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Disruptive Voices in the American Musical Discourse: Comic Song Performance in the American Parlor, 1865-1917

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kevin Steven O'Brien entitled "Disruptive Voices in the American Musical Discourse: Comic Song Performance in the American Parlor, 1865-1917." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music, with a major in Music.

Leslie C. Gay, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Disruptive Voices in the American Musical Discourse:
Comic Song Performance in the American Parlor, 1865-1917

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Music
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kevin Steven O'Brien

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Abstract

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the American song sheet industry vastly increased in size. This mass mediated form reached a broad number of consumers, who performed this music in their homes, identified with it, and shaped the new discourse on their identity as they did so. Simultaneously, Americans were re-shaping their cultural conceptions of music, in a process Lawrence Levine chronicled as the emergence of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” distinctions. Performing music in the culturally sacralized space of the parlor was meant to be an edifying experience and a display of genteel, “highbrow” identities. Performing comic songs (comic character pieces, topical songs, and parody pieces), however, presented distinct, subversive, and disruptive voices in this crisis moment of American cultural discourse. In the segmented idealized realms of nineteenth-century music, the performance of comic songs in the American parlor provided a powerful means of embodying “lowbrow” identities, contributing to and challenging the emerging constructions of class.

Working with Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, I examine how late nineteenth-century American song sheets served as the basis for the corporeal signification of identities. Using key examples from song sheets that specify the use of pantomime, dance, costuming, and vocal alterations, I demonstrate how they engaged the body and created physical and verbal performatives that embodied comic “lowbrow” identities. By showing how singers fully engaged their bodies and altered themselves for performance, I argue that their mimetic embodiments of Others entered alternate identities into constructions of their own.

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Chapter 1 : The High, The Low, and The Comic

Introduction

In 1900, almost fifty years after Stephen Foster penned “Old Folks at Home,” Edgar S. Werner & Co. published a booklet illustrating the proper method of performing the piece. Accompanying each line of the song, photos of a young woman demonstrate recommended gestures. Dressed entirely in white, the young woman resembles a ballet dancer as she strikes poses reminiscent of the severe style of classical Greek statues. Next to each photograph, detailed descriptions prescribe exactly what to do with every body part. For example, while singing the titular line “And for de old folks at home,” the booklet instructs the performer to stand:

Left foot back, strong; right hand supine, oblique ascending; left hand on heart; head right oblique, slightly drooping toward right shoulder; eyes looking in direction of right hand.¹

Each pose and gesture was carefully crafted to match the content of each line and embody meaning. For Edgar S. Werner, the booklet’s publisher, gesture was a language.

A few years prior, in 1893, Werner had co-authored a book on the methods of famed French musician and elocutionist François Delsarte (1811-1871), who defined gesture not as accompaniment to speech, but its interpreter. Delsarte believed that gesture was “the bond of union between inflection and thought,”² and “the direct language of the heart.”³ Bodily actions carry as much performative weight as speech. Thus, as the young woman in Werner’s booklet

¹Reprinted in “Foster-Hall Bulletin,” *Foster-Hall Bulletin* 11 (1935): 22.

² L’Abbé Delaumosne et al., *Delsarte System of Oratory* (New York: E.S. Werner, 1893), 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

sings “When will I hear de banjo tumming/ Down in my good old home?” (see Figure 1.1) and holds her “hands in the position for playing the banjo,”⁴ she not only enacts the literal lyrical content through mimetic action, she embodies the desire for the sensory experience of hearing the banjo by having her “head dropped toward [the imaginary] banjo,”⁵ and she constructs a place for her imagined “good old home” by “looking toward right front.”⁶

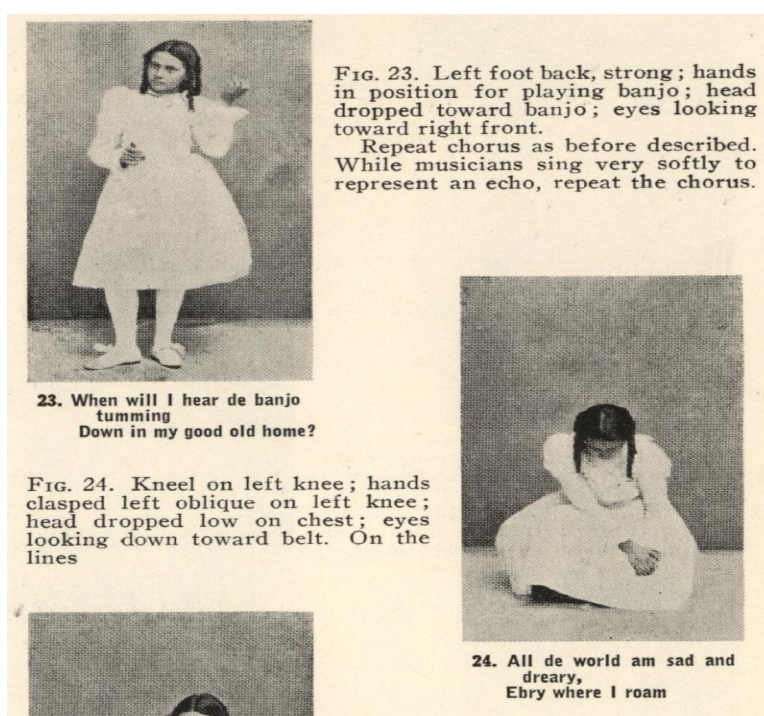


Figure 1.1 “Pantomime of Old Folks at Home, or Swanee River”⁷

⁴ Reprinted in “Foster-Hall Bulletin,” *Foster-Hall Bulletin* 11 (1935): 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

The dramatic nature of this pantomime, however, starkly contrasts the minstrel dialect and context of Foster's song. Although this example comes from one of Foster's sentimental melodies and it held a prominent place in the American parlor music tradition from its outset, it was nonetheless derived from the American blackface minstrel tradition; a tradition centered on white males made up as exaggerated black stereotypes performing bawdy songs and dances for largely working class male audiences. Eric Lott has even argued that "the minstrel show...primitive in execution, and raucous in effect," helped generate the emerging break "between elite, genteel, and low cultures."⁸ According to Lawrence Levine, the American categorizations of "high" and "low" culture emerged in the "second half of the nineteenth century."⁹ Illustrating the rising distinction, Levine quotes author Hiram M. Stanley, who wrote in 1894 that anyone displaying "a permanent taste for higher pleasures...ceases, *ipso facto*, to belong to the 'masses,'" a group Stanley defined by their interest in "eating, drinking, smoking, society of the other sex, with dancing, [and] music of a noisy and lively character."¹⁰ The American distinction between high and low culture, as Levine argues, is determined "less by pedigree than by their life style, manners, and cultural artifacts."¹¹ "Highbrow" actions and possessions generated what Levine termed a "cloak of culture" that the "new professional and middle class" used to "distance themselves, culturally at least, from those below them on the socioeconomic scale."¹² Werner's publication of Foster's minstrel tune blurs this distinction as it

⁸ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 64.

⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 224.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹² *Ibid.*

transports a working class repertoire to the parlor, a primarily feminine space set aside specifically for displaying genteel and “highbrow” ideals.

The forms and modes of power that constructed the notions of high and low culture were engaged in a divisive dialogue on all forms of music in the late nineteenth century. Comic songs presented distinct, subversive, and disruptive voices in a crisis moment of American cultural discourse. Our current understanding of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” cultures did not exist in the same sense in the late nineteenth century, and the conflicting and paradoxical voice of comic songs within the parlor was part of the discourse that led to their construction. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner has not only argued that the “supposedly hard and objective social phenomenon” of class is “culturally constructed,” she has further propounded a poststructuralist position “that cultural constructions are always ‘ideological,’ always situated with respect to the forms and modes of power operating in a given time and place.”¹³ Lawrence Levine has convincingly argued for the rise of these ideological distinctions in the public performance of late-nineteenth-century music, specifically the sacralization of symphonic and operatic traditions, but I extend it beyond the public sphere to the parlor.

Parlor music is the music of “mass culture,” a cultural group Simon Frith defines not by class affiliations, but as one “made possible by technological change, by the use of the means of mass cultural production”¹⁴ like song sheets. Frith has also argued, based on Pierre Bourdieu’s “concept of ‘cultural capital,’” that every cultural group has ways of listening, where certain “aesthetic [responses]” are deemed “socially appropriate,” and “the aesthetic response can

¹³ Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 66.

¹⁴ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 32.

only be understood by reference to the social organization of taste which patterns people's lifestyle, morality and habitus."¹⁵ The parlor aesthetic was a construction, an organization of taste that expounded beliefs in refinement and gentility. Thus, the parlor was not an exclusive realm of a social class, but a set of organizing principles that guided acceptable behaviors. As Simon Frith explains in his interpretation of Levine:

the crucial high/low conflict is not that between social classes but that produced by the commercial process itself at all levels of cultural expression, in pop as well as classical music.... High/low thus describes the emergence of consumer elites or cults.¹⁶

The "consumer elites" Frith depicts altered the American musical discourse, and as new definitions of socially acceptable musical engagement emerged, the home performance of comic songs shifted into a conflicted and disruptive experience. In the segmented idealized realms of nineteenth-century music, the performance of comic songs in the American parlor provided a powerful means of embodying "lowbrow" identities, contributing to and challenging the emerging constructions of class. The contextualized "highbrow" performance of "lowbrow" songs like "Old Folks at Home" encapsulates this conflicted discourse within individual bodies.

Scope and Definitions

The music performed in parlors varied from Foster to Beethoven, from minstrelsy to opera transcriptions, but the space of the parlor had a consistent definition as a place of "refinement." Katherine C. Grier defined the late-nineteenth-century parlor as a space reflecting the Victorian "fascination" with "gentility...[which] stressed individual cultivation and

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

social display.”¹⁷ In her study of the nineteenth-century Christian home, cultural historian Colleen McDannell emphasized the Victorian parlor’s important role in “conveying to the visitor the respectability and status of the family.”¹⁸ Pianos and “portfolios”¹⁹ of printed music provided evidence of this gentility. In Arthur Minton’s 1938 history of parlor music, he described the archetypal parlor as a room with a piano, “topped, perhaps, with a fringed silken scarf, heroic family portraits, and even a bowl of goldfish...[symbols] of the higher life.”²⁰ The majority of the mass-produced music performed in the parlor focused on sentimental treatments of courtship that served largely to reinforce normative behavior. Minton described parlor music as “the essence of ‘refinement,’” metaphorically avoiding the lowbrow by lifting “its skirts above the vulgar.”²¹

The feminine metaphor Minton uses proves especially relevant, as the main producers of parlor music were women. Mary Burgan’s analysis of the representation of women’s music-making in nineteenth-century fiction shows that “the ultimate rationale for musical training for young women was the exercise of moral rather than aesthetic aptitudes.”²² When close family and friends gathered for a parlor theatrical or musicale, the act was a chance to display social value or engage in important courtship rituals. Women’s parlor performances were “a

¹⁷ Katherine C. Grier, “The Decline of the Memory Palace: The Parlor after 1890,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 53-54.

¹⁸ Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 27.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Arthur Minton, “Parlor Music,” *American Speech* 13, no. 4 (1938): 255.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mary Burgan, “Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” *Victorian Studies* 30, no. 1 (1986): 61.

commodity”²³ in Burgan’s terms, a “part of the young woman’s dowry and public identity.”²⁴ Victorian era courtship, according to Jennifer Phegley, “was considered a trial period in which to examine one’s potential partner to make sure they were suitable,” and potential suitors of both genders inspected each other for “signs of disrespectful behavior...a lack of religious feeling, or any inclination toward ‘expensive pleasures,’ ‘low and vulgar amusements,’ or ‘foppish, eccentric, or very slovenly’ appearance.”²⁵ As parlor performers—especially young women—sang, played, and danced for one another, their identities were on display for their closest relations and potential life-partners to scrutinize. Every action in this culturally sacralized space was meant to reflect refinement and gentility. Paradoxically, some music, such as Foster’s minstrel tunes and other “comic songs” (comic character pieces, topical songs, and parody pieces) came in direct opposition to notions of refinement, and their performance in the parlor ruptured the desired “highbrow” identity the parlor sought to create.

The comic song’s distinctly subversive voice comes from its dialectical opposition to the majority of the mass-mediated music of the late nineteenth century. Charles Hamm exhaustively detailed the American popular song throughout history, noting that in the years after the American Civil War songs took on a clear “consistency and character,”²⁶ which was primarily sentimental, pathetic, or tragic. The use of intense pathos and emotional appeal dominated popular song writing, as Jon Finson points out in his survey of nineteenth-century song themes, and these pathetic ballads “invested familiar situations with heightened drama in

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 60.

²⁵ Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 36-37.

²⁶ Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: Norton, 1979), 254.

order to arrest public attention."²⁷ In contrast, the term comic did not necessarily describe songs that made an attempt at humor or the incitement of laughter; rather the term denoted the opposite of tragic. Any song of an upbeat nature, in melody and lyrical content, was thought of as comic. The binary separation of sentimental from comic, and the relative minority position of comic songs, caused a writer for *The Clipper*, a New York trade publication, to begin an 1877 announcement for a visiting Italian singer by saying:

While the pathetic ballad thrills the heart with ecstatic pleasure as it recalls some sweet moment when love enchanted the soul, there are other forms of song and other types of singers that are intended to offset the serious side of life, and cheer the heart with merriment.²⁸

The author felt it necessary to remind the reader that lighter fare did indeed exist outside of the "pathetic ballad."

The verse-chorus form cemented as the standard during this era. The basic form laid out by Charles Hamm for "almost all songs of this time," was to: "begin with a piano (instrumental) introduction...have a verse for a solo voice," where "there is text for 2 to 4 verses, each sung to the same music, unfolding a brief drama or sketching a vignette usually of nostalgic, cautionary, pathetic, or tragic content;" the songs "continue with a refrain, most often arranged for four voices, derived musically from some part of the verse....it functions as a choral commentary on the dramatic situation developed in the successive verses;" and then concludes "with a piano postlude."²⁹ The term "chorus" derived from the minstrel show practice of having all the voices join in. The chorus was not just a separate section of the form; the label suggests that multiple

²⁷ Jon W. Finson, *The Voices That are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 43.

²⁸ "A Serio-Comic," *The Clipper*, June 2, 1877.

²⁹ Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 254-55.

performers, on stage or in the parlor, may have been voicing songs together. Additionally, the piano postludes were frequently marked “dance,” further suggesting ways that song sheets physically engaged the body.

Moreover, Hamm’s analysis of popular songs in the decades following the American Civil War concludes by claiming that popular song was “moving out of contact with the realities of life in the United States...painting an essentially false picture of certain aspects of American society.”³⁰ Hamm recognizes the sentimental themes of most parlor songs as fabrications, but does not connect these themes to the desire to portray these fabricated identities. The “nostalgic, cautionary, pathetic, or tragic”³¹ content Hamm found in the majority of parlor songs reinforces normative courtship behaviors and acceptable Victorian genteel ideas. Chas. K. Harris’ monumental success “After the Ball,”³² published in 1892, fits this model, wherein an elderly man nostalgically recalls a failed attempt at love. In contrast, comic songs are equally false, as the wildly exaggerated identities they portray are not direct depictions of reality, and they do not paint a desirable or ideal picture of any aspect of American society. Comic character pieces portray low-class or foolish characters; parody songs reveal farce by extending conventions to exaggerated extremes; and topical comic songs connect directly to real events, but mock and subvert them.

Among the comic songs, sub-categories stand out. The most prevalent is the “comic character piece,” involving narratives, told in the first person by the “comic character,” offering ready opportunities to embody alternative lowbrow identities. For example, the 1875 song

³⁰ Ibid., 283.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Chas K. Harris, “After the Ball,” Jos. Clauder, arr. (Milwaukee WI: Chas K. Harris & Co., 1892), Box 140, Item 4, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

“Funny Old Gal,”³³ adopts the point of view of an eccentric old woman who gets in street fights and looks for another husband even though she already has nine. For male performers this song would involve slipping into a female identity to enact a criticism of it; and for female performers, this character would involve representing the Self in an alternate identity.

Other useful comic song categorizations include “parody” and “topical” songs. Parody most often designated a song with intertextual relationships to another. Parodies usually occurred most often in one of two further sub-categories, the medley and the sequel song. The parody medley involved arranging a variety of other popular melodies, and changing their lyrics to present one humorous idea. For example, 1881’s “Domestic Squabbles, or, My Mother In Law,” transforms songs of the day, such as “Take This Message to My Mother” and “I Love to Think of the Days When I Was Young,” into complaints about an overbearing mother-in-law.³⁴ The sequel song usually did not directly quote the music of a previous song, but closely paralleled its style while the lyrics continued the narrative of the earlier song, but in an unexpected and humorous manner. The 1888 song “How I Got Even With O’Grady: Companion Song to Harry Kennedy’s Great Hit, ‘I Owe Ten Dollars to O’Grady,’”³⁵ takes a narrative on an immigrant’s crippling poverty and transforms it into a comical tale of revenge and adultery. The term “topical” was generally applied to songs on contemporary political and cultural events, and even included specific names within the lyrics. For example the 1875 song “Upside Down”

³³ Fred Alberts, “The Funny Old Gal” (Boston: Louis P. Goullard, 1875), Box 1, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁴ Harry Hunter, “Domestic Squabbles, or, My Mother In Law,” W. Williams, arr. (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1881), Box 054, Item 029, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³⁵ Thos. P. Getz, “How I Got Even With O’Grady. Companion Song to Harry Kennedy’s Great Hit, ‘I Owe Ten Dollars to O’Grady’” (San Francisco: Matthias Gray Co., 1888), Box 054, Item 052, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

narrates a strange dream where public figures such as Queen Victoria, P.T. Barnum, Jay Gould, and Brigham Young all behave in comically contradictory manners to their normal personas; here Harriet Beecher Stowe even “danced the Can Can—when the world turned upside down.”³⁶ Although sentimental songs were written about important contemporary issues such as temperance, topical songs largely fall on the comic side of the binary division, as their explicit connections to current events, instead of imagined idealized pasts, do not fit the pathetic and nostalgic aesthetic of sentimental songs.

The existence of comic songs and musical performances in the American parlor extend further back and forward than my delimitation of 1865 to 1917, but these years encompass the apex of parlor performances’ cultural import. The essential industries necessary to parlor performance—songs sheets and pianos—were already in place before 1865, but new technologies allowed them to reach a wider number of consumers, and the late-nineteenth-century cultural discourse gave them new significance. Charles Hamm placed the “important beginnings”³⁷ of American popular song in the generation of the 1780s, the same time period that Richard J. Wolfe claims as the “establishment” of an American “music-publishing industry.”³⁸ Although commercially produced songs were available, the mass production and mass dissemination of music in the latter half of the nineteenth century meant a significant increase in the number of Americans who had access to this music. From the “few dozen

³⁶ Howard Paul, “Upside Down!” (New York: Wm. A. Pond & Co., 1875), Box 054, Item 151, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³⁷ Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 1.

