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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GERMAN-AMERICAN HERITAGE AND THE MUSICAL
WORKS OF WILLIAM HENRY POMMER

Holly Cassell
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William Henry Pommer (1851-1937) was a prolific German-American composer and well-rounded musician from St. Louis. In addition to having almost 500 works to his credit, he worked at various times as a music educator, ensemble director and performer. Pommer's German heritage shaped him as a musician and composer; his music has German characteristics and tendencies, yet it does not contain all the same elements that music of his European contemporaries have. There is room to explore how German-American culture and notable historical events of the nineteenth century affected Pommer's life and musical style.

Musical Career

William Henry Pommer was born in St. Louis in 1851 into a German-American family of piano makers. As a youth, he studied piano in St. Louis with Friedrich Eduard Sobolewski (1808-1872), a friend of Liszt, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Wagner. In 1872, Pommer traveled to Europe to study at the Royal Conservatory of Leipzig for two years. Following his training in Leipzig, Pommer then went to the Imperial Conservatory in Vienna to study organ and counterpoint with Anton Bruckner and then returned to St. Louis in 1875. Following his return from Europe, he began to compose and teach piano and voice lessons. He composed most of his works at the beginning of his musical career (between 1870 and 1900) because later he was busy with his duties as a professor at the University of Missouri. For example, at least 55 of his 69 piano pieces that are catalogued were composed in 1900 or earlier. He called American composers to a higher standard and encouraged the development of American music.¹

As a music educator, Pommer held positions as: Music Education professor at the University of Missouri, where he was a founding member of the Zeta Chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, a musical fraternity; director of various singing societies; and director of public school

¹ Janice Wenger, *William Henry Pommer: His Life and Works* (Kansas-City: University of Missouri Kansas City, 1987), pp. 168-177.

music programs. He also taught private lessons in piano and voice and was endorsed by the local newspapers that said he could offer a first-class musical education.²

Musical Works

The various styles in Pommer's works correlate with many musical positions he held. In some of his songs the vocal melody is doubled by the piano, suggesting that they were written for less-advanced vocalists; an example of this is the first several songs from his song cycle *Das Jahr der Liebe* (Op. 6). Most of his chamber works for strings are not composed with an educational purpose in mind and are more suited for professional musicians to play. For example, his string quartet in G minor has several difficult passages demanding technical proficiency of the players. The piece also challenges the players' ability to work together in an ensemble. Pommer's *Washington Hymn*, written for the centennial celebration of 1776 functions as occasional music, a patriotic hymn for the celebration. Pommer also wrote etudes for children he taught at school and choral pieces for school choirs he directed.

Pommer's compositional style, although it may vary by genre, has its general idiosyncrasies. In many of his works for solo piano, Pommer uses repetitive rhythms. Often, there is a rhythmic figure that is repeated over and over again for a whole section or work, and interest is focused on another aspect of the music. In the Six Pieces for Pianoforte, Op. 19, the chord progressions take center stage, while the repetitive rhythmic figures lend the music some momentum. This is seen in all six pieces of Op. 19, and sometimes there are repeated rhythmic figures in both the right and left hand, with the rhythm not changing at all throughout the piece.

Pommer often uses keys that are related by a third within the same piece, many times in an ABAB form. Using consecutive keys that are related by a third was common practice for

²Janice Wenger, "William Henry Pommer: Missouri Musician," *The Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 12 (1991): 13-26; see pp.13-14.

European composers of the romantic era. This practice can be observed in the first piece (Canzonetta) of Pommer's Five Pieces for Violin and Piano. The piece roughly follows an ABAB form, with the A sections in G minor and the B sections in E major.

Generally, the endings of Pommer's compositions are weak. The end of a work is often the same chord repeated and held, or simply a long sustained note. Such an understated ending seems insufficient. This happens in many of his works, including *Gondoliera* for cello and piano, *Night Piece to Julia* for soprano or tenor and piano, and the Six Pieces for Pianoforte, String Quartet in G minor, and Five Pieces for Violin and Piano mentioned above.

Pommer wrote hundreds of solo songs, and many of them effectively express the text through the music. A set of three songs, named *Songs of the Sea* (1888) for alto or bass, presents a fine example of Pommer's text expression. The first song, "If 'Tis Love to Wish You Near," is a love song in B-flat major based on the themes of poverty and love. When the text mentions love, the vocal melody outlines the B-flat major triad, and when the text mentions monetary hardships, the voice has an ascending chromatic line, representing the financial hardship placed on the character and the person he seeks to marry. In keeping with the sea theme, the rhythm of the vocal line imitates the lapping of small waves against a boat. The second song of the set, "Poor Jack," speaks of daily life as a sailor. The music moves through some minor chords when the dangers of being a sailor are mentioned in the text. The song ends with a cheery melody in the piano that imitates a tune from a penny whistle that might be found on deck. The third and final song, "All's Well," is about a sentry guarding the ship at night. The song is very firmly in F minor, with quiet dynamics and thin texture, mimicking the quietness of a clear night at sea. The song ends on the words "all's well" and an F major chord

In some other songs by Pommer the music seems less related to the texts than in *Songs of the Sea*. The most notable exceptions are the several Oriental-themed lullabies Pommer wrote that express the Orientalism in the text but not in the music. For example, in “Indian Cradle Song,” the text talks about the “little papoose” up in the tree while his father is away hunting. While the text may be attempting to talk about Native-American life- the music does not try to sound Native-American at all; there is no repetitive drumming or melisma in the vocal line. A similar approach is seen in his “Scottish Lullaby” and “Sicilian Lullaby,” where the text depicts the implied cultures, but there is little or no reference to the music of Scotland or Sicily in these lullabies.

