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William Henry Pommer's The Legend of St.
Etheldethelwethelberga and Quartet No. 1 in G Minor

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German-American Compositional Identity in William Henry Pommer’s
The Legend of St. Etheldethelwethelberga and Quartet No. 1 in G Minor

Nikolaus Schroeder
Grand Valley State University

German-American Musical Identity: Stages of Development

As Otto Holzapfel and Philip Bohlman discuss in The Musical Culture of German-Americans: Views from Different Sides of the Hyphen, German-American composers ideologically lie somewhere between the traditions of their homeland and the complex, multi-ethnic music of their new home. A concrete representation of this societal phenomenon was the language issue that pervaded education and performance in 19th and early 20th century America: in what language were children to be taught and was music to be performed? Holzapfel and Bohlman also recognize that contextualizing the positions of musicians on this continuum is quite difficult; therefore, little scholarship attempts to do so.

Particularly in the Midwest, there are many fewer extant records of early composers than on the East Coast, which further complicates the issue. Cultural production was often restricted to barn lofts, multi-purpose houses, churches, and the outdoors for much of the 19th century. However, German-Americans were instrumental in developing a cultural environment similar to what they remembered from Germany. Their recreating of musical events and institutions from Germany, such as dances, theaters, beer gardens, Turnvereine, Männchöre, and orchestras, was significant, even if the American versions were different from their German originals.

These musical happenings were made possible by the presence of many local amateur and semi-professional actors, musicians, and composers. A Century of Missouri Music is testament to this in St. Louis and Missouri, and similar compendia are available from the early history of cities like Chicago and Milwaukee. Unfortunately, many of these texts are quite old, and sources they refer to are often no longer available, though some cities have fared better than others in this regard.

For much of the early century, many of these artists were first-generation immigrants from Germany. Because little scholarship exists on the history of German-American music in the early Midwest, many thanks go out to those who have advanced the field, specifically: the Max Kade Institute of German-American studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Historical Society of St. Louis, and the St. Louis Public Library. Many thanks also to Janice Wenger for her thorough and excellent dissertation on Pommer, and to my advisor in this project—Dr. Lisa Feurzeig. Thank you also to Grand Valley State University, the German Club of Hermann, Hermann Arts Council, German American Club of Hermann, Hermann Deutschheim Verein, Missouri State Parks, Missouri Humanities Council, National Endowment for the Humanities, and all others who have supported these endeavors.

1 This paper was born of a Student Summer Scholars research grant from the Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarship at Grand Valley State University. The program supports undergraduate research under the direction of a faculty mentor. GVSU has no graduate music program, so it is an excellent opportunity for undergraduate music scholars to make their first foray into academic research. Most of the Summer Scholars research is published through Scholarworks and appears on Google Scholar.


Germany, and were often highly trained by the masters in Europe. At this point, we must imagine that the culture was mostly one of preservation—master and amateur side-by-side recreating the Gemütlichkeit of their heritage. A second generation of composers—Ethelbert Nevin, Albert Stoessel, our composer W. H. Pommer, and the like—were native to America, but turned to Germany to study with composers who were still more valued than their American counterparts. To some extent, this displays an expectation by the aging first-generation immigrants that American music would continue to model itself on the European style. The tradition of foreign education continued for many years; in the 1920s, even Copland and Gershwin travelled to Europe, only to be told by Nadia Boulanger that they really ought to be developing an American idiom.

This educational displacement created as sort of identity crisis for this second generation of composers. On one hand, their training was still firmly rooted in the German Romantic tradition. On the other, the demands of their often uneducated audiences, the lack of resources and contact with German culture, and an internal desire for compositional separation and new creation led to creativity and new techniques.

Immigrant musicians were constrained by the music they could acquire or memorize, so their early performances were limited to memorized or published works, which were overwhelmingly European. It was necessary that composers or improvisers experiment with and master new styles so that performers had access to new American music. This set the stage for the transition to a distinctive American sound, and is why composers like Stoessel, Nevin, and Pommer are important; their divergence from a purely German idiom created the environment in which departure from purely European music became possible. The late 19th century was the time when local theater companies became able to abandon the classics in favor of music with local flair.