³⁸ Richard J. Wolfe, *Early American Music Engraving and Printing: A History of Music Publishing in America from 1787 to 1825 with Commentary on Earlier and Later Practices* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 38.

printers”³⁹ Russell Sanjek found at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the number skyrockets into the hundreds. Sanjek tallied the number of pieces printed for piano between 1857 and 1887 at 800,000,⁴⁰ and among them, “a considerable number...were for voice and piano.”⁴¹ Publishers also frequently released versions of songs arranged for voice and guitar, banjo, or mandolin, widening the potential consumer base. These printers took advantage of the massive expansion of railroads at the time, which Karl Miller noted, “made it possible to deliver a wealth of consumer products into even previously remote areas.”⁴² In the time “between 1869 and 1900,” Miller found the “train companies completed approximately 100,000 miles of rail”⁴³ all over the United States, allowing unprecedented reach of commercial products into markets.

Outside of the physical manufacturing practices that led to an increase in the availability of parlor songs, the latter half of the nineteenth century contained profound cultural shifts, to which I have already alluded, that reframed the performance of music. The concept of the parlor in the American home reached its height, according to Grier, during “the 1870s through the turn of century, with the 1890s as its apex.”⁴⁴ The notions of refinement and gentility that defined this prominent space are linked to the emerging sacralization of culture that Levine observed in the late nineteenth century.

³⁹ Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business: The First Four Hundred Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁴² Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Grier, “Decline of the Memory Palace,” 59.

I begin specifically after 1865 because of the complicating factor of the American Civil War, which drastically altered the American character, cultural practices, and music. As Charles Hamm put it, “the Civil War was a people’s war, more so than any other in the history of the United States.”⁴⁵ Hamm found that the content of popular song not only shifted in these years, it also became “intimately tuned to the pulse of the people” as “never before” or again for “almost a century.”⁴⁶ The song industry drastically changed as well, as Hamm points out, as the South was “denied access to sheet music from the North for the duration of the hostilities,”⁴⁷ spawning the first large southern publishing houses.

The end date of this study is more porous, and has more to do with technological shifts than the cultural impact of the United States involvement in World War I in 1917. The invention and increased importance of phonograph recordings, player pianos, and radio contributed to dramatic shifts in the modes of domestic mass music consumption, gradually diminishing the importance of song sheets. The early twentieth-century music business became one of “music without musicians,”⁴⁸ according to David Suisman, who argues that “player-pianos and phonographs” differ from “the manual instrument,” i.e. the piano, in that there is a “predetermined outcome of their operation.”⁴⁹ Individual performative actions disappear from these technologies, for as Suisman summarizes:

The musical sounds encoded in sheet music could be followed or ignored; they could be executed well or poorly. The sounds encoded in a piano roll or phonograph record were set in advance and open only to minor variation.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York: Norton, 1983), 242.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴⁷ Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 245-46.

⁴⁸ David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Song sheets require execution that generates specific opportunities for agency, but this experience shifts to new forms as new technologies take shape in the American home and the primacy of sheet music begins to fade.

Although music of practically every classification was printed and sold for home consumption in the nineteenth century, this study is limited to popular music. While I have already referred to Simon Frith and Charles Hamm’s definitions of popular music, based on mass culture, the term still proves notably hard to pin down. As Richard Middleton has exposed, definitions are often based upon “arbitrary criteria.”⁵¹ My definition of popular makes use primarily of Middleton’s “technologico-economic” definition, where popular music “is disseminated by mass media and/or in a mass market,” synthesized with his “sociological” definition of certain musics being “associated with (produced for or by) a particular social group.”⁵² Further, the popular music I address here is limited to secular songs for voice and instrument. Although Hamm’s work came under criticism by Charles Keil for excluding “too many dialectical tensions,” such as “church music...those Americans who couldn’t afford sheet music and a piano...[and] primarily instrumental music,”⁵³ this study does not aim to understand comprehensively the whole of American home music. Rather, I investigate the unique phenomena of embodying and enacting identities through song performance in specifically constructed cultural spaces that frequently include pianos.

⁵¹ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 4.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Charles Keil, review of *Yesterdays*, by Charles Hamm, *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 3 (1980): 577.

Methodology

The focal point of my research concerns song sheets, which served as the basis for the musical enactment of identities. The largest number of sources comes from the Edison Sheet Music Collection at the Library of Congress and the Lester Levy Collection at Johns Hopkins University, which have substantial online holdings. The sheet music collection at the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Popular Music includes bound volumes of song sheets, allowing important insight into how nineteenth-century Americans grouped their music together and evidence of personalized writing and interactions with song sheets. The McClung Historical Collection at the East Tennessee History Center and the sheet music collections at the University of Tennessee Libraries provide a smaller number of relevant samples, but do exemplify both local publishing practices and the reach of other more distant publishing houses.

My method of approaching these song sheets is rooted not in traditional score analysis, but in conceiving of them in relation to their users: as a cultural code and guide for production. Musically, this study limits selections to those written for voice (or small number of voices) and instrument, feasibly performed in the parlor. Lyrically, I limit selections to those with comic or topical content—contemporary labels frequently used by the songs' producers. Although I found hundreds of relevant songs, this study does not aim at a comprehensive catalogue of comic songs from this era; rather I present only select outstanding examples. What drew me to the specific songs utilized in this study, beyond their musical and lyrical content, was the way the song sheets would have engaged the performer, physically and performatively.

I seek to analyze the signs produced through actual performance. Scores with written instructions on performance practice, both printed and hand written marginalia, give the greatest clues to how these pieces engaged the body. Instances of dance, vocal alterations, gesturing, and costuming provide evidence of bodily performatives. Instances of verbal performatives are, of course, woven throughout the texts. While Edgar S. Werner's booklet of photographs detailing the proper method of performing "Old Folks at Home" provides the most detailed, explicit guide to embodying a song I have encountered, evidence of enactment can be seen in select songs across this period. For example, the 1898 publication "The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow" not only instructs a quartet of performers which directions to face and which emotions to portray on their faces, but which colors to wear to match the avian character each vocalist portrays.⁵⁴ I discuss song sheets as more than notes on a page; they are an outline to a performance and the embodiment of identities in nineteenth-century parlor music.

Theoretical Frames

Performing comic songs and enacting lowbrow identities in the refined space of the parlor would not have been an edifying experience or display of genteel nature. Yet, they were performed in this ostensibly highbrow, cultured space. The existence of comic songs in the parlor reveals the space as a gray area. To return to Minton's metaphor, parlor musicians do occasionally let their "skirts" dip into the mud of the "vulgar,"⁵⁵ and it was the process of embodiment that gave the vulgar power in the American cultural discourse.

⁵⁴ Maude Anita Hart, "The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow" (Chicago: S. Brainard's Sons Co., 1898) Box 054, Item 097, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁵⁵ Minton, "Parlor Music," 255.

The actions of the nineteenth-century body provided the primary display of gentility in the parlor. Grier posited that the material items on display in the parlor provided a means of defining and exhibiting a desired identity; I argue that so too does the display of the body—specifically through musical performances. The bodily display of identity has been best explored by Judith Butler, who coined the term “performativity” in relation to the enactment of gender identities, but which extends to all kinds of identity construction. She posited that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance...*on the surface* of the body,” and that,

Such acts, gestures, [and] enactments...are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.⁵⁶

One of Butler’s key examples is actress Greta Garbo, who “‘got in drag’ whenever she took some heavy glamour part,”⁵⁷ acting out a parody of her own gender for the sake of her film roles. For Butler, the gender “parody” reveals that all gender identities are in fact parodic acts, “the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity,” whose “hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’...in their very exaggeration, reveal [gender’s] fundamentally phantasmatic status.”⁵⁸ I share Butler’s definition of identity as a “process” asserted through “signification,”⁵⁹ and so use the idea of performativity to argue that even exaggerated parodies enter into the discourse of one’s identity.

Nineteenth-century parlor musical performances provided highly corporeal means of signifying identity. They involve not only verbalizations, but the utilization and display of the

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

entire body. Singers engage deeply with texts as they transform them into melodic lines and add extra layers of meaning through their vocal tone. Pantomime and dance transform the performers into the characters they portray. Although little direct evidence of specific performance practices survive, creating and imitating characters must have been a key part of performance because a number of song sheets include directions on when and how to do it, for example the 1891 song “Sister Mary Walked Like That.” The song narrates the arrival of a plethora of wedding guests, and during the chorus, the singer lists each guest and parenthetical notes just above the staff instruct the singer to imitate certain walks. Thus, as “Sister Mary” enters, the vocalist sings “pit pat pit a pat” and is told to “(Here imitate a ladies limp);” then while “Uncle stout and fat” enters, the vocalist sings “Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!” and imitates the “waddle of a fat man.”⁶⁰

Performative imitation was not unique to this form of American music at the time, but in this context it presents a powerful cultural force. Minstrelsy, of course, was based entirely on an exaggerated imitation of a racial identity, and Eric Lott posited that minstrelsy’s power lay in being a “counterfeit,” through which “whites [girded] themselves by way of rituals that mirror rather than distance the Other,” and are touching “the blacks they would lampoon.”⁶¹ Gillian Rodger’s history of the nineteenth-century variety hall discusses such imitative acts, including male impersonators, female impersonators, and the potentially risqué “tableaux vivants,”⁶² in which ballet dancers and acrobats imitated classical statuary. The imitation and mimicry

⁶⁰ Chester Hatton, arr., “Sister Mary Walked Like That” (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1891), Box 054, Item 132, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁶¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 4.

⁶² Gillian M. Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 23.

common to the comic repertoire relate to the concept of mimesis, but when this mimetic music is performed in the parlor, it invites the Other into the home and the body.

Mimesis, according to Michael Taussig, allows the breaking of “boundaries” and presents performers with the opportunity of “slipping into Otherness [and] trying it on for size.”⁶³ Taussig posited that “the power to represent the world” and the “power to falsify, mask, and pose” are “inseparable;” through mimesis, not only do performers create “images [that] chase images...one also becomes matter.”⁶⁴ He presents the specific case of the Cuna people of Central America, who believe in specialized healers’ abilities to become “medicines”⁶⁵ through chanting. The Cuna medicine man describes and mimes a spirit Other, engaging “with the thing described so as to bring out its spirit,” placing himself in the scene and existing “not just as subject but also as mimeticised Other....as both chanter and person chanted about, as demonstrator and demonstrated,” creating a “bridge between original and copy.”⁶⁶ Although Eric Lott does not specifically call the minstrel phenomenon mimesis, he describes it similarly, arguing that the power of blackface performers rests in their ability to both “produce and disintegrate the body.”⁶⁷ For blackface performers, donning the “mask:”

may have been as much to maintain control over a potentially subversive act as to ridicule... [though] attempts at regulation were also capable of producing an aura of ‘blackness.’⁶⁸

Performing as the Other offered the opportunity to both separate oneself from a demonstrated identity and lose oneself in it.

⁶³ Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 117.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

White parlor performers frequently took on Othered African-American identities in song, asserting and subverting their own identities as they did so. Werner's photograph guide to performing the minstrel song "Old Folks at Home" aided parlor musicians in creating the appearance of the Other in themselves. The performative actions of the young woman in the photographs mime a fictionalized African-American slave identity. The song uses tropes such as banjo playing to exoticize this identity and signify its Otherness, but her embodiment of this action brings it into her Self. This example does not represent an openly subversive act, as it treats a sentimental theme and Stephen Foster's music holds a special place in Americana. Rather its challenge to the construction of the parlor aesthetic comes from the transplantation of the minstrel stage into the home. Other songs, such as the late nineteenth-century "coon songs," that Karl Miller has analyzed, allowed white performers to embody "black protagonists" who "drank and ate too much...gambled and stole, and...regularly evaded authority."⁶⁹ Miller sees these types of songs as allowing white performers to "commit all these sins through song," and "revel in physical and expressive freedom"⁷⁰ themselves, while still identifying these traits with others. Not every performative act is subversive, and the dialogue of identity and the dialogue that formed nineteenth-century high and low distinctions moved in both directions. Parlor song performers fabricated entirely new identities and entered them into a discourse with their own identities as they performed for their close friends and families. These were largely the desired genteel identities, but occasionally, and powerfully, subversive ones as well.

Nineteenth-century song sheets were mass produced and consumed, but individual consumers had agency in this mass-mediated form, and acts of identification within this music

⁶⁹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

generated meaningful discourses on their identity. Similarly, in the twentieth century, Jason Lee Oakes argued in a study of Elvis impersonators that these performers “identify with” and make the music “their own,” asserting “their own agency in a mass-mediated form.”⁷¹ The “identification” Oakes refers to “is something that must be *made*,” it is “an active verb” that represents someone “doing the identifying” and “something out there to identify with.”⁷² Daniel Cavicchi observed a crucial process of identification in his ethnographic work among Bruce Springsteen fans, leading him to understand “their participation in the music as an act that ideally enables them to shape their sense of ‘me,’ to work through the complexities of who they are.”⁷³ The experience of creating an identity, as Aaron Fox found, “is defined by conflict.”⁷⁴ In Fox’s study of the music of working-class Texans, he found a culture “concerned with the dignity and agency of the subject in direct proportion to the lack of dignity and agency entailed in...[their] experience.”⁷⁵ In the nineteenth century, the concern with gentility equates to this same concern for “dignity.” The display of music in the parlor was a means to work through the construction of the performer’s identity, where acts of identification incorporated certain outside voices into one’s own.

⁷¹ Jason Lee Oakes, “All the King’s Elvii: Identifying with Elvis Through Musical Tribute,” in *Access All Eras: Tribute Bands and Global Pop Culture*, ed. Shane Homan (Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2006), 167.

⁷² Jason Lee Oakes, “Losers, Punks and Queers (and Elvii Too): Identification and “Identity” at New York City Music Tribute Events” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005), 31-32. Emphasis in original.

⁷³ Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 149.

⁷⁴ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 108.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Historical Context

Though we distinguish between home and public, between amateur and professional music in America, the two are inexorably linked and the songs of the nineteenth century were performed both at home and in public, but they meant something different when performed in each space. The “era of public amusements” that David Nasaw has chronicled “was born in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.”⁷⁶ While Nasaw places “going out” and being part of a “crowd” in direct opposition to and replacing “the select circle of acquaintances as the setting in which one sought and found amusement,”⁷⁷ public amusements were also transported to the parlor and given life there. Donna R. Braden’s essay on “indoor amusements”⁷⁸ focuses on the same time period as Nasaw, and demonstrates a simultaneous “proliferation of home amusements.”⁷⁹ As evidenced on the covers of so many popular song sheets, both sentimental and comic, the printed songs of the parlor often existed first in the theatre. The two industries were connected by what Leslie Gay might call “transectorial interdependencies,”⁸⁰ where song performances and song sheets provided marketing for each other. Miller even found that the popularity of sentimental song sales “brought the ideology and symbolism of the private home to the public stage.”⁸¹ Since the stage was responsible for selling songs to the home, Miller observed “celebrations of virtue and domesticity”⁸² appearing in the late nineteenth-century

⁷⁶ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁸ Donna R. Braden, “‘The Family That Plays Together Stays Together’: Family Pastimes and Indoor Amusements, 1890-1930,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 145.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸⁰ Leslie C. Gay Jr., “Before the Deluge: The Technoculture of Song-Sheet Publishing Viewed from Late Nineteenth-Century Galveston,” *American Music* 17, no. 4 (1999): 400.

⁸¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 38.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 39.

public theatre. The theatrical stage and the song sheet industry were tightly connected on multiple levels.

Whereas early American concerts featured wide mixtures of genres and performing forces, the late nineteenth century saw emerging distinctions in music that separated what we would think of today as popular song into its own specific performance spaces. American notions of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” music were formulated at this time, and Levine’s chronicling of this phenomenon in public spaces reveals that those listening to music began “to call into question the traditional practice of mixing musical genres.”⁸³ The public spaces where popular songs found their home were the variety halls, concert saloons, and nearer the turn of the century, the vaudeville hall.

The late nineteenth-century variety hall and concert saloon offered a decidedly different aesthetic from the parlor. These halls and saloons were described by Nasaw as “barrooms with free or cheap entertainment offered in adjacent backrooms, halls, or theaters,” where “exclusively male audiences” gathered in smoke-filled rooms with the “floor filled with peanut shells and spilt beer.”⁸⁴ Despite this description, Nasaw asserts that “the dividing line between those who patronized the variety shows,” and those who did not “was not social class, but gender and ‘respectability.’”⁸⁵ The entertainment was frequently bawdy, but the crowd was made up of the emerging middle class. As the nineteenth century went on, the variety halls and vaudeville theaters Nasaw studied began seeking to “attract women to their entertainments;”

⁸³ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 134.

⁸⁴ Nasaw, *Going Out*, 13.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

accordingly, they “had to remove the prostitutes...smoking...[and] drinking,”⁸⁶ and instead create entertainments that offered “something for everybody.”⁸⁷

These spaces and public entertainment forms proliferated across the country. While studies of variety hall and vaudeville traditions usually focus on New York City, as in Rodger and Nasaw’s monographs, performers and stage productions toured the entire nation. Miller noted that “the availability and cost of railroad travel,” in the late nineteenth century, allowed touring shows to reach “into quite small towns across the country.”⁸⁸ As the century progressed, the industry standardized these tours, which Miller saw as helping “funnel Tin Pan Alley songs into towns across the nation.”⁸⁹

Stagings and audience members varied widely between halls, but standard entertainment forms persisted and shaped the genres of comic songs that would be sold to home consumers. The “miscellaneous elements known as variety” were more precisely defined by Gillian Rodger as featuring “singing, dancing and novelty acts,” usually with “no overarching theme or narrative structure,”⁹⁰ but occasionally organized into “musical comedies and topical dramas” by “the flimsiest of narrative structures.”⁹¹

Public comic performances reflected the predominant social norms that reinforced the status of white, Christian males. Males made up the bulk of public comic singers, just as they made up the bulk of most musical performers in the nineteenth century. Rodger sums up the gendered roles of comic singers with her epigrammatic statement:

⁸⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁸ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 27.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6

If the primary role of women on the variety stage was to be pretty and tuneful, then the primary role for men was to be funny.⁹²

These white male performers frequently sang songs depicting various ethnic identities. Comic singers, as Rodger explains, took on a “comic persona” that was often based on stereotyped “Irish, Germans, and African Americans”—or a more generic concept of “workingmen,”⁹³ which did not rely on ethnic humor. Songs based in ethnic stereotypes were immensely popular among nineteenth-century white Americans and they provided a powerful means of defining and coming to terms with these identities. Minstrelsy involved, in Lott’s terms, “a dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency.”⁹⁴ A complicated treatment of race that both invited in and pushed away the Other. The same arguments can be extended to every racial group ridiculed by comic performers and songs, as well as Lott’s entwinement of racial and class constructions. As Sherry Ortner has said “race and ethnicity have enormous cultural salience in the discourses of social difference in the United States.”⁹⁵ Performing these songs offered the opportunity to play with the interwoven construction of ethnic and class identities. Even though Rodger’s discussion of male and female impersonators of the nineteenth-century stage does not address how these performers stepped into the Otherness of the opposite sex through comic exaggerations and critiques, understanding them through Butler’s conception of identity opens up this possibility. As these stage performers created specific characters, they embodied these Others in their

⁹² Ibid., 98.