Perhaps the greatest flaw of Pommer’s style is a lack of counterpoint. In many of the songs, the piano is strictly accompanimental and does not intertwine with the vocal line. For example, Pommer’s settings of “Du Bist Wie Eine Blume” and “Wanderer’s Nachtlied” never have a melody or theme in the piano, unless the vocal line is resting- and then, it is the same melody that was just heard in the vocal line. Perhaps this is more easily forgiven in songs than in Pommer’s chamber music. The chamber works have the same issue and any piano accompaniment to string works, such as *Gondoliera* and *Five Pieces for Violin and Piano*, is usually very sparse. In the string quartets and trios, there are seldom more than two instruments playing different parts at the same time. Most of the time, one instrument plays the theme and the other instruments play a very basic accompaniment or remain silent.

Despite some shortfalls in Pommer’s work, there are many interesting qualities and effective techniques utilized in his compositions. Perhaps the most interesting aspects of Pommer’s compositional style are his harmonies and key changes- the third-related keys common in his works and the types of harmonies he uses are in line with his European

contemporaries. His use of third-related keys is seen in works from many different genres including: “Valse” from Suite III (piano), *The Song of Ice* (quartet for women’s voices), “Canzonetta” from Five Pieces for Violin and Piano, “Scotch Lullaby” (voice and piano) and many more. In his longer works (particularly the chamber works and longer songs), Pommer has a chance to expand on the harmonic structure of the pieces and several movements of a string quartet or piano trio may change key signature several times. Another positive aspect of his work is the lyric quality of his melodies. His melodies and themes are usually expressive in a romantic style, a particular example being the melody that opens the first movement of the String Quartet in G minor.

Pommer as a German-American

Charles Pommer, a piano maker and William Henry’s grandfather, immigrated to Philadelphia from Germany. After he died, his family moved to Missouri and helped settle the town Hermann, Missouri.³ Aside from his heritage and three years spent studying music in Germany and Austria, it would appear that William Henry Pommer did not have a very deep connection to Germany. However, through certain interests of William Henry Pommer’s, we can sense that he may have had a deeper connection to his family’s original culture than many other second-generation Americans.

The religious views of German-Americans during Pommer’s lifetime were divided. In the years before the Civil War, German-American community life was usually subdivided into two notable groups: the *Kirchendeutschen*, or Church Germans, and the *Vereinsdeutschen*, or Club Germans.⁴ Many of the older German-American communities tended to be religious and had

³Charles L. Venable and Cynthia Browne, “Philadelphia Biedermeier: Germanic Craftsmen and Furniture Design in Philadelphia, 1820-1850,” *Der Maibaum* 12 (2012): 4-9.

⁴Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, an imprint of Prometheus Books, 2000), p. 187.

moved to the Americas for religious freedom and a more prosperous life. However, the newer German-American immigrants, many of whom had emigrated as a result of the political unrest around the 1848 revolutions, were often rationalists and freethinkers who were strictly atheist. The secular camp was the most vocal and visible of the German-American community.⁵ In the 1850's many German-Americans were accused of being "free-thinkers, rationalists, atheists and desecraters of the Puritan Sabbath."⁶ German rationalists and freethinkers founded the town of Hermann, Missouri, where the Pommer family settled in the 1830's; later in Pommer's lifetime, churches were founded in the town.

Little evidence about Pommer's religious views is available; however, his opera *St. Ethelwetheldethelberga*, features an anti-Catholic plot line, depicting the Catholic Church as an organization that is only looking to draw people into the religious orders without regard for the consequences. In the opera, the main character, Ethelwetheldethelberga, turns to the Catholic Church for consolation at a moment of desperation when she believes that both her lover and father have died. Deceived by the clergy, she becomes a nun, making both her father and lover unhappy. Pommer did not write the libretto for the opera; instead, it was his good friend William Schuyler.⁷ The fact that Pommer agreed to write the music to the libretto and that the librettist was a good friend of his suggests that Pommer may have been sympathetic to the opera's negative view of religion- or at least not completely opposed.

Generally, Pommer's music was behind the time compared to the music of his European contemporaries. This recalls various German-American immigrant groups, particularly religious sects that held on to their musical traditions long after they had changed in Europe. For example, German-American Lutheran pastors used music from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth

⁵Tolzmann, pp.173-186.