Little modern study has been done on such composers, though an examination of the decisions that they made lends insight to the broader perspectives of second- and third-generation German-Americans. A lack of organized materials (and extant materials in general) has hindered modern scholars, but enough survives to suggest the importance and fame of these composers in their lifetime.

**W. H. Pommer**

Hermann, Missouri was a colony founded by typically musical Germans who moved further inland in order to escape from the assimilation that they perceived in the German community of Philadelphia. Along with his mother and siblings, Frederick Pommer made the trip from Philadelphia to the small German village as a young professional. The community lacked the population to support him in his trade, musical instrument making, so Frederick’s branch of the Pommer family relocated to St. Louis, where his son William Henry (whom I shall refer to henceforth simply as Pommer) would reside for most of his life.

As an adolescent in St. Louis, Pommer must have experienced many musical influences; German, American, and multi-ethnic influences were easily available throughout his early life. By 1900, troupes of several German and Italian opera companies had made their way through St. Louis, often performing two or three classic operas in a day. This multi-ethnic nature of St. Louis must inform our understanding of the mindset of Pommer and other German-Americans; around 1876, as Pommer wrote *St. Etheldethelwethelberga*, St. Louis was still heavily German, but improved access to the American interior had brought many other ethnic communities to the city. As a third-generation American, Pommer must have had a much more complex relationship to the multi-ethnic environment in America than that of his grandfather in 1830s Philadelphia.

Pommer’s early teachers, such as Eduard Sobolewski (a German-trained musician and composer) also had a significant impact, if only to interest Pommer in seeking further education. He was

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probably exposed to the St. Louis Musical Union, a precursor to the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, which was well-established and regularly performed significant works.\(^7\)

Some sort of Free-Thinker influence—quite common in St. Louis—is implied by Pommer’s selection of certain opera libretti. For example, *The Legend of St. Etheldethelwethelberga* expresses skepticism toward the Catholic Church and organized religion. Pommer’s involvement with public education (as opposed to ethnic or parochial schools) may suggest a Free-Thinking mentality as well.

After absorbing these early influences, Pommer embarked for study abroad in Germany, adding another very significant element to his experience and training.\(^8\) From 1872 to 1874, he enrolled in the Leipzig Conservatory, where he studied under Carl Reinecke, Ernst Richter, and others.\(^9\) Then, he studied in Vienna for a few months with several notable pedagogues, including Victor Rokitauski and Anton Bruckner.\(^10\)

During his studies, Pommer was afforded an opportunity to perform for the elderly Franz Liszt.\(^11\) However, Liszt was relatively unimpressed with his performance, and Pommer was never lauded in his training. He was given only modest comments on his diploma; his piano instructors called him both insecure and unreliable, though he was “diligent with success” at composition and music theory.\(^12\) Upon graduation, Bruckner also had little to say. Nevertheless, when Pommer returned to the United States, he enjoyed an active and successful career as a composer, and, later, as a significant music educator in the Missouri public university system.

Career and Publications

As an adult, Pommer was most known as an educator and reformer, though his compositional activities did not go unnoticed. Though most of his compositions are dated prior to his tenure as Supervisor of Music for the St. Louis public school system (1900–1907) and first music professor at the University of Missouri (1908–22), extant materials suggest that at least in his later life, Pommer advocated the development of an American (and, more specifically, a Missourian) style.\(^13\)

He is cited in several lectures and publications as a proponent of American compositional development. For instance, in 1910, he was selected by Governor Herbert Hadley of Missouri to head the committee to find a Missouri State Song.\(^14\) He issued a statement on musical development in America as a response to criticism of the contest:

> Many highly educated musicians…turn up their noses at simple songs like ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ and ‘Home Sweet Home,’ but one of our greatest musical critics has pointed out that merely because one’s taste is educated to caviar is no reason for poking fun at the man who likes an apple. What this committee hopes to find is a sound Missouri apple, with the flavor of the State and a taste that lingers.