⁹³ Ibid., 99.

⁹⁴ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 18.

⁹⁵ Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, 66.

performance. Transporting these genres to the parlor meant a wide number of individual consumers could embody Others.

Whereas these types of public entertainments were meant purely for leisure, the activities in the nineteenth-century home space were meant for edification. Braden points out that “the strict conventions of Victorian society dictated appropriate home leisure pursuits for men, women, and children,” and that these activities “tended to be quite structured” and were “geared toward social advancement and...[emphasized] educational or spiritual values over simple enjoyment.”⁹⁶ Deeply tied to the prevailing Christian morals of the time, music was seen as a particularly powerful spiritual force capable of great edification. A contributor to the Cincinnati music education journal, *Baldwin’s Musical Review*, wrote in 1880 that:

Everyman in this world, be he bootblack or emperor, is a complete instrument. He may be of greater or less compass, but he has all the harmonies—the entire diatonic scale—every chord every octave. In some way, the eternal grandeurs strike him, sounding the deep tones of faith and conscience; in some way the world touches the meaner and flatter keys. The great thing to be considered is what kind of music he habitually makes.⁹⁷

This axiom is reminiscent of an almost Boethian understanding of music, linking musical harmony to social and moral harmony. Musically becoming a comical Other, I suggest, parallels the discordant act of touching “the meaner and flatter keys.”⁹⁸

Ideologically, the nineteenth-century home was a vastly different space than the variety hall, yet comic songs were still being performed there. In studying Christianity’s influence on shaping the nineteenth-century home, McDannell, claimed that the group she labeled as

⁹⁶ Braden, “The Family That Plays Together Stays Together,” 147.

⁹⁷ *Baldwin’s Musical Review* (July 1880): 4. John Wesley Reams Collection, McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library System, Knoxville, Tennessee.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

“the creators of nineteenth century culture,” the “ministers, priests, reformers, novelists, [and] architects...saw the home as a vehicle for the promotion of values.”⁹⁹ According to the popular Christian sources McDannell analyzed, the “proper” Victorian home was its own sacralized space, like a church, that “encouraged all of the Victorian values: morality, piety, patriotism, order, stability, affection, intellectuality, education, purity, refinement, and discipline.”¹⁰⁰ In the context of white, patriarchal, Christian notions of refinement, performing comic songs substantially disrupted the prevalent parlor aesthetic. In fact, a noticed increase in “parlor theatricals” led one journalist to pen a 1869 article in *The Clipper* that declared that “the more straight-laced” society members “snarl” at the practice of parlor theatricals “which strikes, they say, at the very foundation of the social fabric.”¹⁰¹

The comic parlor songs of this study existed at the crux of several crucial discourses in American history, on “high” and “lowbrow” culture, on ethnic identities, on class identities, and on the role of music in the home. In each instance, comic songs offered a powerful voice.

Literature Review

Although much has been written on American popular song, most studies concentrate on specific composers and compositions, not the amateurs who were consuming this mass mediated form. Hamm’s works on American music provide exceptional background knowledge but are limited to a broad stylistic history and to “those songs demonstrably the *most* popular, the ones listened to, bought, and performed by the largest number of Americans.”¹⁰² Heavily

⁹⁹ McDannell, *Christian Home in Victorian America*, xiii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰¹ “Parlor Theatricals,” *The Clipper*, January 30, 1869.

¹⁰² Hamm, *Yesterdays*, xix.

influenced by Hamm's studies, Finson's *The Voices That Are Gone* complements Hamm's *Yesterdays* by presenting not a survey but "a guided tour of selected songs," including "some of the lesser sights that provide color and context"¹⁰³ in order to arrive at a topically organized treatment of prevalent themes in American popular music. Sanjek's research proves an equally rich source of broad context and widens the scope further with an added focus on the song industry, not just significant composers and works.¹⁰⁴

Nineteenth-century home performance practices are an elusive subject, but some works provide insight into contemporary theatrical and concert performances, illuminating relevant cultural practices that would have at least played a role in perception if not shaped ideologies of home performance. While Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow*¹⁰⁵ comprises my central access point to broad late nineteenth-century cultural trends and my frame for understanding high and low musical performances, several other works elucidate more specific theatrical practices. Lott provides crucial context on not only minstrelsy, one of the most popular nineteenth-century American entertainment forms, but also how white performers embodied black Others, and how working class audiences engaged with performances.¹⁰⁶ Dale Cockrell's work on minstrelsy provides further insights and connections.¹⁰⁷ Outside of the minstrel stage, in the variety hall and in what would become vaudeville theatres, Rodger's investigation of these crucial performance mediums proves the most useful.¹⁰⁸ Besides her unparalleled depth into comic theatrical traditions and her focus on performers and audience members rather than

¹⁰³ Finson, *Voices That are Gone*, xi.

¹⁰⁴ Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business*.

¹⁰⁵ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

¹⁰⁶ Lott, *Love and Theft*.

¹⁰⁷ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁸ Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*.

composers, Rodger's treatment of female comic performers and the feminine in the variety hall tradition provides an especially relevant and often overlooked perspective. Variety and theatrical traditions also make up a sizable amount of the material covered in Nasaw's *Going Out*,¹⁰⁹ which proves useful despite his central argument that public entertainment was replacing parlor entertainment. I see the two practices not in opposition to each other, but informing one another.

While none of these studies provides direct perspective on home music performance, other studies give insight into the home space. Grier's essay on the decline of the parlor after the 1890s provides the clearest definition of the parlor space and its cultural significance.¹¹⁰ While not fitting directly within the time period of this study, Wolfe's history of American song printing practices provides needed context regarding the actual publication practices of the physical song sheets.¹¹¹ The first chapter of Miller's *Segregating Sound*¹¹² supplies a superb summary of how these commercial products reached homes across the United States, and their impact on consumers. I have also made use of several twentieth-century scholarly works to frame how consumers used commercially produced products; for instance as Richard Dyer proposed a model for understanding musical entertainment practices as escape.¹¹³

The concept of embodying music has been amply analyzed, and several texts prove extremely useful in my extension of this notion to parlor music. The numerous writings of Frith were extremely influential in my understanding not only of lyrics and the role of the voice in music, but also how sung words bear "meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of

¹⁰⁹ Nasaw, *Going Out*.

¹¹⁰ Grier, "Decline of the Memory Palace."

¹¹¹ Wolfe, *Early American Music Engraving and Printing*.

¹¹² Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

¹¹³ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character.”¹¹⁴ The gestures that accompany these songs, which I address more fully in later chapters, have been discussed on by Nancy Ruyter¹¹⁵ and Carrie J. Preston,¹¹⁶ who deal with specific nineteenth-century practices of and beliefs on dance and gesture. While Elisabeth Le Guin’s *Boccherini’s Body*¹¹⁷ focuses on eighteenth-century European practices, it provides a useful language and framework for discussing the role of the body in performance.

A range of texts have also covered music’s use in identity construction. Sherry Ortner demonstrates the agency of individuals in constructing the social discourses on identities, specifically American class and racial identities.¹¹⁸ Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*,¹¹⁹ as mentioned above, provides the basis for my argument that identities are enacted through performatives. My definition and understanding of mimesis as a powerful cultural force that invites Other identities into the self comes from Michael Taussig.¹²⁰ Further definitions of the processes of “identity” and “identification” have been pulled from Jason Lee Oakes’ dissertation, “Losers, Punks, and Queers (and Elvii too).”¹²¹ These works, along with that of

¹¹⁴ Simon Frith, “Why Do Songs Have Words?” in *Lost in Music: Culture, Style, and the Musical Event*, Avron Levine White, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1987), 97.

¹¹⁵ Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

¹¹⁶ Carrie J. Preston, *Modernism’s Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body an Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

¹¹⁸ Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*.

¹¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

¹²⁰ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.

¹²¹ Oakes, “Losers, Punks and Queers (and Elvii Too).”

Fox's¹²² provide superb discussions of how the exaggerated and eccentric extremes of identity, the kinds of identities I find in comic songs, can powerfully affect perceptions of the Self.

Conclusion

The dialectic classifications of “lowbrow” and “highbrow” integrally rely on each other, and indeed are only definable in relation to the other. Despite the ideological conception of the parlor as a solely “highbrow” space, the “lowbrow” must occasionally intrude in order to give the parlor its power in policing the discourse of desired identity. When the “lowbrow” voice does appear, its performance subverts the construction of the “highbrow” and even critiques its very existence. In the following chapters I explore key genres and facets of comic songs from varying theoretical frames in order to explicate their role in this discourse. Chapter Two presents songs with explicit instructions on how to engage the body, and how this practice was likely implicitly extended beyond even my selected examples. This chapter fully details how the role of pantomime, dance, and the engagement of the body create physical performatives that add the comic “lowbrow” to the construction of the performer’s identity. The instructions provided on song sheets, and sources like Edgar S. Werner’s writings on Delsartism, detail the nineteenth-century emphasis on the meaningful use of gestures and their place in parlor music. By showing how singers fully engaged their bodies and altered their outward appearance, I argue that their mimetic embodiments of Others entered alternate identities into constructions of their own. Chapter Three focuses specifically on comic character pieces, a sub-genre that utilizes first-person narratives to create a comic persona. Theoretically, Chapter Three extends

¹²² Fox, *Real Country*.

beyond gesture and bodily performatives to add in verbal performatives for a fuller discussion of how performance invites the Other into the body. I argue that singing from the first-person perspective of an Other entered their voice into the mouth of the performer, and ultimately into their process of identity construction. The language and vocal intonations singer's utilized gave disruptive weight to song sheets that offered the first-person portrayal of comic characters that cross class, ethnic, gender, and species lines. Finally, Chapter Four addresses the topical and parodic elements of comic songs, which subvert parlor ideals and aesthetics and critique the genteel utopia that the supposedly edifying movements of the late nineteenth century promised. This chapter focuses on the songs that do not construct an explicit comic character, but those that use bawdy, sexualized lyrics and pointed topical social critique. These songs do not necessarily create entirely new identities for the performers, but allow performers to express opinions and transgress expected genteel ideals. They lifted the veil on the guise of the highbrow utopia that so many nineteenth-century Americans were attempting to construct. Overall I demonstrate the deep social power of the marginalized nineteenth-century comic song, and, perhaps, as one 1892 song states:

O blessed actors, who forego, the tragic mimicry of woe,
 And never hint that life has pain, but crack their jokes and make it plain,
 That in this world of wheat and chaff, *the wisest men are those who laugh.*¹²³

¹²³ Geo. Foertsch, and Kate Kauffman, "Laugh Ha-Ha, Ha-Ha" (Cincinnati: J.C. Groene & Co., 1892) Box 25, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Emphasis added.

Chapter 2 : Physical Performatives in Parlor Performance

In late-nineteenth-century America, song sheets offered more than just notes, and performances involved more than just sound. Parlor song performances were a bodily activity, and contemporary accounts attest to this. Richard Wells, the author of an 1894 etiquette manual complained of the unseemly physical exertions that occasionally accompanied parlor musical production, writing:

there are many young women, who, when they sit down to the piano to sing, twist themselves into so many contortions, and writhe their bodies and faces about into such actions and grimaces...Their bosoms heave, their shoulders shrug, their heads swing to the right and left, their lips quiver, their eyes roll; they sigh, they pant, they seem ready to expire!¹²⁴

Bodily actions were a consistent part of performance, and consistently affected the audiences' reception and perception of the performers. Wells' manual sought to correct what he saw as excess, for "such a [physical] echo of the words and music" would damage the image of "any young woman who would wish to be thought of as pure in heart as in person."¹²⁵ The nineteenth-century body was a performative site, and surface actions were seen as deeply informative of internal substance.

The behaviors of parlor performance vitally informed the American discourse of high and lowbrow identities. These constructions engendered specific behaviors and beliefs about the control of the body. In lamenting over the "improper" actions seen in parlor performances, Wells decreed that "if ladies...would rather consult the statues of fine sculptors, and the figures

¹²⁴ Richard A. Wells, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society* (Springfield, MA: King, Richardson, 1894), 389.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 390.

of excellent painters,” when “meditating” on their physical carriage, they would portray “a thousand ineffable graces” rather than “absurdity and conceit.”¹²⁶ His suggestion was a common one in late-nineteenth-century America; accepted “highbrow” visual arts, especially ancient statuary, guided contemporary beliefs about the body and its communicative power. Within this highly controlled realm of physical performance behaviors, however, the presence of comic songs and the embodiment of exaggerated, uncouth behaviors offered a significant disruption to the construction of a highbrow identity. These performances were an enactment of the larger nineteenth-century discourse on high and lowbrow identities examined by Lawrence Levine,¹²⁷ allowing performers to engage with, embody, and exert control over “improper” lowbrow identities.

As the above example demonstrates, the reception and production of parlor songs depended on more than musical forces, but a variety of specific behaviors. Situating parlor song performances within their total soundscape elucidates how song performances entered into the late-nineteenth-century American identity discourse. Composer R. Murray Schafer conceived of a soundscape as the whole of “the sonic environment,” referring to both “actual environments” and “abstract constructions such as musical compositions.”¹²⁸ Sonic research, in Schafer’s system, is not just concerned with what was heard, but also “with changes in perception and behavior.”¹²⁹ The parlor was not just the literal location of sonic activities; it was

¹²⁶ Ibid., 390-91.

¹²⁷ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

¹²⁸ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1977), 274.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 71.

an abstract space that engendered certain behaviors and modes of perception. The space created and perpetuated certain expectations of highbrow behavior.

Particular ideals organized the items of physical culture, the sounds, and the physical behaviors of the parlor. Of paramount importance was an elegant and refined appearance. As Katherine C. Grier has argued, “setting aside space and furnishing a parlor gave certain characteristically Victorian values and aspirations physical presence in the world.”¹³⁰ The highbrow/lowbrow discourse occurred visually, and the physical embodiment of Victorian values can be found throughout the parlor soundscape. The space propounded the idea of refinement, and Wells believed “the parlor should be the room of all others in which good taste should be every-where apparent.”¹³¹ A May 1881 advertisement for “Beatty’s Cabinet or Parlor Organ” in *The Clipper* not only features a lithograph of the elaborate and ornate instrument, but the advertiser also deliberately highlights the “elegant exterior,” claiming the “design [is] of rare beauty,” and has “reached the highest state of perfection.”¹³² Alongside descriptions of the instrument’s sound, the ad emphasizes that the design featured a place for a “beautiful lamp stand at night or vase of flowers by day,” and an “extra large fancy top decorated with original designs.”¹³³ Expectations similarly demanded that people in the parlor craft their own bodies to a “state of perfection.”¹³⁴ As Wells warned his readers, “first impressions are apt to be permanent,” and if people desired being perceived as “well-bred” they should “give careful

¹³⁰ Katherine C. Grier, “The Decline of the Memory Palace: The Parlor after 1890,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, eds. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 51.

¹³¹ Wells, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society*, 465.

¹³² Daniel F. Beatty, “Beatty’s Cabinet or Parlor Organs,” advertisement, *The Clipper*, May 28, 1881, 164.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

attention to their personal appearance.”¹³⁵ Every image and activity of the parlor performance played into the construction of identity.

The parlor soundscape was also inextricably linked with the nineteenth-century stage. Although the excess of the stage occasionally presented the antithesis of the level of control and propriety desired in the home, the two mutually informed one another. Stage performances informed the physicality of parlor performances. To return to Wells’ writings on etiquette, he bemoans that what some parlor performers “call expression in singing, at the rate they would show it, is only fit to be exhibited on the stage.”¹³⁶ Performing at home with all the excessive expression of a stage performer offered an opportunity to slip out of the normal limits of bodily expression. From this, Karl Miller has argued that performing Tin Pan Alley songs “enabled young women to revel in the freedom associated with public popular culture” and “for the time of the performance, be as sensual and free as the performer who made the song famous.”¹³⁷ These actions subverted Victorian ideas of propriety, and, according to Miller, “brought the freedom and danger associated with the public stage into the private home.”¹³⁸

The philosophy behind nineteenth-century physical acting methods also added significant weight to how a performance could either construct or disrupt a highbrow identity. Although time has relinquished it to obscurity, the system of expression propounded by François Delsarte (1811-1871) played a major role in shaping the nature of, and philosophical thought surrounding physical expression at this time. While studying music at the Paris

¹³⁵ Wells, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society*, 320.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 389-90.

