

## American Reed Organs and the Music of Stephen Foster

This semester, I will give a lecture recital on April 4th about American Reed Organs and the Music of Stephen Foster. Usually, senior music performance majors give an hour long performance recital as the capstone of their degree. Unfortunately, I sustained a mouth injury that prevented me from playing a senior recital. Cancelling the recital would be devastating since it would prevent me from graduating, so I decided to give a lecture recital instead.

A lecture recital is where one researches a musicological topic and then presents the findings with a lecture and a small performance. I chose to research American reed organs because my family had our heirloom reed organ restored to playing condition a few months ago. In the 19th century, reed organs were more popular than pianos but today are rarely seen or heard. I think that reed organs are an unique, underappreciated instrument and I wanted to share this instrument with my peers because it played a vital role in American music history. Since I was giving a lecture recital, I needed a performance aspect on my primary instrument. I chose to arrange parlor songs by 19th century American composer, Stephen Foster, for horn and reed organ. I would be exploring a new medium in musical composition as there are no existing compositions for horn and reed organ.

I began my research by going to the main library and checking out every book on American reed organs in the University of Georgia collection. Surprisingly, I found a few books in German, but was unable to use those sources due to the language barrier. The books had extensive bibliographies linking to primary sources, most of which were in the hands of private collectors. Because these books were written in the 1970s, I was unsure if the private museums were still open. After some research, I found that they were not. Nearly every book cited Robert

Gellerman's books, *The American Reed Organ* and *Gellerman's International Reed Organ Atlas*, both of which I obtained from the UGA library. Gellerman was the foremost researcher in this field and did extensive research on all aspects of reed organs. Unfortunately, there are few other musicologists who specialize in this area. Gellerman edited a reprint of a 19th century reed organ primer titled *The Improved Easy Method for the Parlor Organ*. Because this book is not often called for, it was in the repository, and I requested to check it out. I searched for more sources through the Georgia PINES public libraries, but did not find any new sources because UGA already has most of books that have been published about American reed organs.

The research regarding the biography of Stephen Foster and the history of the songs was fairly straight forward. I began by checking out various biographies from the main library and reading the entry on Foster in the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, a reference book in the music library. Through Galileo's online database, I found that the article on Foster from the *Grove Dictionary of American Music* was more complete and better suited for my study. By using Google Scholar I was able to obtain a useful abstract from the Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale (RILM) database about the total royalties Foster earned. Also on RILM, I found a book review of *Manufacturing the Muse*, which is a book specifically on Estey reed organs and 19th century consumer culture. After reading the review, I knew that it would be an excellent source for my project. I tracked it down through WorldCat, only to find that the University of Georgia owned a copy and I had overlooked it. I am glad I found it! This book became one of my favorite sources because it described how American reed organs influenced domestic life.

In addition to print media, I listened to as much music played on reed organs or songs by Stephen Foster as I could. I took advantage of UGA's extensive CD collection. Dr. Kevin Kelly, one of UGA's music librarians, recommended a particular CD of Stephen Foster's music sung by the famous soprano, Jan DeGaetani. Coincidentally, the performers used a reed organ in the performance! In addition to UGA's physical collection, I browsed recordings online through NAXOS Music Library and Music Online: American Song; both of these sites are databases provided by Galileo. When searching for music played on reed organs, I would have to use multiple keywords since reed organs are known by a variety of names. The list includes: reed organ, parlor organ, pump organ, and melodeon. Sometimes it was useful to have a search limit of NOT "India" or "Indian" since India has their own version of a reed organ used in Indian traditional music. YouTube was also a helpful online source for finding music and instructional videos on reed organs. I found Rodney Jantzi's "Reeding 101" video series helpful for explaining how reed organs work.

After reading Gellerman's books, I learned that there was a Reed Organ Society. I visited the Reed Organ Society's webpage and found interesting primary sources including 19th century advertisements, company trading cards, and a registry of over 10,000 reed organs. I also learned that the Region II Counselor of the Reed Organ Society, which includes the Southern U.S., Central and South America, was music historian and collector Jerry Taylor, of Young Harris, Georgia. I contacted Mr. Taylor and explained the aims of my research, which resulted in an invitation to visit his collection of reed organs. He has an impressive collection of over 20 American reed organs spanning the era of reed organ production, ranging from an early Taylor & Farley lap organ from 1847 to an Estey field organ from WWII. When I visited the collection, I

was allowed to play on the reed organs and see the inner workings of them. I received firsthand experience on the different techniques used on American reed organs and was able to see how the reed organ evolved over time. Mr. Taylor has been vital resource for this project. I am extremely grateful to Mr. Taylor for providing the 1891 Mason & Hamlin reed organ that was used for the recital; this project would not have been the same without his help.

In addition to researching reed organs and the songs of Stephen Foster, I created special arrangements of Foster's songs for horn and reed organ. I checked out an annotated edition of Stephen Foster's music from the music library and was able to obtain PDFs of the original publications through the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP), which is an ongoing project to house all of the world's public domain music. Using the PDFs, I was able to convert the files into a score that I could manipulate in a music notation software. However, for one of the songs, "Nelly Was a Lady", the PDF from IMSLP would not transfer properly. Because "Nelly" is not a song that is often played, there were not many other places where I could find an electronic copy. I thought I was going to have to go through the tedious process of inputting the piece manually, but then I remembered that several of my Stephen Foster biographies cited the Library of Congress for the original editions of Foster's songs. I went to the Library of Congress' webpage and was able to find photographs of the song in question. I was then able to convert the picture to a format where I could arrange the song.

Going through the process of intensely researching a subject and compiling all of my work in a lecture recital was a rewarding process. I was already familiar with how to use the library and databases before this project, but this was the first time I had ever contacted a historian to aid in my research. It was a little nerve wracking at first, but the results were well

worth the effort. I believe I have gained valuable experience by researching this subject which will undoubtedly aid me in the future.

## Abstract

This lecture recital is about the development and use of American reed organs in the United States and the influence of Stephen Foster's songs. The American reed organ is a keyboard instrument whose sound is produced by a vibrating brass reed when under a vacuum. These instruments were more popular than pianos in 19th century America because they were cheaper, easier to move, and could better withstand the harsh frontier climate. However, by the turn of the 20th century, pianos became more affordable and they soon replaced the American reed organ as the primary domestic instrument. Today, American reed organs are rarely seen or heard.

Stephen Foster (1826-1864) is considered one of the first American composers. He wrote nearly 300 songs and a few, such as "Oh! Susanna" and "Camptown Races", transcended into the realm of American folksongs. However, Foster received very little money for his compositions and died penniless. Foster primarily composed parlor songs, which are songs for voice and keyboard that are sung in a domestic setting. This is the kind of music that would have been played on American reed organs. I have selected five of Foster's songs and arranged them for horn and American reed organ. I will perform these songs and be accompanied by a 1891 Mason & Hamlin reed organ during the recital.

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