⁶Tolzmann, p. 200.

⁷Wenger, *Pommer: His Life and Works*, p. 82.

centuries to keep German-American Lutherans loyal to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*⁸.

The Canadian Hutterites are another example; they have conservatively held on to their musical traditions and preserved them for 250 years, while the Austrian Hutterites' traditions changed.⁹

Although Pommer probably did not belong to a conservative religious group, there was a tendency for immigrant groups, religious or not, to create settlements in America to preserve and mirror the culture of their home country. The goal of preservation may have led to a more conservative musical culture in the United States than the changing musical culture in Europe. Therefore, Pommer's general audience was perhaps more conservative in musical taste than the general concert audience in Europe. An incident with the Missouri State Song Contest in 1912 suggests that Missourians of the time were not interested in refined music. The State Song Contest, whose judging committee that Pommer chaired, ended without a contest winner- due to both to Pommer's contracting an illness and to the general consensus of Missourians that an unsophisticated Ozark tune, "Kickin' My Dog Around," should be the state song.¹⁰

The American Civil War was going on during Pommer's early adolescent years, and many German-Americans had strong anti-slavery views. Heinrich Börnstein, an Austrian-born newspaper editor with radical political views who immigrated to St. Louis in the wake of the 1848 revolutions, describes the political climate in the Missouri during the war: "Although Missouri was a slave state, all of Missouri's Germans were decided opponents to slavery, and they were so out of principle and conviction, for they directly suffered little from the evil of

⁸A. Gregg Roeber, "Lutheran Hymnody and Networks in the Eighteenth Century," in *Land Without Nightingales*, edited by Philip Bohlman and Otto Holzappel (Madison, WI: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, 2002), p. 116.

⁹Helmut Wulz, "Musical Life Among the Canadian Hutterites," in *Land Without Nightingales*, edited by Philip Bohlman and Otto Holzappel (Madison WI: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, 2002), p. 164.

¹⁰"Missouri Chanting Houn' Pup Song," *Trenton (NJ) Evening Times* January 5, 1912.

slavery.”¹¹ Of course, Börnstein’s statement that *all* German Americans were opponents of slavery may be an exaggeration, but the overwhelming majority were. This was true especially of the German-Americans of St. Louis; in 1860, more than half the population of St. Louis was anti-slavery and German.¹² The German-Americans who favored slavery or whose actions were not anti-slavery were often scorned by their German-American community. In an incident in Augusta, Missouri in 1863, William Sehart a long-time resident of Augusta and member of the town board reported a Negro waiting for a river ferry boat to the Justice of the Peace. At a public meeting, Augustans declared Sehart “unworthy of holding any office” and decided the Negro would be taken back to where he was found by Sehart. Sehart left Augusta and never returned.¹³

Pommer’s business correspondence offers little evidence of Pommer’s political point of view and its relation to German-American ideals.¹⁴ Although we cannot be sure of Pommer’s thoughts on slavery, it should be noted that his first higher education teaching position was at Christian College, a college just for women. Christian College was progressive for its time and was founded in 1851 based on the belief that women deserved formal college education.¹⁵

Two things strongly link Pommer to his German heritage: language and music. During his lifetime, it was common in St. Louis for most documents to be published in German and English. Pommer must have been bilingual as his business correspondence was in English, but he had been to Germany and Austria to study music for a few years and many of his early songs were German poems set to music. Pommer chose to set famous German poetry to music. In his songbooks, there are settings of several famous German poems, in their original language,

¹¹Henry Börnstein, *Memoirs of a Nobody: The Missouri Years of an Austrian Radical, 1849-1866*, translated and edited by Steven Rowan (St. Louis: The Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997), p. 263.

¹²Tolzmann, p. 212.

¹³Anita M. Mallinkrodt, “Runaway Slave Rescues,” *Der Maibaum* 12 (2012): 10-15; see pp.14-15.

¹⁴Box 1, Pommer Collection, St. Louis, Missouri History Museum, Archive Center.

¹⁵Wenger, *Pommer: Missouri Musician*, p. 14.

although, it appears that some of them were later translated into English for publication.

Pommer's apparent love for setting famous German poetry to song is important as he set many poems that had also been set to music by Schubert and Schumann and ones that had been set or would soon be set by Hugo Wolf. This choice of poetry not only reflects his interest in German poetry and language, but his respect for great German-speaking composers.

German heritage aside, Pommer had a large amount of first and second hand experience with German music. Perhaps his studies with German teachers before he went to Germany and his further studies in Germany and Austria influenced his musical style more than the German-American community in Missouri. However, there are aspects of Pommer's compositions that are clearly different from the musical language of his European contemporaries, suggesting that he either was not capable of creating music of that style, he was not personally inclined to follow the modern European style, or that his American audience demanded a more conservative style. With the evidence available, it is unclear to discern whether or not Pommer had religious or political views similar to other German-Americans. However, it is clear that great composers and poets from the German-speaking world were a source of inspiration for him.

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