¹³⁷ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 39.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

Conservatory, Delsarte reportedly ruined his voice, compelling him to research new methods of singing and acting and to become a teacher himself. He soon became renowned for his system of gesture and expression, one that even went on to influence Constantin Stanislavsky's acting method in the twentieth century.¹³⁹ Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter's research into American Delsartism has shown that although it originated "as a professional art endeavor" in France, when it was transplanted the United States, Delsartism became "a broad-based social phenomenon."¹⁴⁰ American Delsartism, according to Ruyter, fit into the preexistent discipline of elocution training, which had been growing in popularity and "had been developing on a national scale from the 1820s."¹⁴¹ Delsartism reached its height of popularity in the 1880s and 1890s, as part of a trend Ruyter noticed among elocution instructors who "increasingly emphasized gesture and bodily motion" in systems of "expression," ultimately making the Delsarte system "the best known and...the broadest application."¹⁴² Through Delsartean training, Ruyter found that "a considerable number of late-nineteenth-century white middle- and upper-class American women and children were able to pay attention to their bodies in a socially acceptable manner," as they trained themselves in "physical and expressive techniques," and presented "themselves to selected audiences in public performances."¹⁴³ Physical culture and expression became a major part of parlor entertainment, and Wells believed that "tableaux vivants, as commonly represented," were nearly ubiquitous in the

¹³⁹ Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 77.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

parlor, and “so well understood that no directions [were] necessary”¹⁴⁴ in his etiquette manual. The practice of imitating statuary, Delsartean or otherwise, impacted musical practices, and Wells does detail the way tableaux vivants could “represent the different verses and scenes in a song in pantomime”¹⁴⁵

Delsarte’s methods were propagated through the United States by several influential figures. The first and only American to study directly with Delsarte was actor Steele Mackaye, who went on to found the first American acting school in 1872.¹⁴⁶ Mackaye’s students, the first wave of American Delsartians, were largely male professionals, but, when Henrietta Hovey and Genevieve Stebbins began advocating the Delsarte system in the 1880s and 1890s, Ruyter reveals, it shifted to an “amateur performance activity for women.”¹⁴⁷ Hovey was a student of Mackaye’s school before touring and presenting on the Delsarte system herself, and Ruyter has chronicled how she became a media darling and received “broad press coverage” for her work in the “high social and fashionable circles”¹⁴⁸ of nineteenth-century America and London. She was asked to speak at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition,¹⁴⁹ an incredibly visible position in American culture. Even Hovey’s influence, however, was outshined by Genevieve Stebbins. After briefly studying with Mackaye, Stebbins started a regular series of public readings of and instruction on Delsarte technique in 1880 that Ruyter believes popularized the method for the broadest audience “outside the fields of acting and oratory.”¹⁵⁰ She also became the most

¹⁴⁴ Wells, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society*, 417.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Ruyter, *Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism*, 21.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

prolific writer on the method, publishing several articles and books, and the seminal 1885 instructional text, *Delsarte System of Expression*.¹⁵¹ Many of Stebbins' articles were published by E.S. Werner, a New York printer and Delsarte advocate, whose magazine, *Werner's Voice Magazine*, became the primary forum for Delsarte publications.

Edgar S. Werner defined "the art of oratory," as "expressing mental phenomena by the play of the physical organs."¹⁵² Within the Delsarte system that Werner advocated, physical expression was not something detached from internal mental processes. Internal and external processes were inclusive. In what little of Delsarte's writings that did survive, he strongly purports a two-way connection. Heavily influenced by Christian doctrine and Trinitarianism, he believed that "to each spiritual function responds a function of the body," and that "to each grand function of the body, corresponds a spiritual act."¹⁵³ Ruyter translated "spiritual function" as "any thought, intention, psychological state, character trait, or emotion," meaning that each "will have bodily manifestations," and that similarly, functions of the body, i.e., "gesture, facial expression, voice, carriage, physical mannerism, bodily rhythm, and breathing,"¹⁵⁴ not only reflect but engender internal spiritual functions. Delsarte and his followers called this the "Law of Correspondence," and posited a "concept of the body" as "a worthy whole that includes the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of existence."¹⁵⁵ Delsartean and other nineteenth-century writers on physical culture rejected the Cartesian duality in favor of a unified inner and outer experience. Ruyter also found that the Delsartean

¹⁵¹ Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1977).

¹⁵² L'Abbé Delaumosne et al., *Delsarte System of Oratory* (New York: E.S. Werner, 1893), xxvii.

¹⁵³ Ruyter, *Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism*, 76-77.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

idea of correspondence “between the physical and nonphysical realms”¹⁵⁶ was common among numerous nineteenth-century writings. To support Delsarte’s “law of correspondence,” Genevieve Stebbins cited the work of another orator, Moses True Brown, who similarly posited that “man expresses his psychic states in terms of his environment.”¹⁵⁷ Werner explained this mutual inclusion to his American readers, stating “the soul being the form of the body, the body is made in the image of the soul.”¹⁵⁸ In the context of the Christian norms of nineteenth-century America, such beliefs give the physical gestures of performance the potential to refine the soul. Gestures were incredibly powerful in the formation of identity.

Gestures were not just deeply meaningful, they formed a specific language. Although the Delsarte system trained its practitioners in the specific meanings of gestures, they believed everyone could understand the semantics of this language. Delsarte attempted to arrive at a system of gestures that he believed to be universally meaningful. Carrie J. Preston inferred that Delsarte’s own use of the term “semeiotics,” which he defined as “the science of the organic signs,”¹⁵⁹ was similar to its later use in the field of structural linguistics. The system, according to Preston, was based on Delsarte’s own research into “the codification of gestures seen in attitudes, classical sculpture, and melodramatic acting styles.”¹⁶⁰ Delsarte took existent, codified gestures and further standardized them, making their ascribed meanings

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression*, 391.

¹⁵⁸ Delaumosne et al., *Delsarte System of Oratory*, xxvii.

¹⁵⁹ Carrie J. Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 60.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

unambiguous. For, in Delsarte's words, "to attain the Beautiful, one cannot do without a formula—that is, a fixed principle."¹⁶¹

The main inspiration and foundation for Delsarte's belief in the universality of gesture came from ancient Greco-Roman statues. Delsarte's conception of "the Beautiful" derived "exclusively from antiquity" and he believed "everything produced outside of that is miserable."¹⁶² These beliefs were similarly extolled by his American successors. Stebbins challenged "any one to point to a single modern work really beautiful and intrinsically artistic," that was "not a copy of antique marbles."¹⁶³ For Stebbins, the ideas portrayed in classical statuary were "eternal" and constituted "the only divine part of the human soul,"¹⁶⁴ which served as further proof to her "that between mental states corresponding to ideas and their physical expression there is perfect correspondence."¹⁶⁵

For audiences then, external significations were the defining features of identity. Several twentieth-century scholarly works clarify the power of corporeal signification in shaping and conveying an identity. From these, I argue that not only did nineteenth-century audiences perceive bodily actions and external appearances as informative of others, but also that fabricated, performative appearances were incorporated into the Self. The knowledge of another is primarily gained through her or his appearance and actions. Michael Taussig addresses the epistemes built on "the notion that truth always lies behind (mere) appearance" with the aphorism that scientism misses the obvious: "daily life, however, proceeds

¹⁶¹ Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression*, 372.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

otherwise.”¹⁶⁶ Observing appearances, as Taussig notes, is “an everyday art.”¹⁶⁷ Elisabeth Le Guin’s innovative work on the bodily performance of Boccherini’s music has similarly posited that “to a very great degree, Westerners experience self within the representational frameworks of what is seen.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, not only is sight informative of others, notions of Self are constructed in reference to what is seen. Le Guin also connects sight to the “kinesthetic experience of selfhood,”¹⁶⁹ where kinesthesia is defined as an “individual’s sense of himself *as sensing*”¹⁷⁰—incorporating corporeal experience in the formation of the Self. Furthermore, since performative surface actions define the body, Judith Butler argues that the ontological status of the body cannot be separated from “the various acts which constitute its reality.”¹⁷¹ Consequently, the interior, according to Butler, “is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse.”¹⁷² Viewing others and being seen by others becomes a discursive process that informs the Self. Thus, as performers mime an alternate identity and alter their body, this outward expression not only conveys meaning to viewers, it incorporates this sensation into their own experiential self-formation. This is where Taussig sees mimesis as able to transform images into “matter.”¹⁷³

The process of embodying an Other is discursive, and this discourse both defines the Self and the Other. Inviting the Other in through mimesis makes the Other a part of the Self but

¹⁶⁶ Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 177.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 91.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 43.

also distinguishes it from the Self. Mimesis, according to Taussig is capable of “dancing between the very same and the very different,”¹⁷⁴ registering both as it does so. In this way, late-nineteenth-century parlor performers could both become and distance themselves from undesirable alternate identities, trying these identities on for size and holding control over them. Accordingly, comic songs helped form the emerging high and low distinctions, and played on both sides of them. Aaron Fox found a similar process of discursive social control in his study of a working-class Texas culture. He found a variety of strategies in play for controlling the “foolishness” of others that presented “a challenge to sociability.”¹⁷⁵ Here he saw the role of “local ‘comedians’” as “artful clowns” whose “ironic self-presentations”¹⁷⁶ presented established transgressive behaviors. This ironic presentation of the “foolish” acted as a method of controlling and maintaining normative social expression. This discursive process can be seen in the nineteenth-century parlor as well. By ironically becoming a “foolish” Other and bringing this persona into the parlor via mimesis performers furthered the discourse by delineating particular behaviors as “lowbrow.”

Within this understanding of the body’s signifying ability and the role of kinesthetic experience in defining the Self, the physical actions of performing comic songs held great potential for disrupting the dominant discourse. Evidence of this process can be found in nineteenth-century song sheets that encouraged embodiment. Werner’s photograph guide to performing “Old Folks at Home” provides some of the best evidence of mimetic practices, but instructions for bodily engagement came in a variety of forms. If song sheet consumers saw the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 129.

¹⁷⁵ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 128.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 129.

song performed on stage or in another parlor, this would certainly influence their future performance. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, song sheets nearly ubiquitously included elaborate cover designs, often illustrating the narrative thrust of the song, and possibly informing consumers about how the characters they were portraying carried themselves. Another practice, as evidenced by a January 1895 advertisement in *The Clipper*, was to include a set of “stereopticon¹⁷⁷ pictures...taken especially for the song.”¹⁷⁸ A sizeable amount of songs from this time even include written directions indicating exactly how to perform them.

More than notes on a page, late-nineteenth-century song sheets offered guides for embodiment. The 1898 song “The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow,” written for “comic quartet,” is so concerned with specifying appearances that it even dictates costuming, advising that: “The quartet rendering this should as nearly as possible dress in the color of the birds they represent.”¹⁷⁹ Printed notes just above the staff direct the different voice parts when to face the audience and when to turn and face each other, including a moment when “Soprano, Alto and Bass [turn] to Tenor with a look of surprise”¹⁸⁰ (see Figure 2.1). These guided actions not only further the narrative structure, but signify emotions and moments of realization to the audience.

¹⁷⁷ A stereopticon was a form of “magic lantern” or projection system invented in 1860 that projected two images at once to either create the illusion of depth or to dissolve between two images. *Oxford Reference Online*, s.v. “Stereopticon,” <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100530489> (accessed February 24, 2013).

¹⁷⁸ Friday, Hall & Co., “Dead!” advertisement, *The Clipper*, January 26, 1895, 756.

¹⁷⁹ Maude Anita Hart, “The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow” (Chicago: S. Brainard's Sons Co., 1898), Box 054, Item 097, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

TRIO. Soprano, Alto and Bass turning to Tenor with a look of surprise.

We nev - er knew that a crow could sing, Now let your mel - o - dy ring.

We nev - er knew that a crow could sing, Now let your mel - o - dy ring.

Figure 2.1 Performance Directions in “The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow”¹⁸¹

Embodying the characters in these songs substantially disrupted the Victorian emphasis on the controlled, highbrow body. The comic body was frequently clumsy, grotesque, or operating outside of the law. Taking in an uncontrolled body via mimesis allowed performers a great deal of expressive freedom, giving surface to desires and actions outside accepted late-nineteenth-century societal norms. The singers of “The Owl, Parrot, Duck, and Crow” all express the desire to leave their bodies and live as birds, taking on their characteristics. The tenor proclaims that:

A crow I would be and the farmers defy, In corn planting time in the spring...
Their fields I would rob, then away I would fly, and high in some tree top sing.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

At the end of the piece, the cross-species identification reaches a zenith as the singers erupt into a chorus of mimed bird calls (see Figure 2.2). This comical cacophony does not embody a desired genteel identity or display refinement. Instead, it disrupts this discourse as it brings the uncouth Other into the Self.

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow". The score is arranged in five systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are as follows:

Is so ver - y hun - gry, And she wants a cracker, cracker, Yes, she wants a cracker;

quack, quack, Quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack, quack,

caw, caw, Caw, caw, caw, caw, caw,

hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo.

The piano accompaniment consists of chords and rhythmic patterns that support the vocal lines. The overall style is characteristic of 19th-century comic songs, with a focus on miming various bird sounds.

Figure 2.2 Mimed Bird Calls in "The Owl, Parrot, Duck and Crow"¹⁸³

The explicit instructions found in comic songs operate discursively, and as performers take in the characteristics of an uncontrolled, socially free body, they simultaneously reinforce the emphasis on the control of the body. Indeed, much of the humor of nineteenth-century comic songs came from their presentation and mocking of the usually undesirable or imperfect.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

For example, the central joke of the 1885 song, “Old King Joel: The Comic Gaping Song” comes from the title character constantly letting his mouth hang agape. During the chorus, the performer mimes this behavior, as the song sheet explicitly instructs them to “Gape”¹⁸⁴ after every couplet. By embodying this behavior, and putting it on display as a subject of ridicule, parlor performers gained control over this behavior, potentially censoring it.

Comic songs did not just address abnormal bodies, but abnormal, lowbrow behaviors. A prime example of the explicit instruction to embody a lowbrow identity comes from F. Belasco’s 1886 song, “He’s the Picture of His Daddy in a 1000 Different Ways!” wherein a child imitates every behavior of his father. These behaviors include such transgressions as smoking his “best cigar,” drinking his rum, stealing his chickens, and pawning his watch to buy “whiskey Scotch.”¹⁸⁵ The explicit physical instructions of this example come in the form of parenthetical asides given during rests in the vocal line. In the third verse, after singing the line “and here’s the way he tries to walk,” the performer is told during two bars of rest to “Hop and Skip”¹⁸⁶ (see Figure 2.3). The comic nature of the song, and that it is meant to be an impression of the “way he *tries* to walk,”¹⁸⁷ suggests that the hopping and skipping would likely be exaggeratedly inelegant. A few lines later, after singing “and here’s the way he tries to talk,” the performer is instructed to speak “th-th-thay girls, aint I t-t’hweet,”¹⁸⁸ with an exaggerated stutter and lisp. By outwardly manifesting such behaviors as stumbling and stuttering, the performer embodies

¹⁸⁴ Gus B. Brigham, “Old King Joel. The Comic Gaping Song” (Chicago: National Music Company, 1885), Box 054, Item 092, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ F. Belasco and M.H. Rosenfeld, “He’s The Picture of His Daddy in a 1000 Different Ways!” (n.p.: W.F. Shaw, 1886), Box 054, Item 049, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

the clumsy characteristics of an uncontrolled body. Embodying this character disrupts the Victorian emphasis on the control of the body, which in turn signified a highbrow identity.



Figure 2.3 Examples of Mimesis in "He's the Picture of His Daddy in 1000 Different Ways!"¹⁸⁹

Taking on an uncontrolled body via mimesis allowed a great deal of expressive freedom. Performers could give surface to desires and actions outside accepted late-nineteenth-century social norms. The explicit instructions in Belasco's song offer the opportunity for performers to enact elements of courtship and even physically engage with another. In the final verse, the line "Oh, Daddy dear, I want a ma!" is accompanied with the action of "Selecting lady from audience."¹⁹⁰ Following the instructions and embodying the character gave performers the opportunity to express their desire for another as they pulled them from the role of spectator and into their performance. Common to most songs of the time, the chorus closes with eight

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

bars of “Dance,”¹⁹¹ providing further opportunities for a performer to perhaps physically interact with his or her chosen partner, or put on a solo physical display.

The melodic and harmonic material of comic songs encouraged possible mimetic actions as well. F. Belasco’s “He’s the Picture of His Daddy in a 1000 Different Ways!” contains several instances of interaction between the vocal and piano lines that utilize sonic, and perhaps implicit physical, mimesis. The first time through the verse, after the line “his ways are cute, he plays the flute,”¹⁹² the right hand of the piano leaps up in register and plays a previously unheard fanfare-like melody with the word “Flute” written under the staff (see Figure 2.3).¹⁹³ In this instance the piano sonically mimes the narrative content. Additionally, some performers may have also chosen to take this opportunity to mime flute playing. A couplet later, with the line “he drinks my rum, he beats my drum,”¹⁹⁴ the piano is told to imitate the sound of a bass drum as both hands play (in octaves) a low chromatic, and then diatonic, descending line. In these moments, whether the vocalist chooses to mime the action of drumming or not, the connotative music of the piano evokes external forces and brings them into the parlor.

While not every song of the time included explicit instructions to take on bodily characteristics, the practice was likely extrapolated to numerous performances. If, for instance, a performer were to engage with the text of 1912’s “When Crazy Joe Did the Alligator Slide,” the sexualized nature of this minstrel song would have significantly disrupted the highbrow parlor aesthetic. The song describes “Crazy Joe,” an African American character, and his various

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

dance moves over a lightly ragged rhythm (see Figure 2.4), which would have encouraged dance and physical engagement. As the chorus proceeds, it lists a variety of physical activities:

When Joe began to fiddle,
 Folks all began to wiggle,
 Shake their feet a little
 And then how they would jiggle
 Alligators came from miles around
 Just to hear his fiddle sound
 And on their stomachs they would slide
 jump on each others backs and ride
 Dance 'til day was breakin'
 And all the roosters wakin',
 Their big tails a shakin',
 Their sides with laughter quakin' [.]¹⁹⁵

In the context of the up-tempo, syncopated rhythms (see Figure 2.5) performers likely wiggled and jiggled along with the music. Within the highly sexualized minstrel tradition, roosters with their “big tails a shakin’”¹⁹⁶ would have been a potent double entendre. Eric Lott’s research on minstrelsy and how it invoked the “black male body as a powerful cultural sign of sexuality”¹⁹⁷ suggests that miming this song would have given white performers an opportunity to embody an alternate anatomy. As Lott discusses, minstrelsy reduced “the [black] body purely to sexuality”¹⁹⁸ as both a means of racial oppression and a method for white performers and audiences to enact sexual fantasies. Thus, as the song explores the sexual freedom of jumping

¹⁹⁵ Dennison Cook and Edith Maida Lessing, “When Crazy Joe Did the Alligator Slide” (Chicago: Will Rossiter, 1912), Box 16, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 118.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

“on each others backs” and riding “‘til day was breakin’,”¹⁹⁹ it both brought this disruption into the parlor and contributed to a discourse of difference. Similarly, in Miller’s understanding of Tin Pan Alley performance practice, embodying what whites identified as the “racial traits” of African Americans allowed them to “revel in the physical and expressive freedom they associated with African American culture.”²⁰⁰ By taking on the appearance of a differentiated Other, white parlor performers incorporated the experience of these embodied sensations into themselves while using derisive humor to distance themselves from African Americans.



Figure 2.4 Syncopated Rhythms in “When Crazy Joe Did the Alligator Slide”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Cook, “When Crazy Joe Did the Alligator Slide.”

²⁰⁰ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 41.

²⁰¹ Cook, “When Crazy Joe Did the Alligator Slide.”