In a lecture dealing with the direction of American music, he said, “be glad that the struggle is upon us, for has it not already driven the colorless, inane ‘American ballad’ to the wall?” He championed composers like Foster, Gottschalk, and Nevin.\(^16\)

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\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Ibid.


\(^14\) Ibid, 51.

\(^15\) Ibid.

He also published a work titled “A Suggestion to Stimulate American Composition.”

Pommer’s earlier compositional activities, from 1876 to 1898, demonstrated the same qualities he describes in these comments. It seems unlikely that his concern with the American style would have appeared suddenly at the turn of the century. He was recognized in many compendia and encyclopedias, including the American supplement of the 6th Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Pratt’s New Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians, and a Dictionary-Catalogue of Operas and Operettas Which Have Been Performed on the Public Stage. A Century of Missouri Music makes several mentions of Pommer’s compositions and educational efforts.

In Europe, one of his most notable works, Quintett in D minor, was positively reviewed in Wilhelm Altman’s Handbuch für Klavierquintettspieler. It was reviewed as “a work preponderantly worthy of love.” Many other notable musicians praised the work, including Bostonian violinist Albert Stoessel, Missouri natives Frank Gecks (violin) and Ernst Kroeger (composer), and Italian cellist Adolfo Betti, who found the work “effective and brilliant.”

Many of the reviews of his works were written by local critics whose credentials are unknown, which calls the validity of the reviews into question. When a St. Louis Dispatch article by critic Louis Albert Lamb states that “Mr. Pommer is as famous in Munich and Berlin as in his home state,”

we may suspect that his pride in a homegrown composer leads him to exaggerate or make claims beyond his knowledge—but the fact that Pommer’s works were published on at least 119 separate occasions, by both European and American publishers, does provide some supporting evidence of Lamb’s claim. On the other hand, the appreciation for Pommer from his colleagues and notable composers is of more significance and should not be discounted.

Pommer’s Compositions

In the works that our study was most concerned with, critical praise seems to be consistent with his most performed operas and the beloved Quintett. A newspaper clipping preserved by Pommer’s family labeled several numbers in St. Ethel as “better and more scholarly than many a work of greater pretensions.”

While the general forms of the two works that we studied are quite conventional, further study reveals that two forces seem to be at play in each of the works. While Pommer’s German education is apparent at times, his beautiful, melodic writing is often starkly and aggressively contrasted with abrupt, raw, and, frankly, unrefined writing. Likewise, both works have moments with total lapses of harmony: at points of climax at which a more traditionally German composer might use full or complex harmony, Pommer often removes the harmony altogether, leaving a solo voice or instrument to hang alone. There is a consistent presence of simplified chord progressions (which is to be expected in operetta, but certainly not in Romantic string quartet literature). He also uses strange voicings to provide a sense of progression to the works, but rarely ventures past thirds and octaves.

Although Pommer regularly expressed distaste for the developing ethnic music in St. Louis

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18 Wenger, William Henry Pommer, 93, 158.

19 Krohn, A Century of Missouri Music.


21 Wenger, William Henry Pommer, 100.


24 “St. Etheldelwethelberga,” [n.p.], [n.d], quoted in Wenger, William Henry Pommer, 82. In the collection of the Missouri History Museum, item M[25]. The articles acquired by the museum were often clipped and preserved in such a way that it is impossible to determine the author or publisher.
(e.g. ragtime), there is no doubt that he favored folk-like progressions over counterpoint. While these techniques could be the result of his lack of success during his German training, they might also be attempts at the ‘American style’ that Pommer advocated in later lectures. Most likely, it is some combination of both.

However, his writing is not exclusively American. Of course, his relationship to his German-Americanness is complex, specifically because he spent his life in St. Louis, but received most of his training in Europe. Since he had much greater access to scores and references in Europe than upon his return to Missouri, it is no surprise that his compositions present juxtapositions of Romantic, German sounds and newer, rougher techniques.

