

Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War

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Review

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McWhirter, Christian *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3550-0

A Unique Perspective on Civil War History

Music and the Civil War is a musical topic that has attracted more attention from historians than perhaps any other “music and X” (fill in the blank) except maybe music and Shakespeare. Undoubtedly, the voluminous source material available, coupled with a generally popular era, has contributed to the interest in this area of research. Christian McWhirter’s *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* is the latest book to enter this market and has much to offer. An assistant editor for the Papers of Abraham Lincoln at the National Archives (Washington, DC), McWhirter provides meticulous details on many popular songs, composers, and publishers (almost half of the book is documentation in the form of endnotes or bibliography). Some of this information has been noted elsewhere, but often without the thorough background provided here.

This being said, there are some serious issues with *Battle Hymns* that must be raised. These come under a general categorization of needing to broaden the use of secondary literature, such as contributions to the topic of music and the Civil War, or to American music in the nineteenth century in general, or to women’s history. For example, although McWhirter claims that he will examine music as it related to all aspects of society, including women, he utilizes only one of the numerous insightful studies by scholars of women’s history (a relatively recent book by Drew Gilpin Faust). This is not a small omission. The issue of Civil War histories being those solely of the battlefield, commanders, and politicians has been noted as problematic for some time. Many earlier studies of music in this period have also focused largely on those pieces that tie directly to “the boys,” and often deal extensively with the well-known male composers (such as Stephen Foster and John Hill Hewitt). Despite its claims

otherwise, much of *Battle Hymns* falls in this general vein.

In this sense, McWhirter's *Battle Hymns* follows closely in the steps of books such as Lawrence Abel's *Singing the New Nation: How Music Shaped the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (2000). True, McWhirter takes on both North and South, but his narrative runs along the same lines as earlier studies. He expounds further on many of the same songs, composers, and publishers, but he does offer more bibliographical detail and connections than most previous authors. This is perhaps the book's strongest contribution.

Even though there are chapters devoted to different segments of the population, McWhirter's text falls short in a few areas. He seems to have limited his background studies in music to the well-known but general materials on music and the Civil War published by Richard Harwell and others. Of course, these provide necessary background information, but a large percentage belongs historiographically to a different period, providing more objective information than contextualization. There have been other, more recent, publications that deal precisely with some of the themes McWhirter seeks to investigate, but these are missing from the bibliography. One such source is my own *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer* (SIU Press, 2010), the final chapters of which deal precisely with some of the issues covered here. Other studies of women's history, such as Catherine Clinton's *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1984) would also add to the views of women and the war years.

Other areas of concern center largely around McWhirter's analysis of musical issues that lead to generalizations that do not hold as true as stated in *Battle Hymns*. For example, he comments that "The effects of this decline [of public classical music performances] were not as widely felt in the South, where theatre was not as readily available, at least outside of New Orleans," but as Katherine Preston demonstrates in *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-1860* (2001), opera was indeed alive and well in the southern United States in the 1840s and 1850s (28). On the contrary, opera companies toured far and wide during the exact period that McWhirter claims it was dying out. It may not have been the scores as we know them today, but audiences certainly understood what they heard as "opera." Other areas of concern deal with McWhirter's discussions of various publishers and what their earlier practices meant, the place of music in culture, and why composers write as they do. It is not always as simple as the connections the author makes here,

and more background on musical practices before 1861 would certainly have benefited this book.

As it stands, McWhirter's *Battle Hymns* is a wealth of practical information on who composed what, when, and under what circumstances. His discovery of minute details concerning the origins of popular Civil War songs constitutes a real contribution to this area of specialization.

Dr. Candace Bailey is Professor of Music at North Carolina Central University. She has published and presented several papers on music and women in the antebellum and Civil War South, as well as a monograph entitled Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer (SIU Press, 2010). She can be reached at cbailey@ncu.edu.