Figure 2.5 Syncopated Rhythms in the chorus of “When Crazy Joe Did the Alligator Slide”²⁰²

Such wild motions certainly did not exist within Delsarte’s system of beauty and bodily signification based on ancient statuary, yet the nineteenth-century body nonetheless made them. If we return to the words of Hiram M. Stanley in Chapter One, and the belief that interest in “eating, drinking, smoking, society of the other sex, with dancing, [and] music of a noisy and lively character”²⁰³ makes up a lowbrow identity, then performing comic songs considerably disrupts the construction of the highbrow in the parlor. F. Belasco’s “He’s the Picture of His Daddy in a 1000 Different Ways!” depicts all of these behaviors and instructs performers to embody them. The power of mimesis, and the contemporary belief about gestures’ power,

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Hiram M. Stanley quoted in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 225.

means that performing this song, and similar comic songs, brought the lowbrow into the nineteenth-century body, giving it substance in the parlor and incorporating these experiences into the formation of the Self. Readers of Wells' manual would have been conflicted when confronted with his command, "that in [parlor] entertainment there shall be nothing to which there can be any objection, or which shall cause unpleasant remark and leave unpleasant memories."²⁰⁴ Parlor musicians regularly embodied the unpleasant and the objectionable.

²⁰⁴ Wells, *Manners, Culture and Dress of the Best American Society*, 410.

Chapter 3 : The Comic Character: First-Person Perspectives and Vocal Inflection

The soundscape of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century parlor has been lost to time, but accounts of its practitioners have survived. In 1986, musicologist Edith Borroff published an article based on her childhood recollections of her grandmother's turn-of-the-century parlor musicales in Chicago. She provides not only a useful definition of the practice and insight into it, her article also attempts to "counter some of the misconceptions about the American musical parlor."²⁰⁵ Borroff's polemic seeks to remove "negative characterizations of parlor music" as "limited."²⁰⁶ What begins as a well-intentioned defense of all kinds of listeners ultimately degenerates into a defense of Borroff's childhood experience and the parlor as a highbrow space, "superior" to the high-culture commonly associated with Schubertiades of the early nineteenth century.²⁰⁷ She romanticizes the American parlor as part of a "history of excellence" that displayed "egalitarian" values, making "women...equal with men," and "American music...equal with European."²⁰⁸ While her comparative logic seems faulty and unnecessary, her descriptive language reveals some underlying assumptions of the parlor. Her frequent references to Beethoven and other high-art Germanic composers reinforce the conception of the parlor as a highbrow space. In her singular reference to a potentially lowbrow action in the parlor, Borroff recalls "my mother's older brother singing wonderful vaudeville songs to ukulele, *acting* such chestnuts as 'Oh Lord, If You Won't Help Me, for Heaven's Sake Don't You Help That Bear.'"²⁰⁹ In every other reference to a specific piece of music, Borroff

²⁰⁵ Edith Borroff, "An American Parlor at the Turn of the Century," *American Music* 4, no. 3 (1986): 302.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 304. Emphasis added.

describes the performer as “playing” a piece; only in referencing vaudeville does she say the performer was “acting.”²¹⁰ When parlor performers sang comic songs they acted out characters, singing from their first-person perspectives, taking on their language and the sound of their voices. This first-person embodiment of comic characters and their lowbrow identities disrupted the highbrow aesthetic.

In the late-nineteenth century, comic performers took on alternate identities in their specific stage personas. Comedians performed in stereotyped comic identities, mocking various ethnicities, classes, or the opposite gender. Gillian Rodger’s research on the nineteenth-century variety stage argues that “the presentation of character through song was an important means of presenting comedy,” and that song performance was “the means by which performers shaped their comic persona.”²¹¹ In the nineteenth-century variety hall, Rodger found that comic songs “formed the core of men’s repertoire,” and that these songs were most often “based on specific character types.”²¹² These comic songs, as laid out by Rodger, supplied “a central character, a narrative full of comic events, and an opportunity to interpolate longer comic monologues or commentary within the song.”²¹³ The most frequently presented characters, in Rodger’s survey of the genre were “workingmen, upper-class men, the Irish, the Germans and African Americans,”²¹⁴ but other ethnic groups and feminine characters were also presented and mocked.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Gillian M. Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 99.

²¹² Ibid., 98.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 98-99.

Expressed in the medium of song, the voices of these comical characters held considerable power in signifying identity. As Rodger demonstrated, songs most succinctly and clearly conveyed a comical identity to audiences. This process was the same in the parlor. The comic character piece, an extremely common sub-variety of comic song, sung entirely in the first-person, allowed consumers to take on these comic identities as well. As parlor performers sang of themselves in the first-person, they transformed their voices, singing melodies and words that conveyed alternate identities. These performances, phatically heightened by singing, disrupted the highbrow/lowbrow discourse of the parlor as performers identified with these characters and shared their lowbrow traits.

Whereas the previous chapter uncovered how nineteenth-century parlor performers took on the signifying bodily gestures of lowbrow identities, this chapter investigates the power of the voice. In his examination of the power of the voice in Texas country music, Aaron Fox theorized that:

singing heightens the aural and visceral presence of the vocalizing body in language, calling attention to the physical medium of the voice, the normally taken-for-granted channel of “ordinary speech.” Singing is by its very nature *phatic* communication.²¹⁵

When text is sung it gains extra levels of social meaning. Similarly, Daniel Cavicchi in his ethnographic study of Bruce Springsteen fans argued for the “especially powerful function” of “musical practices...in the construction of personal identity.”²¹⁶ Arguably more than any other

²¹⁵ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 272.

²¹⁶ Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 137.

medium, musical performances, especially vocalizations, carry the most performative weight in the formation of identity.

The tremendous power of the singing voice has also been treated by Simon Frith. In attempting to understand the role of words in song, Frith argued that:

In songs, words are the sign of a voice. A song is always a performance and song words are always spoken out, heard in someone's accent. Songs are more like plays than poems; song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character. Singers use non-verbal as well as verbal devices to make their points—emphases, sighs, hesitations, changes of tone; lyrics involve pleas, sneers and commands as well as statements and messages and stories.²¹⁷

The words of a song do not just convey semantic meaning and relate narrative. The voice's subtle alterations add meanings to text, and the singing voice makes the body present in performance. In Frith's theoretical positioning of "the *voice as a person*,"²¹⁸ he lays out the way the voice can take on identities and inform others of identities. The voice, as Frith points out, is "a key factor in the way in which we assess and react to people we don't know [and] in the way we decide what sort of person they are."²¹⁹ The alteration of the voice, just as with performative actions, depends upon context. While not essentialized, the voice and its surface alterations still construct identities. As Frith elaborates, the voice "may not be a key to

²¹⁷ Simon Frith, "Why Do Songs Have Words?" in *Lost in Music: Culture, Style, and the Musical Event*, Avron Levine White, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1987), 97.

²¹⁸ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 196.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

someone's identity, but it is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities [and] pretend to be something we're not."²²⁰

Singing in another's voice, especially the comic character, brings them into the Self. Frith posits that "if a voice can be made to change to deceive other people, it can also be used to deceive ourselves," and that "putting on voices," is "a normal part of our *imaginative* activity."²²¹ By taking on a voice as one's own, and imagining the Self as the imitated Other, this voice becomes incorporated into the formation of Self. Singing in the style of an Other takes on what Frith calls her or his "vocal personality," and puts on "a vocal costume, enacting the role that they are playing."²²²

Singing, then, allows performers to shift between identities and construct Otherness. If identities do dynamically shift, then it is appropriate to follow the suggestion of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and ethnomusicologist Jason Lee Oakes, and "use the term identification in favor of identity."²²³ An identity is not an essentialized object, but a process. Oakes sought to divorce the notion of an essentialized identity from scholarship by observing the "actual acts of identification from which 'identity is extrapolated,'" as only then "can one look at the 'identities' that arise from these identifications as they are interpreted after the fact."²²⁴ Oakes' study of musical tribute events in twentieth-century New York also proves relevant to nineteenth-century song sheet performers. In both, performers chose "to identify with a particular musical

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 198. Emphasis in original.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Jason Lee Oakes, "Losers, Punks and Queers (and Elvii too): Identification and 'Identity' at New York City music tribute events" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005), 30.

²²⁴ Ibid., 31.

star and with particular musical sounds,” and in both cases those identifications were “used as a means of representing oneself.”²²⁵ In studying the “‘lounge music revival’ of the early 1990s,” Oakes found a group of largely “middle-class white males” whose identification with the music and material culture of the 1950s and 1960s allowed them to “both align themselves with, and distance themselves from, an idealized white identity.”²²⁶ As Oakes points out, the “urban hipsters” who revived lounge music “didn’t subscribe to grunge and alternative-rock notions of white male naturalism.”²²⁷ They chose which musical voice they wanted to identify with, and which voice would let them play with the identity they alternately desired and derided. As a mass-produced product, nineteenth-century consumers had a choice of which song sheets to bring into their parlors, and ultimately, which identities to embody. Their choices created the acts of identification that crafted or disrupted the discourse of high and lowbrow identity.

Daniel Cavicchi’s twentieth-century ethnography of the “fan” experience further elucidates the importance of selecting with what voice to embody and identify. For the Springsteen fans Cavicchi studied, being “touched” by the music meant “making a personal connection between oneself and something outside oneself.”²²⁸ The Springsteen fans experienced a “heightened self-awareness” in these musical dialectic confrontations. I argue that the same process applies to the home performance of nineteenth-century popular songs. Cavicchi supports his theory with accounts of fans’ collections. He observed fans’ tendencies to fetishize objects, such as CDs and ticket stubs, removing them “from their original context of

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 182-83.

²²⁷ Ibid., 182.

²²⁸ Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 137.

meaning and [giving] them new uses and meanings.”²²⁹ Nineteenth-century consumers, in purchasing the song sheets of famed comic actors, or those portraying famous comic character archetypes, were engaging in the same behavior. The songs gained new uses and meaning in the home, as parlor performers embodied the characters themselves, moving between themselves and something else. Just as Springsteen fans selected which items represented themselves, nineteenth-century consumers selected which song sheets and which sung narratives they wanted to use to represent themselves in the parlor. Cavicchi framed the process of seeking out items for self-representation in the words of nineteenth-century philosopher William James, who put forth the idea that the Self constructs an “ideal” or “potential”²³⁰ Self in the mind, and actions are guided in reference to this ideal. For James:

our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities.²³¹

Purchasing comic character song sheets shaped the Self. They allowed parlor musicians to explore potentialities, to take on the first-person narrative of another, and to be and do something outside the Self.

The significance of the voice in nineteenth-century parlor performances comes in two forms: “grain” and lyrics. The “grain” of the voice, as defined by Roland Barthes, involves the “dual production” of “language and of music.”²³² The nature of the interaction between

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid., 140.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” reprinted in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 294.

language and melody, as Barthes believes, is what gives the voice its “significance.”²³³

Metaphorically, the “grain” is “the body in the voice as it sings,” or “the hand as it writes,”²³⁴ as Barthes treats each performance as a creative act where an individual’s performance writes new layers of meaning. Barthes’ “grain” incorporates both culturally constructed stylistic elements, such as “the rules of the genre,” and the ways “melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work.”²³⁵ Listening to melodic lines, according to Barthes, conveys individual vocal personality and “the image of the body.”²³⁶ The sound of the singing voice adds layers of meaning and conveys the sense of a physical body.

The lyrical significance of comic character songs stems from the text’s use of first-person narratives. The tremendous power of first-person statements was explored by philosopher and linguist J.L. Austin, who coined the term performative, which later went onto to shape Judith Butler’s theories of identity as discussed earlier. Austin recognized that uttering phrases such as “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow,” were neither descriptive nor informative, to utter it “is to do it.”²³⁷ According to Austin, in these types of sentences, “the utterance is the performing of an action.”²³⁸ By singing in the first person, performers lent performative weight to the comic character’s utterances, and took on its actions.

In the context of the parlor, with its assumptions about and constructions of the highbrow, the voice should purport a highbrow identity, but nineteenth-century musicians also

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid., 299.

²³⁵ Ibid., 295.

²³⁶ Ibid., 299.

²³⁷ J. L. Austin, *The Works of J. L. Austin. Electronic Edition. How To Do Things With Words* (Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex Corporation, 2000), 5-6.

²³⁸ Ibid.

sounded the lowbrow voice. Music, as Levine found in his study of the developing high/low divide, held a special prominence in the supposed enlightenment of society. He found the push for disciplined, refined identities throughout culture, such as in a 1890s edition of “America the Beautiful” that added the lines: “God mend thine ev’ry flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law.”²³⁹ Music, according to nineteenth-century American critic John Sullivan Dwight, was meant to serve as a “civilizing agent” that corrected “crudities.”²⁴⁰ Singers were pressured to present a refined Self to society, but comic songs portrayed uncivilized crudities, giving them a voice in this contentious discourse.

Specific nineteenth-century beliefs about music, especially vocal music, clarify its immense power in shaping and potentially refining the Self. Not only were the gestures explored in Chapter Two powerful external significations of the Self, so was vocal intonation. In her Delsarte technique manual, Genevieve Stebbins instructed her students to “place your heart into the place of your larynx,”²⁴¹ because vocal intonation “subtly indicates each passing thought.”²⁴² Vocal inflection corresponded with internal thoughts and characteristics. She goes on to detail techniques of breathing to achieve specific vocal inflections. Further, her system of “Degrees for Music”²⁴³ provided a detailed theoretical method that specified exactly when singers should emphasize the dissonant notes of ascending or descending lines, what kind of dynamics and inflection to use, and what it meant to do so. Failure to conform to this specific musical grammar reflected back on a person’s identity, for as Delsarte believed, “vulgar and

²³⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 178.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁴¹ Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1977), 290.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 293.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 311.

uncultured people, as well as children, act in regard to an ascensional progression in an inverse sense to well-educated, or at any rate, affectionate persons.”²⁴⁴ As Delsarte reportedly said about vocal intonation:

light and shade are not, as has been asserted, subject to the arbitration of inspiration; they are ruled by laws (for in art there is no phenomenon not subject to absolute mathematical laws).²⁴⁵

The nineteenth-century voice conveyed an essentialized identity. Every movement and inflection carried meaning.

Such an emphasis on the power and control of the voice gives disruptive power to the 1871 song “The Roomatiz.” The song makes light of rheumatism by employing a musical line and vocal quality that imitate coughing. This comic character piece, sung entirely in the first-person, provides the performer with instructions on how to act the part, explicating: “Note: The singer is supposed to be a very old man, with a cracked and trembling voice.”²⁴⁶ Singers likely sought to embody the old man depicted on the cover sheet: hunched over, a cane clasped in his wiry hands, and a scowl on his face (see Figure 3.1). In a lilting 6/8 meter, the singer stutters out “I hev got the roo-ma-tiz, the roo-hoo-hoo-ma-tiz,”²⁴⁷ with grace notes accenting every syllable and contributing to an unsteady, cracking voice (see Figure 3.2). Singing “I” establishes that this voice comes from the singer him or herself, but the grain, in combining the melodic material and the “cracked and trembling”²⁴⁸ inflection, defines the singer’s body and identity as old and

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 309.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 311.

²⁴⁶ C.P. Cranch, “The Roomatiz,” (New York: Wm. A. Pond & Co., 1871), Box 054, Item 115, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

ailing. The accompaniment also distorts itself, as at the end of each verse when the pianist is instructed to hit a series of relatively dissonant dominant seventh chords with “a twinge.”²⁴⁹ In this instance the performer brings respiratory disease into the parlor, giving substance to a very real and common threat in the nineteenth century. In his survey of nineteenth-century popular songs, Jon Finson addresses the “high frequency of songs about dying” with the hypothesis that “many people [in the nineteenth century] could not escape direct confrontation with the whole process of dying,” and thus “popular song took on the subject more as a necessity rather than as a macabre obsession.”²⁵⁰ Parlor performers played with the dangerous, but in making light of it, perhaps gained a level of control over it.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Jon W. Finson, *The Voices That are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 83-84.

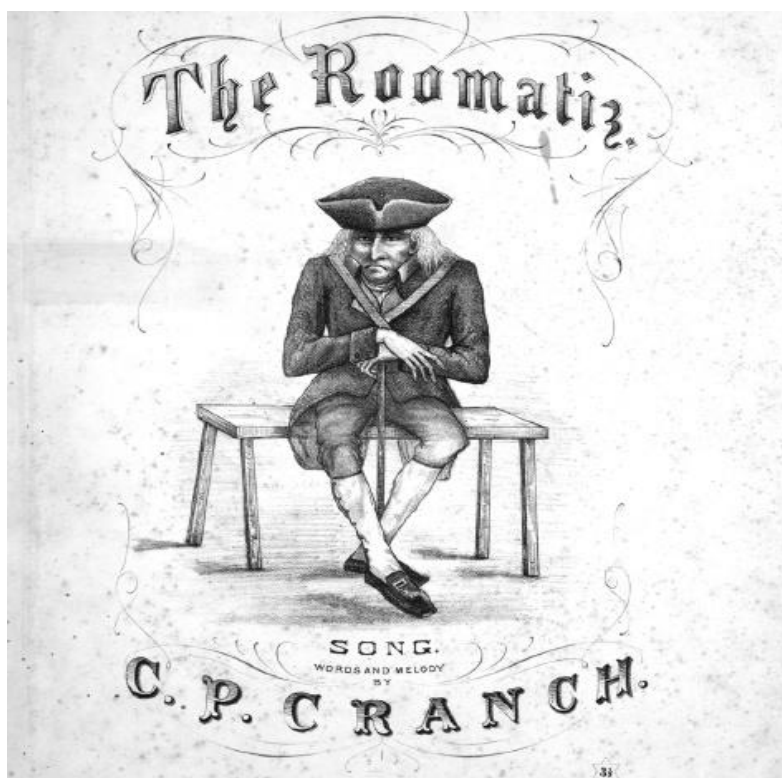


Figure 3.1 Cover Sheet for “The Roomatiz”²⁵¹

Allegretto.

1. Did you ev - er hev the roo - ma - tiz, The roo - hoo - hoo - ma -
 2. 'Twas in the winter at Val - ley Forge, At Va - ha - hal - ly

Figure 3.2 The “Trembling” Vocal Line of “The Roomatiz”²⁵²

²⁵¹ Cranch, “The Roomatiz.”

²⁵² Ibid.