**St. Etheldethelwethelberga**

Pommer wrote ten operas and operettas between 1876 and 1896—following his return to St. Louis from Europe until just before his appointment as Supervisor of Music for St. Louis Public Schools.\(^{25}\) The works garnered many local performances, but there is no record of any outside of St. Louis. Many scores, piano reductions, and librettos survive, so we can be sure that the issues discussed in *St. Etheldethelwethelberga* are common themes, especially since Pommer collaborated with William Schuyler, the librettist, many times.\(^{26}\) Though Pommer was not confident in his scores, they earned enthusiastic reviews; with one report of his work *The Mummy* suggesting Pommer had “the divine spark [of genius]”.\(^{27}\)

*St. Etheldethelwethelberga* was one of Pommer’s early operettas, dating from around 1878. We know it was performed at least once (probably twice or more) because of an extant list of chorus members and a clipping of a newspaper review. The libretto was published by J. H. Chase of St. Louis, and Pommer saved a piano-vocal score in his collection. It is very possible that an orchestrated version never existed, since some of Pommer’s operettas were performed in his mother’s parlor and other small venues.\(^{28}\) However, we are sure that the work was performed at least once to a larger audience, since a newspaper review read that “the house was overflowing full.”\(^{29}\) The reviewer enjoyed several of the operetta’s numbers, and said that “the opera was a great success, the plot and versification very good, indeed, and the music better and more scholarly than many a work of greater pretensions now before the public.”\(^{30}\) Whoever the reviewer was, he felt sufficiently qualified to comment on the scholarliness of the musical writing.

I have completed a transcription from Pommer’s manuscript to electronic notation. This has given me an intimate knowledge of *St. Ethel*, and has made it possible for the work to be performed once again. The operetta is based on religious, ethnic, and romantic tensions. Etheldethelwethelberga (Ethel) is the daughter of a ruler, Athelstane, from an unspecified part of England. From some conquest or another, Athelstane returns with a Welsh harper, ap Tomas ap Morgan ap Owen ap Jones (Aptomas). Ethel and Aptomas fall in love, though they are not without occasional petty disputes. Athelstane and the townspeople are enraged, and the local abbess and friar step in to aggravate them further. Athelstane and Aptomas fight, and, while they are both incapacitated, the Abbess convinces Ethel that they are both dead, so that Ethel has no choice but to become a nun. By the time the combatants return to consciousness, it is too late to undo Ethel’s decision.

Though the text was not written by Pommer, we can be sure that he had some input. The librettist, William Schuyler, must have been Pommer’s close friend. He was a fellow teacher and administrator in St. Louis, and Pommer set 21 of his texts to music.

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26 Ibid, 112.

27 “Social Gossip,” [n.p.], 20 April 1878, quoted in Wenger, William Henry Pommer, 83. The article is in the collection of the Missouri State Historical Society, item M[25]. Pommer wrote on *The Mummy’s* cover page, “Notice! This, as well as all other efforts in this direction up to the ‘Daughter of Socrates,’ I discard, as they... have no value.”


29 “St. Etheldethelwethelberga,” quoted in Wenger, William Henry Pommer, 82.

30 Ibid.
Pommer preserved much of their correspondence in his journals, and selected Schuyler to serve on the committee of the State Song competition in 1909. In several ways, the libretto is typical of German-Americans in the late 19th century.

There is mockery of the Irish and Welsh—a traditionally German-American pastime. Some of the lead characters are presented with ridiculous accents, and the setting presents itself as a twisted sort of exoticism; the characters represent a variety of British ethnicities, and the operetta’s location is simply somewhere in Britain, with few clues as to where it might be. This ethnic vagueness is reminiscent of European exoticism of the time, in the fashion that Bizet or Delibes would present Africa or the Oriental East.

Plenty of jokes are also made at the expense of the church. The tongue-in-cheek presentation of the town Friar and Abbess as scheming and sinful suggests that Schuyler and Pommer felt some sympathy for Free-Thinking or anti-Catholic perspectives. There is plenty of dancing and drinking—typical of German theatre and real life at the time. These characteristics lend the English text of the operetta a distinctly secular German tone.

