perfectly illustrated.

The cultivation of popular music received a great impetus from the work of Lowell Mason ; he was himself the author of a large number of church tunes, some of which, like the "Missionary Hymn" and "Nearer My God to Thee," still remain standard. In his later life, after 1850, he directed what were known as "Musical Conventions" at Cleveland, Rochester, N.Y., etc. These were of the nature of impromptu musical festivals and teachers' institutes combined. Mason generally was accompanied by a good soloist and a good pianist, the remainder of the program being manufactured on the spot. One singer who accompanied Dr. Mason was a very pleasant young basso, George F. Root, who

afterward found himself unable to escape the distinguishment of having written the "Battle Cry of Freedom," all the other works of a long and distinguished life being swallowed up in the overwhelming success of this popular piece. Mr. Root was residing in New York city as organist in a prominent church and teacher of singing in several seminaries. As a result of his early training, some simple melodies occurred to him — too simple to be published over his own name, he thought; but on playing some of them, he was besought by a publisher to furnish the manuscript. About 1855 six songs were published by Hall & Son, among which was "Rosalie the Prairie Flower," which gained instantaneous popularity. These led to the production of a large number of popular melodies, many of which had wide currency, although now forgotten.

Another distinguished figure in American popular music, and the best melodist of all, was Stephen C. Foster, a native of Pittsburg. He wrote a variety of songs in the "darker" dialect, all of them representing the folk-life of the slave, as conceived from the white man's standpoint. The most popular of these melodies was "Way Down Upon the Suwanee River," but many others, such as "Master's in the Cold, Cold Ground," were almost equally well known, although not so long-lived. Foster was a natural melodist of very considerable refinement, and his name is an honor to American art.



Louis Moreau Gottschalk

To change the scene to the city of New York : we come now to one of the most important agencies in America for the maintenance of a high musical ideal. The Philharmonic Society was founded in 1842—a cooperative society of musicians for the encouragement of high art. They have always given a number of concerts by subscription every year, and the Society is still in a healthy condition after forty-seven years of activity. The founders of the Philharmonic and the principal movers were men who were all-round musicians : pianists, violinists, and theorists, such as the late George F. Bristow, whose symphony was played by the Philharmonic within its first five years ; H. C. Timm, a leading professor and teacher in New York, who figured in symphony concerts as an artist of the kettle-drums ; William Scharfenberg, also a pianist, and a splendid musician. Among the directors of this Society were Theodore Eisfeldt, who also carried on a well-trained string quartet; Carl Bergmann, the former leader of the Germania Society, Boston ; Dr. Leopold Damrosch, Theodore Thomas, Anton Seidl, and Emil Paur. For many years the Philharmonic represented the highest standard of orchestral music in this country, and in connection with it all the great pianists who visited America were heard.

Jenny Lind was accompanied on her tour by a solo violinist—a boy not more than thirteen or fourteen years of age, Theodore Thomas by name. Later on Thomas became

the leading violinist in the Opera Orchestra in New York. In 1863 he got his first start with his own orchestra, maintaining a series of symphony concerts in opposition to those of the Philharmonic, and composed of music of a more modern character, such as the conservative Philharmonic regarded with dread. A few years later Thomas had his own orchestra at the Central Park Garden, playing every night, and here he established a precision and finish of orchestral performances never before known outside of conservatory concerts in Paris. In 1869 Mr. Thomas made his first tour West, and since that time he has been, up to within the last ten years, the main educator of the American people in higher kinds of music.

Space forbids any extended mention of a large number of names and instrumentalities connected in this progress. For example : from 1853 there were the concerts of the American pianist, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who was the first American to attain distinction in Europe. Gottschalk was a charming melodist and a pianist of great distinction. The career of William Mason, who was contemporary with Gottschalk, was different. After receiving what training he could in Boston, he went to Europe in 1849, returning about 1854, settling in New York, where he has ever since resided. Mason at that time was the best concert pianist we had of the modern school, thoroughly acquainted with the classic repertory of the instrument; he was also well schooled in the works of Liszt and Chopin, and had been with Liszt at Weimar. He was the first Schumann player we had in this country, and he has always remained a great votary of that master. The influence of Dr. Mason has been very wide in this country in the training of pianists and teachers, and latterly his "System of Pianoforte Technics" marks an epoch in the world-cultivation of the instrument.

To return again to the history of the opera : the standard has been continually advanced. All of the great European favorites, such as Mme. Parepa-Rosa, Mme. La Grange, Christine Nilsson, Patti, Materna, Lehmann, and a host of other splendid artists, made many appearances in America. For twenty years or more we have had splendid American singers in the same companies. Charles R. Adams, of Boston, the magnificent Wagnerian tenor, who had a brilliant career at Vienna, is remembered by all musicians ; Adelaide Phillips, a most charming singer; Anna Louise Carey, Clara Louise Kellogg, Sybil Sanderson, Emma Eames, Mme. Nordica, Helene Hastreiter, Emma Juch, and scores of other brilliant and attractive names, have illustrated the American talent for this form of art.

The great American principle of "getting the best and blaspheming the expense" came to fruition with the advent of the Mapleson opera in 1880, and the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York by the Abbey Company in 1884. From this time on we have had here the most expensive opera companies ever formed in the world, and the managers have alternated between a Monte Cristo opulence and a Micawber-like waiting for "something to turn up."

It is now a full half-century since William Mason was one of the first young Americans to study music abroad. A procession of ambitious youngsters has crossed the ocean every year since, and when they have returned, some have gone on to influence and well merited distinction ; others have found themselves hidebound by the restrictions of their foreign training, and have not been able to bring their vague ideals to fruition. Moreover, the atmosphere for new works by composers of untried powers has been, and still is, unfavorable in this country. In spite of this we have had a constantly increasing band of native composers, of whom other writers will give particulars. They fall mostly into one or the other of two classes : those who have written works of the largest caliber, which they have never been able to get performed ; and those who have written in smaller forms, with less straining after originality. Among the men of both classes very strong

works have been produced. Had we been blessed with a native school, manned by well-trained American teachers, and supported with means facilitating the production of new works, we would by this time have begun to reach as brilliant a harvest in this line as France and Russia are now continually reaping from their own conservatories. This, however, is another story.