More commonly, comic character pieces put on an ethnic vocal costume or personality containing and furthering certain musical tropes and discourses of Otherness. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh have persuasively pointed to “Western music’s long history of borrowing from and evoking non-Western cultures and musics”²⁵³ to argue for the importance of turning a post-colonial lens, in the tradition of Edward Said, on the “discourses of race and ethnicity” central to popular music, and the “prominence of Orientalist, primitivist, and exoticist tropes.”²⁵⁴

Among the most common comic character tropes was the Irish stereotype. The Irish character piece, according to Rodger, was often sonically defined by the use of “nonsense syllables.”²⁵⁵ The lilting melody of Irish character pieces is reminiscent of the Irish ballads popularized by Thomas Moore, which had a tremendous impact on American song and the impression of the Irish earlier in the nineteenth century.²⁵⁶ Uniquely, the Irish-ness of 1875’s “What’s the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?”²⁵⁷ comes entirely from the voice, particularly its characteristic dotted rhythms and the vocal inflection, which adopts Irish dialect (see Figure 3.3). The accompanist plays only quarter-note block chords, leaving the vocal line to define the ethnic character of the piece.

²⁵³ Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, “Introduction: On Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music,” in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 7.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵⁵ Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, 100.

²⁵⁶ Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: Norton, 1979), 54.

²⁵⁷ R.H. Stoddard, Esq. and Alfred B. Sedgwick, “What’s the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?” (New York: S.T. Gordon & Son, 1875), Box 69, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

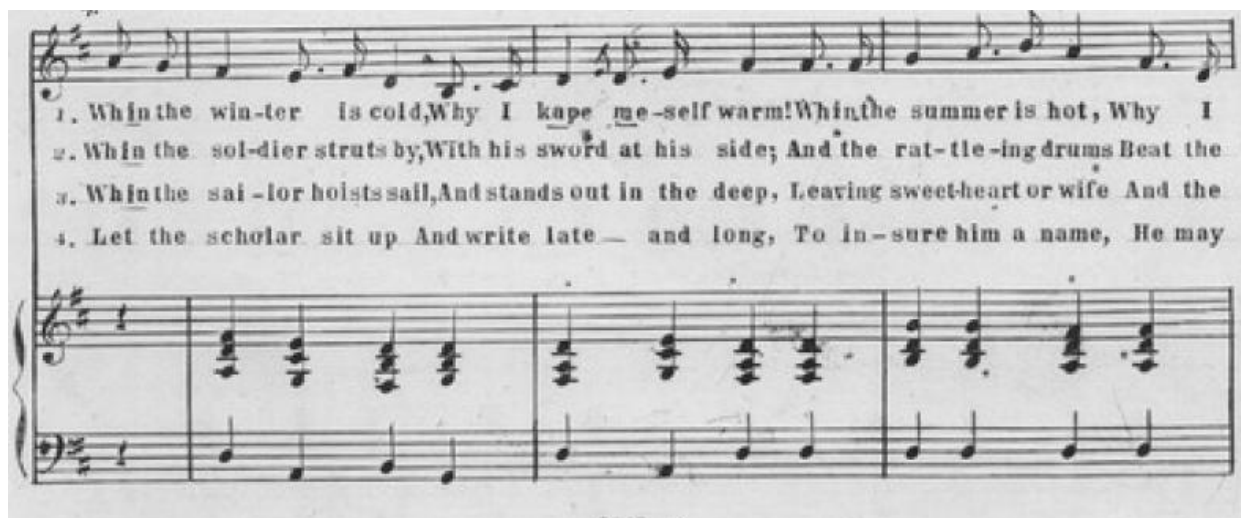


Figure 3.3 The Liltng Irish Melody of “What’s the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?”²⁵⁸

Taking on a sonically signified ethnic Other allowed performers to explore a variety of lowbrow and subversive behaviors. Embodying an ethnicity, for many nineteenth-century Westerners, was a method of delving into the extremes of identity. In his discussion of comic character pieces, Finson cites Carl Dalhaus’ observation that:

to the early-nineteenth-century mentality, “characteristic” meant idiosyncratic rather than general or typical...“interesting” and “striking” rather than “nobly simple,” coloristic rather than statuesque.²⁵⁹

This led Finson to conclude that “comic songs,” which “often dealt with the peculiarities of human behavior...fall naturally into considerations of ethnic color (a manifestation of the ‘interesting’ and ‘striking’ rather than the ‘nobly simple’).”²⁶⁰ Singing with another’s ethnic

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Finson, *Voices That are Gone*, 271.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 274.

voice allowed the display of peculiar behaviors outside of one's norms, including even open mockery and criticism.

The first-person narrative of "What's the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?" perfectly exemplifies the way performers could use an ethnic identity to embody something outside of the Self, and perhaps even hints at why some chose to identify with these songs. Subtitled "Pat's Philosophy," the stereotyped Irish "Pat" offers a first-person critique of marriage.²⁶¹ "Pat" compares his wife to a widdy, or noose, and relays how other facets of life—such as sailing or battling—are made hollow by an overly demanding spouse. Consumers who bought and then performed this music likely identified with such a complaint, and wanted to include a representation of it in their own Self formations. They transferred this song from the context of the variety hall to their own homes, much as with Cavicchi's Springsteen fans, to help them "shape their sense of 'me.'"²⁶² An idiosyncratic Other was free to behave outside of expectations; it offered performers a lowbrow identity to escape into and through which to process opinions, desires, and behaviors in themselves.

The layers of vocal mimesis within the first-person narrative of "What's the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?" recreate Pat's relationships to others, giving power to the act of embodying Pat's persona and the enactment of his social critiques. The piece not only lends the performer Pat's voice, with lines such as "It's mebbe I'm bold, And it's mebbe I'm not,"²⁶³ but it also constructs other characters, with their own unique voices. This move between voices and the creation of other characters demonstrates the way character pieces utilize multiple

²⁶¹ Stoddard and Sedgwick, "What's the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?"

²⁶² Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us*, 149.

²⁶³ Stoddard and Sedgwick, "What's the World to a Man When His Wife is a Widdy?"

voices and identities. Even within one character piece, singers can take on and ridicule multiple, idiosyncratic identities. Pat is the ultimate butt of the joke, but in singing about his wife Pat brings her into his fictional world and creates yet another comic identity and Other, the controlling wife, to mock. At the end of each chorus, the vocalist adds another layer of vocal mimicry and identification by quoting his “Uncle Dan’s” advice to “stay home with your biddy.”²⁶⁴ As Frith has pointed out, “singers, like lecturers, have their own mannered ways of indicating quote marks,” and when they incorporate “such a multiplicity of voices”²⁶⁵ into their sung narratives they actually reaffirm their vocal costume and embodied persona. As Frith argues, narrative singers take “on many parts but [retain] an essential ‘personality’ that is common to all of them.”²⁶⁶ As performers sing about Pat’s wife, or change their inflection to quote “Uncle Dan,” they are also essentially remaining “Pat” and embodying his relationship to those figures in his fictional world. Singing about his wife or uncle not only conjures them up via mimesis, singers could expound on the nature of these relationships with the grain of their voice. They could have added extra levels of irony in their inflection, making their disdain for an Other clear. Identifying with this voice could have freed some to express their own distaste for their spouses in an acceptable manner by attributing the words of the voice to an exaggerated Other.

Melodically and harmonically essentializing an identity, however, is not a clear cut process. The 1881 song “Dot Beautiful Hebrew Girl” confuses music’s means for signifying ethnic identities as it conflates a Jewish identity with tropes most commonly associated with

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 199.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

German music and “Dutch”²⁶⁷ comic characters. The mocking dialect of the song, while intended to present a “Yiddish” voice, could easily be confused with the types of mispronunciations heard in “Dutch” character pieces, such as replacing “with” with “mit” and “that” with “dot.”²⁶⁸ The chorus also moves into a waltz and makes use of an oom-pah style bass, further conflating German and “Hebrew” identities.

In this instance, the singer’s identity comes through most clearly in his or her use of words. The song relates, in the first-person, how a young man fell in love with a “Hebrew girl.” Interspersed in the lyrics are transliterated spellings of Yiddish terms such as “masseltov,”²⁶⁹ with footnotes that provide anglicized and Christianized translations. A “bar-mitz-va” becomes a “confirmation,” “schule” is understood as a “church,” and a “schick-sa” is translated as a “servant.”²⁷⁰ These dubious translations clearly represent a Christian-Eurocentric bias, but more significantly, reveal one of the ways Christian Americans came to terms with other identities, by appropriating their terminology. The phonetic spellings and use of hyphens make these potentially foreign words easier to pronounce and incorporate into one’s own voice. Parlor performers took on another’s voice by using another’s words.

Singing in the stereotyped dialects of Others became a crucial part of the discourse for white, Christian Americans who had to reconcile the surging tides of immigration and an ever-growing diversity with their homogenous, utopic, religiously based, ethnocentric visions of

²⁶⁷ In the nineteenth century, the term “Dutch” did not refer to the Netherlandish. It was a transliteration of “Deutsch,” and was used to refer to anything German.

²⁶⁸ George Schleiffarth and Harry G. Neeler, “Dot Beautiful Hebrew Girl” (Chicago: The Chicago Music Co., 1881), Box 054, Item 033, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

refinement and constructions of class. Although his methodology was later critiqued by Simon Frith, H.F. Mooney's argument that "pop song lyrics reflect the emotional needs of their time"²⁷¹ still holds some relevance. Popular entertainment has served as a release valve for emotional and social tensions across time, and the ever diversifying population was one of the chief tensions for white, nineteenth-century Americans. American cities presented frequent opportunities for interracial contact. In 1890, "62 percent of all foreign born" settled in urban cities, compared to only "26 percent of native white Americans."²⁷² From these statistics, Finson argued that the lyrics and music of nineteenth-century popular song traced the "changing ideas about how disparate European groups arriving on these shores might relate to one another."²⁷³ The United States struggled, especially, with the tension from Chinese immigration in the late nineteenth century. As evidenced by an 1880 political cartoon, "The Chinese Invasion," Americans had an extremely negative reaction to Chinese immigrants, both on the east coast and west coast (see Figure 3.4).²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Frith, "Why Do Songs Have Words?" 79.

²⁷² Jon W. Finson, *The Voices That are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 270.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 270-71.

²⁷⁴ J. Keppler, "The Chinese Invasion," *Puck* 7, no. 158 (1880), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91793028/> (accessed March 31, 2013)

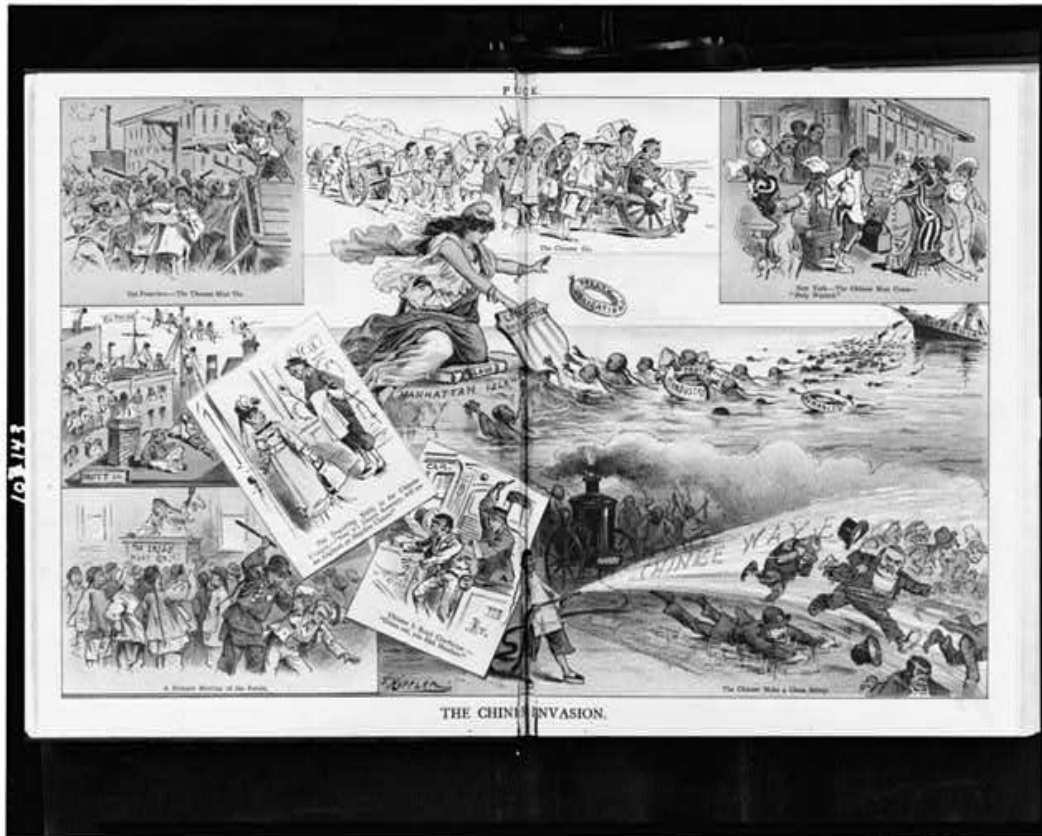


Figure 3.4 “The Chinese Invasion”²⁷⁵

A prime example of the tensions over the arrival disparate ethnic groups is voiced in 1878’s “Ah Sin’: Chinese Song.” The song explores a variety of ethnic identities, reflecting the shifting demographics of the late-nineteenth century. Written three years after Congress’ first direct law on immigration and four years before the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,²⁷⁶ the song represents the height of tension on the issue. Concern over immigration spread far beyond the highest areas of influx, even to areas relatively unaffected. Although

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Thomas J. Archdeacon, "Immigration Law," in *The Oxford Companion to United States History*: Oxford University Press, 2001. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195082098.001.0001/acref-9780195082098-e-0747> (accessed March 31, 2013)

California had the largest Chinese population at the time at 75,218 (approximately 11 percent of their total population) the song was published in Michigan, which, according to the 1880 census, had a total of only twenty-eight Chinese citizens.²⁷⁷

Written in a derogatory faux-Chinese dialect, “Ah Sin” tells the story of a Chinese laundry worker who competes with a “melican”²⁷⁸ man for an “Irish Gal.”²⁷⁹ Sung from the first-person, although with “I” replaced in the dialect with such stereotyped lines as “me like Irish gal, she like me,” the vocalist repeatedly asserts his ethnic identity both in the narrative and in their use of phonetically spelled mispronunciations such as “P’lice man takee me to lockee up shop.”²⁸⁰ It portrays the Chinese man as eating “rats and mice,” the “melican” man as a “dead beat,” and the “Irish gal” as drinking lots of “ginee.”²⁸¹ The song attributes such lowbrow activities as drinking, kissing, and violence to ethnic identities, but simultaneously allows performers to enact them.

In the late nineteenth century, Americans were not only constantly reasserting their own ethnic identities within ever shifting demographics, American men and women were constantly redefining their relationships to each other. They accomplished this in part through song. Within the parlor soundscape, a primarily feminine space, women were able to exercise their voices in far greater numbers than on the public stage and even enact crucial gender critiques and subvert sexual norms. American patriarchal society and Victorian sexual norms

²⁷⁷ Historical Census Browser, “State Level Results for 1880,” University of Virginia Library. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/state.php> (accessed April 17, 2013)

²⁷⁸ Based upon the stereotyped dialect of the song this likely translates as “Mexican.”

²⁷⁹ Harry R. Williams, “‘Ah Sin.’ Chinese Song” (Detroit: Roe Stephens, Successor to Whittemore & Stephens, 1878), Box 054, Item 002, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

were notoriously restrictive of women. Important figures, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, pushed for suffrage, but women were politically and socially marginalized into the twentieth century. Women's sexuality was far under the bar of Christian, Victorian repression. Literary critic Hannah Aspinall, in her study of how "the female body has long been idealised, objectified and fetishized...particularly in Victorian culture," discussed how the various nineteenth-century "social rules and guidelines on how the female body should look, and how it should be dressed" furthered this objectification process.²⁸² For example, Aspinall pointed to "the strict dress codes of the time" that denoted "that female legs and ankles remain covered under swathes of fabric," and how baring them was "considered wholly indecent."²⁸³

Parlor musicales offered unique opportunities for the voice of female concerns and desires to enter the discourse. Colleen McDannell cites the cultural emphasis on celibacy as encouraging "the development of a sex-segregated social structure."²⁸⁴ In order to avoid temptation men met in public spaces, like pubs, while women "usually gathered within the confines of relatives' homes."²⁸⁵ This culturally imposed sexual segregation gives extra weight to parlor music performances. In same-sex contexts, men or women had the opportunity to bond over feelings about the opposite sex. The parlor musicale was also one of few acceptable occasions for mixed-sex-company and it provided the genders with crucial opportunities to

²⁸² Hannah Aspinall, "The Fetishization and Objectification of the Female Body in Victorian Culture," *brightONLINE Online Journal of Literary Criticism and Creativity* 2 (August 2012), <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/study/english-literature-studies-brighton/brightonline/issue-number-two/the-fetishization-and-objectification-of-the-female-body-in-victorian-culture>.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Colleen McDannell, *The Christian home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 11.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

confront each other. Singing comic character pieces about or as the other gender substantially disrupted normative nineteenth-century expectations

When female parlor performers gave voice to the 1866 song “You Naughty, Naughty Men,” they substantially subverted nineteenth-century patriarchal American society. The song immediately establishes the first-person perspective with the line “I will never more deceive you,”²⁸⁶ and goes onto to decry men’s faults, including deceiving, misleading, and beating women. In the penultimate verse, the singer proclaims:

And when married how you treat us, and of each fond wish defeat us,
And some will even beat us, oh! you naughty, naughty men,
You take us from our mothers, our sisters and our brothers,
When you get us, flirt with others, oh! you cruel wicked men.²⁸⁷

Within the verses, the singer’s pronoun use situates women together, placing women (“us”) in opposition to “you naughty, naughty men.”²⁸⁸ Performed amongst a group of women, this song could be a powerful catharsis. Performed by a woman in front of men, it could be an extremely pointed critique. Performed by a man, it could engender a sense of empathy or invert the critique. In any case, performers would have chosen to identify with the disruptive message of the song before singing it from a first-person perspective.