Moving to musical qualities, we will examine a scene in the second act that presents Pommer’s stylistic juxtapositions succinctly (Fig. 1). The heroine, Ethel, begins by reflecting on her love for Aptomas. The overdone metaphor of the libretto is delightful—“As the sunlight shineth / In the weird depths of the ocean, / And midst sea plants twineth, / Waving in the water’s motion, / Many a pearl revealing / That the warm, light feeling / Shines forth with unwonted glow aflame.” The accompaniment, mostly homophonic, is relatively sophisticated in its harmonies (at least for Pommer), creating a beautiful accompaniment for Ethel’s melody.

What follows is quite a contrast. The first repetition of Ethel’s song ends as the piano takes up the vocal melody for four bars, after which we return to the beginning of the melody (Fig. 2). The second repetition, however, cuts off the piano melody, launching instead into a raw, tritone-filled duet between Aptomas and Ethel (Fig. 3). The vocal melodies are reduced to lengthy, chromatically descending lines, and the piano repeats the same pattern for nearly 50 measures.

At first glance, the writing is certainly more primitive in this second half of the number. But, the writing follows the plot—Ethel is seeking a sweet moment while Aptomas complains of Ethel’s “sighs and groans.” Perhaps the grinding intervals in the piano and the gradually descending melodies allude to these lamentations. It seems that this could be an attempt at the unsophisticated “Missouri apple” that Pommer referred to in later publications. The presence of the tritone passage suggests that Pommer is attempting to develop new compositional techniques, occasionally going to extremes that distance him from his European education.

This simplistic style is even more egregious in the ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’ chorus from the first act. For nearly thirty seconds, the entire chorus and piano play and sing in unison (Fig. 4). The remainder of the song is spent alternating between two chords while the chorus repeats over and over “ha, ha, ha, ha” on one note (Fig. 5). Clearly, this takes the concept of a simplified texture to the extreme.
Here too, the very simple passage is preceded by a considerably more ‘normal’ section in a duet between Ethel and her father, Athelstane. The interplay between their voices is light and ordinary for operetta—plenty of thirds and few deviations from diatonic tonality. However, even this section displays some odd textural writing; in the transition between this duet and the “Ha! Ha! Ha!” aria that follows, the piano plays descending diatonic chords...in first inversion (Fig. 6). The series of 6/3 inversions is quite peculiar. Though this technique was used in 15th-century European music as fauxbourdon, it was not customary in the 19th century.

These excerpts bring to light another issue of Pommer’s style—his lack of counterpoint. Pommer often attempts other characteristically Romantic techniques, and when he attempts to write in a lush, harmonically complex idiom, he usually succeeds. He is capable of mimicking the styles of works he would have been exposed to in Germany.31 Because of this, the lack of counterpoint appears to be intentional.

Where more Germanic composers would usually utilize lush, full harmony or complex counterpoint, Pommer often removes the accompaniment altogether, leaving the vocalist singing all alone. We can hear this in act III, during the love duet between Ethel and Aptomas (Fig. 7). This technique is used many times throughout the operetta. This is another example of the simplicity of Pommer’s style—his writing is often minimal (and perhaps counterintuitive), but still effective, since it catches the listener off-guard.

31 This is even more apparent in his String Quartet; more on that later.
Figure 4: “Ha! Ha! Ha!” Chorus, Part 1

Figure 5: “Ha! Ha! Ha!” Chorus, Part 2

Figure 6: Chords in First Inversion (Fauxbourdon Style?)
Pommer uses several other techniques wildly—a trait that separates him from his German counterparts. His use of absurdly extended ostinati, prolonged fragmentation, and simplified harmonic progressions goes far beyond German works of the period. His use of extended ostinati is exemplified in the “Ha! Ha! Ha!” aria (see fig. 4), and he seems to use fragmentation or diminution of a piano melody to end every scene in the operetta. Likewise, there are long sequences where Pommer does nothing but alternate between dominant and tonic harmonies. This certainly contrasts the moments of harmonic complexity which at times seem to chase the ideal of German Romanticism.