Nearly half a century later, in 1912, the position of women in America had shifted, but the highly sexual nature of the song “Tickle it!” still disrupted the parlor aesthetic. As the cover art makes clear, in depicting a woman leaning over a male piano player’s shoulder and

²⁸⁶ G. Bickwell and T. Kennick, “You Naughty, Naughty Men” (New York: S.T. Gordon & Son, 1866), Box 7, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

whispering “Tickle it!,”²⁸⁹ the title and chorus of the song refer to tickling the ivories (see Figure 3.5). But, the subtleties of the body posture on the artwork and the lyrics within barely hide the sexual metaphor. In the verse, the vocalist syncopates each phrase, beginning on the last sixteenth note of the downbeat (see Figure 3.6) and singing such highly sexualized lines as:

Cause when you play the Baby Grand, Why I just lose my heart and hand,
Oh hear me sighing, oh hear my crying, Honey can't you just understand.²⁹⁰

During the chorus, the singer inverts the rhythm, landing on the downbeat and alternating between dotted eighths and sixteenth notes (see Figure 3.7). The vocalist rises a third or fourth melodically with every statement of “Tickle it!” and pulses forward rhythmically, lending a sense of urgency to the command. After rising upwards, the line dramatically descends on “Oh press that harmony strain,” before chromatically emphasizing the line: “take me straight to Heaven and right back again.”²⁹¹ Though the music already enacts the sexual content of the song in moments such as the exasperated pauses on “So...Please, Honey keep on playing,” and “Cause...I just can't keep from swaying,”²⁹² performers could have added further layers of sexual meaning and innuendo in their individually inflected performances. Even though the artwork implies the song comes from a female perspective, the lyrics never explicitly state this. A male performer could also identify with this vocal role and register his sexuality. In fact, it opens a broader sexual discourse either way, as the narrative sings about being excited by another's song, entailing a two-way interaction and, again, adding mimetic layers of meaning as the voice creates and enacts other characters and relationships to them. Putting on this vocal

²⁸⁹ Joe Cooper and Dave Oppenheim, “Tickle It!” (New York: Shapiro Music Pub. Co., 1912), Box 16, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

personality would have allowed parlor performers to make implicit sexual references or imagine the Self as sexual.



Figure 3.5 Cover Sheet for "Tickle It!"²⁹³

²⁹³ Ibid.

'Cause when you play : that Ba-by Grand, Why I just lose my heart and hand,
For Hon' you know that in each key There is a chord that speaks to me,

Figure 3.6 Syncopated Rhythms in "Tickle It!"²⁹⁴

CHORUS
Tic - kle it, tic - kle it, tic - kle it, For it's love you say, in ev - 'ry
tune you play, Oh press that har-mo-ny strain, Take me straight to Heav-en and right

p-f

Tickle It 3

Figure 3.7 The Chorus of "Tickle It!"²⁹⁵²⁹⁴ Ibid.²⁹⁵ Ibid.

Through the voice, parlor performers shared comic character's names, accents, terms, and ultimately, their identities. Bringing these characters into the parlor soundscape disrupted its highbrow edifying mission. They acted in direct opposition to the nineteenth-century cultural forces that Levine discusses, those that advocated for "a force for moral order" and sought to halt "the chaos threatening to envelop the nation."²⁹⁶ The musical voices of comic songs were not what John Sullivan Dwight wrote about in 1870; they were not a "civilizing agency" or a "beautiful corrective of our crudities;"²⁹⁷ similarly, they did not bring harmony to the American nation and its "a great mixed people of all races."²⁹⁸ Instead, the discordant voices of these songs brought chaos into the home. Singing in the first-person transformed the parlor performers into the idiosyncratic Other. Doing so accentuated crudities and drew divisive racial lines between peoples, both defining and maintaining social norms via mockery, and subverting them via embodiment.

²⁹⁶ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 200.

²⁹⁷ John Sullivan Dwight, quoted in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 200.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4 : Topical Songs: Addressing Reality and Critiquing Utopia

In 1895, Ludwig Engländer and Sydney Rosenfeld premiered *The 20th Century Girl*, “a lyrical novelty in two acts”²⁹⁹ at the New York Bijou theatre, and according to a review in the *New York Times*, it was met with “great applause.”³⁰⁰ This “burletta” takes an ironic stance on the modernist promise of the twentieth century as it presents the story of “a girl who apes masculine ways and is nominated for Congress by an Irish-American ‘boss.’”³⁰¹ It subverts the utopian promise of the turn-of-the-century as it mocks the imperfect state of women’s roles in society, immigration, and politics, rather than presenting an idealized, harmonious future. The pursuit of an ideal state was a very real concern for many in the nineteenth century. Various Americans attempted to create their own versions of Thomas More’s utopia, from the famous Reverend Sylvester Graham (1794-1851) and his followers, who championed a popular health movement across the nation,³⁰² to the Oneida “perfectionists” experiment in communal living in central New York (1848-1881).³⁰³ Topical songs, in their explicit presentation of contemporary political and cultural issues and mockery of them, critique the supposed move towards a highbrow utopia. Nineteenth-century American visions of utopia concerned themselves with perfecting society and moving towards a future without the supposed ills of

²⁹⁹ Frederick Hallen, Sydney Rosenfeld, and Ludwig Engländer, *The 20th Century Girl*, playbill (New York: Grand Opera House, 1895).

³⁰⁰ “The New Bijou Burletta: Great Applause for ‘The Twentieth Century Girl’ Last Night,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1895.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Sylvester Graham,”
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/240742/Sylvester-Graham> (accessed April 16, 2013).

³⁰³ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Oneida Community,”
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/429132/Oneida-Community> (accessed April 16, 2013).

conflict, alcohol, and sexual impulses, but topical songs revealed that these lowbrow actions never receded.

Not surprisingly, the lowbrow intruded into the utopia that the parlor attempted to construct. The same year that the *20th Century Girl* premiered, song sheets of the most popular numbers from the burletta circulated across the country. Among them, the “plaintive ballad of ‘The Ambitious Magpie,’” according to the *New York Times*, proved “popular.”³⁰⁴ The magpie’s story has little to do with the plot of the *20th Century Girl*, but its lyrics reveal the pronounced high and lowbrow contradictions of late-nineteenth-century America:

A magpie once dwelt in a bower of gold, A beautiful bird of yore,
With dainties as full as the bower would hold: A pamper’d pet bird of yore!
With courtliest grace he had learn’d to salaam, He’d been taught sweetest words, such
as sugar, and jam;
But he pined, in his heart, ‘Cause he could not say “damn!” That sorrowful bird of
yore!³⁰⁵

As the rather static narrative unfolds, the magpie’s tale presents little more than flimsy pretense to repeatedly say the expletive “damn!” The song stands out, however, because it paints the bird as a highbrow character, surrounded by extravagant pieces of material culture and putting on graces, yet with a secret desire to transgress. The magpie serves as an apt metaphor for Victorian era American society. The parlor soundscape, with its material items and constructions of genteel behaviors, operated as a kind of bird cage, putting parlor performers on display, but restricting their modes of expression. Performing this type of comic song in the parlor exposes two crucial phenomena: first, parody and topical songs demonstrate

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ludwig Engländer and Sydney Rosenfeld, “The Ambitious Magpie!” (New York: T.B. Harms & Co., 1895), Box 23, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

an acute awareness that nineteenth-century Americans were not living in a utopia; second, performers desired to enact lowbrow, anti-utopian behaviors. Topical comic songs, in addressing the real world, and not an idealized one, exposed the persistence of the lowbrow. Their place in the parlor reveals that the world of highbrow manners was not a universal utopia. Comic songs allowed performers to escape from the highbrow vision of perfection into the subversively desirable realm of the low.

Comic songs proliferated across the country and enough Americans chose to embody alternate identities in their gestures and voice to support nationwide industries. While the cultural momentum of the time advocated for refined identities as a means of gauging social value, Americans still chose to entertain themselves with low, crass songs. Embodying such identities offered something that the highbrow failed to provide.

The multiple layers of meaning and significations in parlor songs acted out broader social conflicts. British film scholar Richard Dyer believes entertainment is capable of enacting these conflicts by allowing people to escape into the realizations of external forms. Dyer specifically studies the genre of musicals, but in his influential monograph, *Only Entertainment*, he theorizes that the description of entertainment as “escape” underlines entertainment’s “central thrust...utopianism.”³⁰⁶ Dyer believes this utopianism manifests itself in entertainment because it “offers the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide.”³⁰⁷ Entertainment forms like parlor musicales give a

³⁰⁶ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

sense “that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized.”³⁰⁸ As Dyer explains elsewhere, they accomplish this not by directly depicting utopia, but “what utopia would feel like.”³⁰⁹ The “utopian sensibility” of entertainment, according to Dyer, corresponds to “specific inadequacies in society.”³¹⁰ Thus, if there is a sense of “social tension/inadequacy/absence” such as “dreariness,” then entertainment will present a feeling of “intensity.”³¹¹ Whatever the perceived ills of society are, entertainment allows an escape into their inverse. In Dyer’s theory of entertainment, as nineteenth-century America struggled with the construction of class, then entertainment should address this tension by presenting how an ordered, harmonious, and genteel society would feel. Uniquely, comic songs worked in opposition to this model, presenting critiques of reality rather than utopian escapism.

Examining other contemporary entertainment forms such as melodrama, a theatrical practice characterized by exaggeratedly clear characters, emotions, and plots, reveals how the extremes of identities represented in performances allowed the overflow of social tensions to emerge. The clearly signified identities of nineteenth-century song and melodrama provided powerful means of confronting tensions, and their extremes of representation in music and gestures have led numerous scholars to connect these types of entertainments to Freudian analysis. In studying melodrama, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith compared the excesses of the form to Freud’s concept of “conversion hysteria,” where repressed emotions emerge “as physical

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” reprinted in *Genre, The Musical: A Reader*, Rick Altman, ed. (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul in association with the British Film Institute, 1981), 177.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 183.

³¹¹ Ibid., 184.

symptoms.”³¹² Similarly, melodrama historian Peter Brooks connected melodrama to “the psychoanalytic concept of ‘acting out,’” which uses the body along with “its actions, gestures, its sites of irritation and excitation, to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation because they are somehow under the bar of repression.”³¹³ The central conflict for melodrama’s heroes and heroines is often repression, and an inability to express oneself, just as those living in the Victorian era, with its emphasis on highbrow, genteel ideas, may repressed certain types of expression. As John Mercer and Martin Shingler observed, “melodrama’s characters are noted by their inability to take action to resolve their problems; they are effectively oppressed and repressed individuals.”³¹⁴ As a consequence, “we see emotions and tensions build up that cannot be turned into action,” and according to Mercer and Shingler, these emotions manifest themselves in the “music and *mise-en-scène*.”³¹⁵ Mercer and Shingler concur with Nowell-Smith’s supposition that “the undischarged emotion” that overflows its way into “the music and...*mise-en-scène*”³¹⁶ represents a siphoning off of the “ideological contradictions that cannot be resolved in the narrative of the melodrama.”³¹⁷ The excessive nature of melodrama is “a safety valve”³¹⁸ that resolves deep societal and psychological conflicts. Comic songs, in their exaggerated characters and music, operated in a similar fashion, siphoning off the lowbrow actions that conflicted with late-nineteenth-century highbrow ideals.

³¹² Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, quoted in .John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (New York: Wallflower, 2004), 22.

³¹³ Peter Brooks, “Melodrama, Body, Revolution,” in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, J. S. Bratton et al, eds. (London, 1994), 19.

³¹⁴ Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 22.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Nowell-Smith, quoted in Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 23.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

Many of the musical presentations in nineteenth-century America aimed towards achieving a specific set of ideals, “improving” society, and removing the lowbrow. Arguably, the process of cultural “sacralization”³¹⁹ that Lawrence Levine found in nineteenth-century America, and that I have built upon in the previous chapters, was an attempt to bring about a utopia or ideal type. Levine observed a broad thrust to reorganize American aesthetics to create a type of enlightenment. The achievement of an ideal society, in nineteenth-century Western thought, guided a drive for “improvement.” The end goal of this “improvement” was social harmony. Political theorist George Kateb wrote that in Western thought, utopia is conceived as “a world permanently without strife, poverty, constraint, stultifying labor, irrational authority [and] sensual deprivation.”³²⁰ Conversely, Kateb lays out the common conception of “imperfection” as the “presence of authority and constraint, hierarchy and class, slavery and war, property and scarcity, labor and pain, disease and mutation.”³²¹ In political scientist Elisabeth Hansot’s analysis of the changing conceptions of utopia across time, she found that by the nineteenth-century utopias were primarily concerned with “changing the arrangements of society” in order to better humanity.³²² This “modern” conception of utopia, according to Hansot, “argued that men will become better as they deliberately attempt to change their society in the direction indicated by utopia.”³²³ The process Levine uncovered, of constructing a highbrow identity was an attempt to deliberately reorder society for its “improvement.” Comic songs disrupted this process, however, by putting imperfection on

³¹⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

³²⁰ George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 9.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³²² Elisabeth Hansot, *Perfection and Progress: Two Modes of Utopian Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 9.

³²³ *Ibid.*

display. Mocking these imperfections allowed a level of control over them, but did not resolve them or remove them from society.

Music held a prominent place in the construction of the nineteenth-century American highbrow utopian ideal. Levine's work clarifies the beliefs surrounding German symphonic music and its supposed power to elevate humanity. Delving further into these ideas clarifies music's role in shaping the American enlightened, utopian ideal, and thus the disruptive power of comic songs. Levine cites notable personages such as music critic Henry Theophilus Finck, who stated in the 1860s that hearing an orchestra made him feel "nearer to the immortal God,"³²⁴ and the 1848 report of the Philharmonic Society of New York, which posited that "the science of Music as it exists in nature is not of human invention, but of divine appointment."³²⁵ Sacralized high-art held the transcendent power to bring humanity closer to the divine. Concurrently, the "priests" of this art sought to remove lowbrow behaviors from their high-art utopian vision. Levine supports his discussion with anecdotes about conductor Theodor Thomas, who understood his musical endeavors as the height of moral superiority. According to Levine, Thomas refused "to listen to vulgar talk, go to 'questionable' plays, or read immoral books, for fear of poisoning his mind and rendering himself unfit to interpret the music of the classic masters."³²⁶ When a friend began to tell Thomas an "off-color story," he promptly stopped him, proclaiming,

Suppose you tell me this story and tonight when I am about to conduct some work of beauty and purity I catch sight of your face...Do you not see that involuntarily my mental

³²⁴ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 133.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

state is distorted from the idea of purity I ought to have, and it will not be possible for me to give that composition the interpretation of perfect purity that it demands?³²⁷

Certain music held the power to move humanity beyond its current state to perfection. Other influences had the power to desecrate the Self, separating it from an idealized purity.

Comic songs disrupted the conception of an ideal society as they presented the vulgar, the questionable, and the imperfections of reality. They worked in opposition to the supposed corrective power of highbrow music. Nineteenth-century American music critics sought to address an aesthetic problem heuristically by purporting an ideal musical model as a solution to the new problem of social class. Social theorist Max Weber described the “ideal type” as “an internally consistent system...a utopia which has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality.”³²⁸ Nineteenth-century American music critics such as John Sullivan Dwight accentuated certain Germanic symphonic traditions to construct a musical ideal type. The external nature of this construction is essential, for as Weber states, “in its conceptual purity, this mental construct [Gedankenbild] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality....It is a utopia.”³²⁹ Music considered sacred and outside of daily-life was presumed to help achieve a state of idealized perfection. In this framework, comic songs that directly touched upon daily life, and even the baser sides of life, then, diametrically opposed the progress toward a utopian ideal.

Parlor performances held greater power in this discourse than attending public entertainments, as they brought the lowbrow into the home. David Nasaw cited a kind of

³²⁷ Theodor Thomas quoted in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 134.

³²⁸ Max Weber quoted in Arved Ashby, “Schoenberg, Boulez, and Twelve Tone Composition as an Ideal Type,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* vol. 54, no. 3 (2001): 588.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

utopian feeling as the impetus for attending public entertainments in the late nineteenth century. He claimed that:

for urban Americans in general, and white-collar and ethnic workers in particular, the world of commercial amusements represented a privileged sphere of daily life outside the mundane social world with its confusions and contradictions. Everywhere else...they straddled the social divisions of class and ethnicity....Only in...the show...could they submerge themselves in a corporate body...that transcended these divisions.³³⁰

Nasaw and Dyer focus on the utopian feeling from attending public entertainments, but I assert that we should also hold this lens up to amateur performances of entertainment, as in the nineteenth-century American parlor. Hypothetically, nineteenth-century Americans seeking to resolve the societal tensions concerning their identities might seek to escape solely into a utopic presentation of a corrective highbrow world. Yet, parlor musicians were not escaping exclusively into the idealized realms of sentimental songs; they were enacting the very tensions and inadequacies of vulgarity and violence in their performance of comic songs.

Participating in and identifying with comic songs in nineteenth-century America offered opportunities to engage in conduct that highbrow ideals prohibited, releasing the overflow of repressed desires into presentable, external forms. As explicated in Chapter Two, Karl Miller's research on Tin Pan Alley songs argued that the genre of "coon songs," a late form of minstrelsy that portrayed African-Americans in an extremely negative light—often as "violent-simpletons"³³¹—, gave white Southerners an opportunity to embody this identity. "Coon songs," in Miller's opinion, allowed whites to "revel in the physical and expressive freedom they associated with African American culture," and "commit all [the] sins" of the black protagonists

³³⁰ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 45.

³³¹ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 41.

in these songs, who “drank and ate too much...gambled...[and] stole.”³³² Some songs even allowed the fictional enactment of the “violent assault and murder of African Americans,”³³³ as with 1895’s “The Coon That I Suspected.” In the song, the stereotyped African American protagonist chases after another man who stole his wife, proclaiming that when they meet “they’ll be a strange coon sent to heaven, And a new black angel looking for a seat.”³³⁴ Embodying these characters in song allowed whites to enact an idealized freer physical culture and the resolution of social tensions in both the mocking of African-Americans and the assertion of white supremacy. Miller ultimately uses such songs to demonstrate the emerging definitions of “southern cultural distinctiveness in the age of Jim Crow.”³³⁵ For white supremacists, this distinctiveness and segregation was its own type of utopia, achieved by removing those they unfairly labeled as negative influences on white society. Performing comic songs, even when the mockery is intended to control a transgressive Other, allows the Self to experiment with the desire to embody the lowbrow. Comic songs gave surface to the tension that Victorian era highbrow beliefs repressed.

Comic songs, especially topical songs—as defined in Chapter One—subvert norms and rebut ideals. Topical songs, by definition, do not present an external idealized realm; they present reality as they directly name and mock real subjects. The frank treatment of daily life in topical comic songs challenges the move toward an ideal type found in other parlor songs. They do not create a world outside reality to escape into; instead, they take reality head on. In

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid., 41-42.