Some of these simple approaches to musical construction are quite common in operetta, so finding them in *St. Ethel* is not a surprise—but these techniques often extend to his works in other genres, lending his music a distinctly non-German sound. For this reason, analysis of Pommer’s String Quartet in G Minor strengthens the argument for Pommer’s “American style.”

For each genre Pommer wrote in, he achieved a significantly different sound, which seems justifiable; the audiences Pommer faced ranged from uneducated Midwestern farmers to first-generation trained German musicians. Pommer was certainly writing with his audiences in mind. It is unlikely that

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**Figure 7: A Moment When Pommer Eliminates Harmony Entirely**

![Image of musical score showing a moment when harmony is eliminated.](image-url)
the audiences of his operetta in St. Louis would have been drawn to lofty art music, just as the musicians performing his string and piano works might not have enjoyed the simple, raunchy writing of his operetta. Thus, it is surprising that Pommer’s String Quartet in G Minor shares so many traits with St. Etheldelwethelberga. If Pommer had not later espoused the “American style,” his consistent use of non-German techniques would make little sense.

**String Quartet in G Minor**

To most German composers, the string quartet represented the height of artistic and intellectual expression. In a sense, it appears that Pommer agreed with his German counterparts. His String Quartet in G Minor presents even stronger contrasts than *St. Ethel* between lush Romanticism and abrupt (and often unanticipated) harmonic shifts, excessive ostinati, and strange textural idioms. As he was presumably writing for an educated audience, his ‘Americanisms’ stand more blatantly next to unaffected, characteristic Romantic harmony. In fact, Pommer observed German conventions so much more in his string works that occasionally we do find counterpoint (which is totally lacking in *St. Ethel*). This is not to say that his string works lack moments where the melody hangs alone.

Pommer focused on chamber works throughout his later teaching career, which was a period of greatly diminished compositional productivity. He wrote several notable and well-received works, including *Fünf Stücke für Violine und Klavier* [op. 20], sonatas for violin and viola (accompanied by piano), a piano quintet, two piano trios, and two string quartets.

It appears that his chamber works were among the most revered, alongside his choral writing. They received many performances and publications, and received recognition from the Missouri Music Teachers Association, the *Musical Courier*, the St. Louis Art League Music Competition, the Missouri State Federation of Music Clubs, the Guild of American Violinists, Wilhelm Altmann (in his reference work *Handbuch für Klavierquintettspieler*), and the St. Louis Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Though the dates of the string quartets are unknown, it is likely that they were written after the turn of the century, because the publication dates of other chamber works range from 1905 to 1913.

The first movement of the String Quartet in G Minor follows sonata form, as one would expect of a Romantic-era piece (*Fig. 8*).

**Figure 8: Analysis of Pommer’s Quartet in G Minor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposition</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>Key</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theme I</td>
<td>1-15</td>
<td>Gm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>15-22</td>
<td>Gm/Cm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme II</td>
<td>24-65</td>
<td>BbM</td>
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<td>Codetta</td>
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<td>Theme I</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
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32 Second perhaps only to the symphony


36 It is interesting to note that *St. Ethel* also follows a traditional three-act form, with a typical arc of storytelling. Pommer took few risks with the organization of his pieces.
Pommer is not concerned with innovative form, but he uses the form to set up contrasts between complex harmony and unexpectedly simple textures and intervals. He often defies the expectations for specific sections, and frequently favors the incongruous. For instance, in the transition between Theme I and Theme II, the tempo moves suddenly from *Allegro Vivace* to *Andante Sostenuto*—unexpected this early in an *Allegro* movement. This section also modulates abruptly to C minor (iv), jumping sharply to a C fully diminished chord several times, followed by a dominant seven flat nine chord on G. The transition back to the second theme is just as abrupt, with the second violin playing a solitary Bb major scale (Fig. 9). The coda presents an even stronger juxtaposition.

**Figure 9: Transition between Themes in Exposition**
Pommer’s love of the tritone is apparent in each piece. Even more aggressively than in the second act of the operetta (Fig. 3), the coda in the String Quartet uses a repetitive and abrasive tritone. The contrast here is the most clear (Fig. 10). The strings work their way to a tritone (G and C#), which grows in volume to an accented fortississimo (the loudest dynamic of the piece). There is a pause, followed by a snippet of the first theme. The music pauses again, only to return to the grinding tritone. Another pause and the phrase of the first theme is completed. It would be difficult for Pommer to juxtapose more clearly a raw, unsophisticated sound with his lyrical melodic writing. The presentation of the tritone is as clear and aggressive as possible, which one can only imagine that Pommer intentionally embraced.

Figure 10: Beginning of Coda
Pommer’s textural abnormalities are also apparent in the string quartet. Just as he often drops the harmony entirely for climactic moments in *St. Ethel*, he reduces the harmonic intensity at some climactic moments in the string quartet. For instance, the first theme begins with a lyrical melody that is passed between instruments, supported by full harmony in the other voices. The part pushes forward, but as it ends, the violins enter with a *forte* melody in octaves (Fig. 11). Here, the viola offers some counterpoint, but the harmonic texture is reduced, relative to the full chordal harmony in the first eight bars. The listener expects the second theme to spin out (as it does), and the marked *forte* indicates that Pommer planned for this section to contrast the following *piano* section (around eight bars later). Though not as absurd as the harmonic contrasts in *St. Ethel*, the reduced harmony seems to work against the dynamic expansion.

**Figure 11: The First Theme in the Recapitulation**
It appears that Pommer felt that harmonic simplification could serve to heighten the intensity of the music—or perhaps he hoped to surprise the audience with a moment of unclouded writing. As in the first transition, he uses texture in a novel way to create emphasis. For many other composers, a lush, fuller harmony would be used as the piece builds to its climax. Pommer’s sense of ‘harmonic minimalism’ in the quartet recalls moments in St. Ethel, such as the climax of Ethel and Aptomas’s love duet (Fig. 6) and the ‘Ha! Ha! Ha!’ chorus (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).

The development, as expected, features complex harmonic writing that mimics his German counterparts. Ideologically, that section is almost totally unrelatable to St. Ethel, as they serve to entertain very differently educated audiences. Nonetheless, the final harmonic motion of the development is a move from #iv to V (C#m-D). This progression is also employed in the finale of St. Ethel. Even with writing as conservative as in St. Ethel, Pommer sneaks in complex harmonic motion and ties his works together in unexpected ways.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, Pommer was not comfortable enough to break totally from the compositional style of his heritage. However, clear progress is made in his music towards what he describes as an ideal American style. It would be hard to justify his moments of quirky writing in any other way, particularly since it appears as a bold contrast to the remnants of his German training. From this evidence, it would appear that Pommer was intentionally trying to develop and advance the ‘American Style’.

Pommer’s new sounds (as they appear next to his Germanic writing) diverged from the academic intellectual writing of the European school. His grinding dissonances, odd and often sparse voicings, and inclusion of folk-like harmonic progressions present a new approach to the incorporation of unsophisticated music into traditional styles. His discussion of the American style in his later life reinforces this argument.

However, because of a lack of extant materials, Pommer’s intentions (particularly in his younger years) are necessarily unclear. If he was resisting his German training, it is unclear why he chose to continue to incorporate traditional writing amid his less conventional material. Perhaps Pommer was seeking to appeal to a broader audience—it would have been impossible for him to achieve his position of acclaim without appealing both to music critics and to the general public. It is also possible that Pommer viewed his voice as a compromise between the new and old. This is plausible considering the extended time he spent in each country.

Pommer’s compositional decisions might also be unintentional—mere products of quirks in his personality. Perhaps he saw his style as a development of the German voice and did not consider the issue of an American style until later in life, after his own compositional activities had dwindled. Though this seems unlikely, it is certainly possible. Clearly, more work needs to be done before we can have a concrete idea of the intentions of William Henry Pommer.
Bibliography