³³⁴ Gussie L. Davis, “The Coon That I Suspected” (Cincinnati: The John Church Company, 1895), Box 19, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³³⁵ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 8.

naming current celebrities, such as politicians and authors, topical songs directly situate themselves in the existing present, not an ideal realm. They are less an escape and more of a direct engagement. For example, “Little Billie’s Sweetheart” criticizes American society at large as it indicts those who are caught up in the craze surrounding George du Maurier’s wildly successful 1894 novel *Trilby*. The characters in the song are too consumed with reading the novel to pursue anything else, and the singer even witnesses a house burn down without anyone assisting, because “each fireman’s reading *Trilby*.”³³⁶ The composer’s *nom de plume*, S.V. Engali, is even a jab at the book, parodying the hypnotist and antagonist of the novel, Svengali.³³⁷ The popularity of *Trilby* was so pervasive that the chorus even warns, “if you hav’nt [read it] don’t admit it, or they’ll brand you for a jay.”³³⁸ A plethora of advertisements from 1895 reveal that the extreme popularity of *Trilby* was matched with an equally popular fad of parodying the novel. There were songs such as “Trilby and Little Billie,”³³⁹ “Like Trilby,”³⁴⁰ “Who’s Trilby? She’s a Corker,”³⁴¹ “Who Hypnotized O’Leary?,”³⁴² “I am a Hypnotizer a la Trilby,”³⁴³ and even a touring singing donkey named Trilby, whose master “as Svengali, walks Trilby down to the foot lights and hypnotizes her to sing.”³⁴⁴ Each advertisement highlights the “novelty” of the songs, emphasizing its newness and direct connection to what was currently happening, not an external realm.

³³⁶ S.V. Engali and J. Sherman Bristol, “Little Billie’s Sweetheart” (New York: New World Novelty Co., 1895), Box 23, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ “The King of Ballads,” advertisement, *The Clipper*, May 25, 1895, 192.

³⁴⁰ “Lottie Collins’ Latest Song Success,” advertisement, *The Clipper*, April 6, 1895, 76.

³⁴¹ “Who’s Trilby?” advertisement, *The Clipper*, March 2, 1895, 839.

³⁴² “Who Hypnotized O’Leary?” advertisement, *The Clipper*, February 16, 1895, 808.

³⁴³ “An Up to Date Song,” advertisement, *The Clipper*, March 16, 1895, 28.

³⁴⁴ “A Novelty for Comedy Plays, Minstrels, Combinations and The Only Act of its Kind in the World,” advertisement, *The Clipper*, March 16, 1895, 27.

Many of these topical songs not only capitalized on the current, but unveiled the flaws in it as well. The latter half of the nineteenth century is frequently referred to as the Gilded Age, because a thin layer of cultural optimism—or gold—covered deep social and political flaws in the Reconstruction era. Topical songs peel back this gilding by performing distinct critiques. In the case of 1909’s “Possum,” a particularly stilted minstrel dialect lightly veils a political critique of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft. The chorus sings the praises of eating possum, which has become “all de rage” since “Bill Tafts cum to Washington.”³⁴⁵ The possum was Taft’s unofficial mascot, an affiliation cemented in 1909, the same year as the song’s publication, when the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce hosted a “Possum dinner” in the White House, where they did not eat possum, but rather lined the tables with stuffed possums for the guests (see Figure 4.1).³⁴⁶ Subtitled, “the latest craze,” the song “Possum” was published at the peak of relevancy. It flips the significance of Taft’s own mascot, though, and uses it as a source of derision. The song registers disapproval, claiming that even though Taft defeated “Teddy Bar,” an obvious reference to Roosevelt, Taft remains the weaker political figure. The song even subtly accuses Taft of handing out boondoggle government jobs, claiming:

Jes get in touch wit’ de President
 Eat Possum when you dine
 Den ask a Job of de Government
 An you’ll cert’ly be in line.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ J.B. Cohen and G.A. Scofield, “Possum,” (New York: Pease Piano Company, 1909), Box 15, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁴⁶ “Possum” Dinner Tendered to President-Elect William Howard Taft by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, January 15, 1909 (1909), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c01551/>

³⁴⁷ Cohen and Scofield, “Possum.”

Minstrel songs, especially, had a long history of political commentary. Dale Cockrell noted that “Jim Crow,” one of the very first minstrel songs and characters, was at its “base a political song,” and that the “Jim Crow [character] would lend his name to political agendas for the rest of the [nineteenth] century.”³⁴⁸ Topical songs came in every dialect and expressed every possible opinion. Song sheet publishers all over the country produced a cornucopia of topical songs each year, reflecting a wide breadth of beliefs. The 1890 song “All on Account of the Tariff” criticizes both the Democratic and Republican parties as they debate McKinley’s Tariff Act of the same year. Laying the debate out in plain speech, one verse explicates:

The Democrat says prices will be higher,
All on account of the Tariff;
The Republican says, “Democrat, you’re a liar,”
All on account of the Tariff.³⁴⁹

These songs allowed parlor performers to directly deal with the pressing issues of an imperfect society, and even add their own voice to the discourse, choosing which song sheets to purchase and which topical issues and opinions to incorporate into their own performances.

³⁴⁸ Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 73.

³⁴⁹ Ike Browne, “All On Account of the Tariff” (Boston: I.S. Browne, 1890), Box 054, Item 004, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

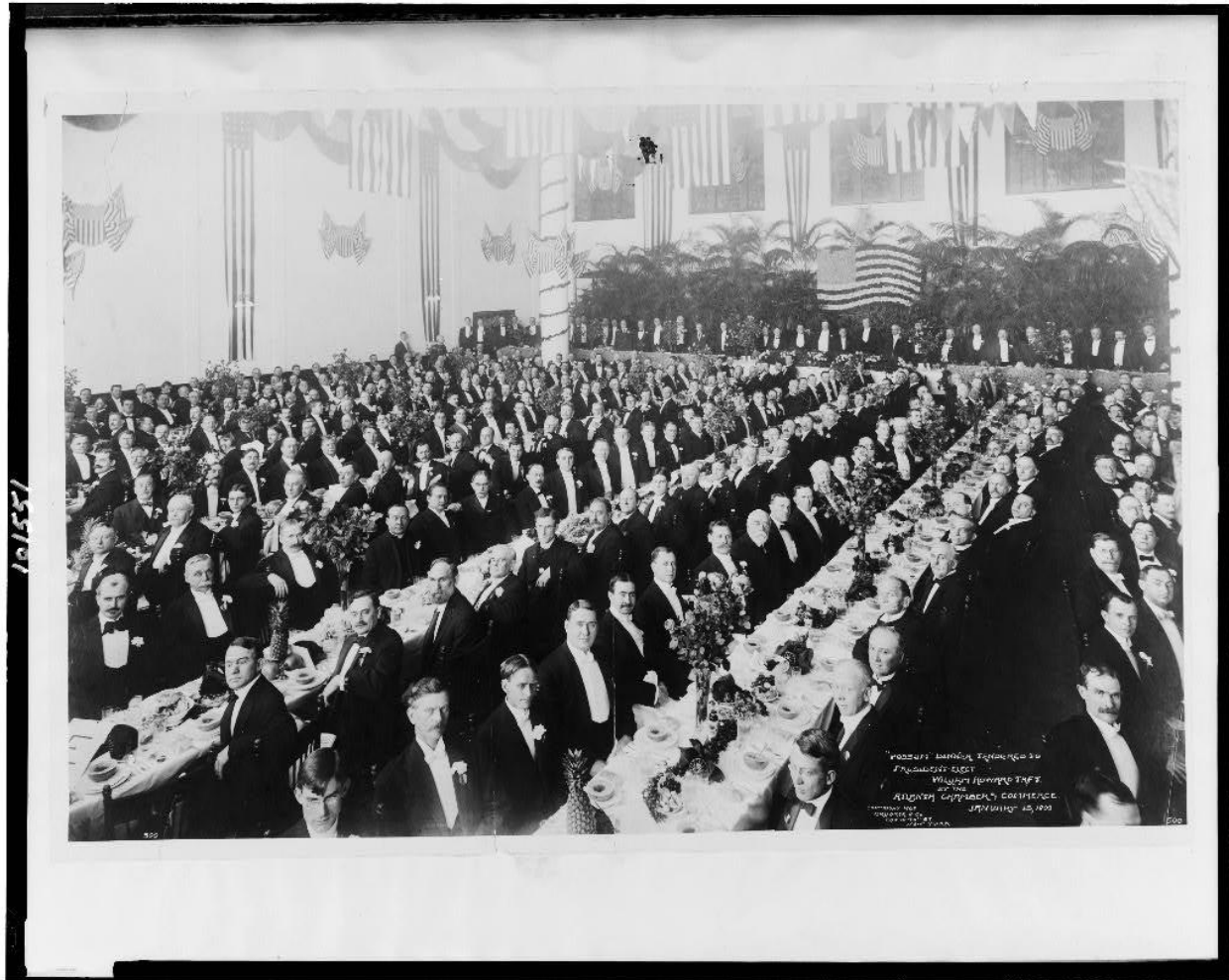


Figure 4.1 “Possum’ Dinner Tendered to President-Elect William Howard Taft by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, January 15, 1909”³⁵⁰

Commenting on more than just political problems in America, topical songs also addressed the contentious emerging high and low divide by revealing the lack of utopian harmony in society. Gus B. Brigham, a noted topical song writer, took on a plethora of contemporary issues in his 1892 song, “That’s a Fact, Did You Notice It?” The song’s observational humor reveals that America is not an ideal society, as it mocks “the mud from the

³⁵⁰ “Possum” Dinner Tendered to President-Elect William Howard Taft by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, January 15, 1909 (1909), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c01551/>

streets,” the corruption of New York’s government, and troublesome mothers-in-law.

Understood in terms of Dyer’s model of entertainment, the song presents a physical absence in the form of poverty, but does not resolve it with a utopic overabundance:

You pass a poor blind beggar who is strictly “out of sight,”
That’s a fact, did you notice it?
He hobbles on his crutches through the day and through the night;
That’s a fact, did you notice it?
You blow your stuff at billiards and at pool, its very strange,
You “dally” with a rifle in a shooting gallery’s range,
But when he asks you for a dime you “haven’t any change.”
That’s a fact, did you notice it?³⁵¹

So many other entertainment forms of the time, such as melodrama or penny dreadful novels, correct the social ill of poverty by steering the protagonist somehow toward a surfeit of wealth and a happy ending. On the other hand, topical songs like this one present the problem, but not the utopian correction. The continuous interjection of the refrain “that’s a fact, did you notice it?”³⁵² enforces the immediacy of the song’s complaints and gives them a sense of actuality. The strain of these imperfections upon American society presents itself in another of Brigham’s songs, 1889’s “It Is a Terrible Deal: A Topical Song.” The song revisits the common comical tropes of mothers-in-law and slipping on banana peels, while also offering complaints on various other, more specific facets of modern life, such as the debate over the location of the upcoming world’s fair³⁵³ and scandalous women’s bathing suits. As the song relates the

³⁵¹ Harry Armstrong and G.B. Brigham, “That’s a Fact Did You Notice It?” (Chicago: National Music Co., 1892), Box 2, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ In 1889, both New York and Chicago were vying to host the World’s Columbian Exposition that would eventually take place in Chicago in 1893.

story of going to a “bathing resort” and seeing “a young girl in the breakers disport,” it titillates the audience with the information that:

Her bathing-dress caused the old ladies to frown,
 ‘Twas just of the size of a small wax doll’s gown,
 I think it was made of a neck-tie cut down.³⁵⁴

The lyrics move the young girl’s transgressive behaviors from potentiality to materiality as they also discuss the reactions to it. The “old ladies” frowning disapproval situates the young girl’s bathing suit in opposition to the desired genteel behavior and signifies that this is not a utopian world—there is strife. The narrator’s voice further reveals the high and low contradictions, for even as he censures the girl’s behavior, he is engaging in the vulgar himself. As he sings about her bathing suit and what “loveliness did it reveal,”³⁵⁵ he derives pleasure from leering at her exposed body. The song is ambiguous enough to operate discursively, allowing performers and audiences to either deride the woman’s bathing suit or the stodgy disapproval of the supercilious “old ladies.”³⁵⁶ Low and highbrow actions met and clashed, both in public and in song.

By breaking away from the standard content of nineteenth-century songs, comic songs allowed the subversive expression of repressed desires. They reveal that the extremes of human behavior still lie just below the guise of an ordered high culture. Nineteenth-century Americans still yearned for what lay under the cloak of culture, just as with Brigham’s bathing-suit-spying protagonist in “It Is A Terrible Deal” or the singer of the 1896 song, “Her Skirt Went

³⁵⁴ G.B. Brigham and George LeRoy, “It Is a Terrible Deal: A Topical Song” (Chicago: National Music Co., 1889), Box 054, Item 064, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

A Little Bit Higher.” They yearn to see what lay just beneath the “modest and neat” costume of a “proper” lady, “staid and demure.”³⁵⁷ On the cover of “Her Skirt Went A Little Bit Higher” (see Figure 4.2), a young woman lifts up the heavy layers of her elaborate costuming to barely reveal her ankles.³⁵⁸ Beneath the oppressive, constructed layers of her refined clothing still lay a site of desire. In these moments, comic songs act out repressed desires and emotions, converting them into alternate physical forms as in melodrama, and releasing tension. The slightest bit of female flesh became a metaphor for repressed, lowbrow sexual urges. Comic songs provided the opportunity to explore this lowbrow utopia.

³⁵⁷ Richard Stahl and Chas. Hoyt, “Her Skirt Went A Little Bit Higher” (New York: Carl Fischer, 1896), Box 73, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.



Figure 4.2 Photo from the cover of “Her Skirt Went A Little Bit Higher”³⁵⁹

Taken as metaphors for society at large, comic songs illustrate the ways that highbrow actions were merely a masque or excuse to cover lowbrow urges. As discussed in Chapter Three, embodying a comic persona in the first-person allowed parlor performers to act on these urges, taking on an alternate identity and enacting desires outside of the Self. Examples like 1889’s “Close to it” allowed performers to drink, cheat on their spouse, and steal.³⁶⁰ Songs not necessarily in the first-person, but critiquing the low behaviors of Others, further reveal the extent of the contradictions in American society, and just how aware Americans were that they

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Chrles[sic] Duncan and Arthur Corney, “Close To It,” Edmund Forman, arr. (New York: Harding’s Music Office, 1889), Box 054, Item 024, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

were not living in a utopia. The 1878 song “What They Do at the Springs” indicts the way the wealthy “drink...eat...flirt...[and] waltz.”³⁶¹ It pulls away the cloak of culture, exposing the hypocritical behaviors the supposed members of high society exhibit as they engage in lowbrow activities. The song prods at the elite’s incongruous actions, such as believing that swimming in springs full of “wholesome medical things” allows them to drink heavily.³⁶² Their refined and genteel behaviors thinly covered their indecorous actions as they over-indulge in food, drink, and sexual relations. A four-part chorus allows others to join in and harmonize, potentially creating a group feeling, letting performers add their voices to the critique. Their combined voices coming together to sound a unified critique of an imagined identity.

Some topical songs not only attacked the inconsistencies of the genteel elite but advocated for the low. Alcohol was frequently seen as a stumbling block to progress and enlightenment in the nineteenth-century United States, and numerous songs and musicians championed the cause of prohibition. Certain comic songs, however, allowed parlor musicians to identify with the opposite position and register their support for alcohol consumption. The lyrics of 1886’s “Turn the Crank!! A Plea for Personal Liberty”³⁶³ attack the logic of prohibitionists and advocate helping “them scoot out on all fours...with your boot.”³⁶⁴ The lyrics argue against prohibition by extending it *ad absurdum*, saying:

Suppose you gave your freedom up, To imbeciles erratic,

³⁶¹ Fred G. Carnes and John G. Saxe, “What They do at the Springs” (San Francisco: California Music Publishing Company, 1878), Box 054, Item 155, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Edward F. Edwards, “Turn the Crank!! A Plea for Personal Liberty” (Chicago: Metropolitan Music Co., 1886), Box 054, Item 147, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

What next fool thing would they demand, These partisans fanatic?
 What next would these old grannies ask? I do not doubt, great land's sakes!
 If you for them should give up beer, They'd then abolish pancakes.³⁶⁵

The song gives surface to a tense social problem, *a la* Dyer's utopian model, but it turns against the highbrow. It labels the elite impetus as oppressive and seeks to correct it with the personal freedom to engage in the low.

High and lowbrow metaphorically clash again in 1870's "All Among the Hay," with the low triumphing. Told from the point view of a "swell"³⁶⁶—a nineteenth-century slang term for an effete, upper-class man—who meets and then falls in love with a "country" girl, the narrative demonstrates an overwhelming attraction to the low, even for a self-admitted privileged individual. The "swell" takes a "sup" from the girl's "cask of barley corn," and has "a 'jolly spree' when all among the hay."³⁶⁷ The inebriated "swell" then ends up thrashing a "rival raw" like a "load of straw" before winning the "woman with his tongue" and sowing his "wildest 'oats' all among the hay."³⁶⁸ Rather than escaping into a harmonious utopia, the character of this song gladly slips into a world of drinking, violence, and sex.

The dangerous challenge that these songs provide to social norms are diffused by the fact that they are comedic. Mocking these phenomena allows the tensions surrounding them to flow out in a psychologically acceptable manner. The excessive nature of such songs' lyrics and music facilitate the overflow of the pent up social tensions of late-nineteenth-century American society. Making these identities foolish and laughing at them gave performers and audiences

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Jesse Williams, "Popular Songs. No.5. All Among the Hay" (Boston: White & Goulland, 1870), Box 054, Item 003, The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

power over them. High and lowbrow identities were delineated, but the low was not removed. The low's challenge was left unresolved as it continually reappeared in the parlor across the last half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The presence of the lowbrow in the parlor suggests that it offered a pleasure that perhaps even a refined utopia could not. Parlor performers desired experiencing such low identities, even when it meant potentially tainting the Self. At the end of Engländer's "The Ambitious Magpie," the bird dies in ecstasy when it is finally able to utter "damn!" In that moment, he:

Open'd his mouth, lean'd his head on one side, His face lit up with a glorious pride
And crying out, "Damn!" in triumph he died, That satisfied bird of yore!³⁶⁹

His pride and his satisfaction came from his uncivilized action. He achieved a personal utopia by transgressing societal norms.

³⁶⁹ Engländer and Rosenfeld, "The Ambitious Magpie!"

Chapter 5 : Conclusions, a.k.a. The Punch Line

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were a time of shifting ideologies for the United States of America. These beliefs expressed themselves in a multitude of cultural forms. Within the world of music, shifting distinctions separated which music could be performed where, how it should be performed, and what its performance meant for society at large. The high and lowbrow divide that emerged at this time was centered on the drive to refine society, removing the contaminating low from the high. Comic songs, as I have demonstrated, both contributed to and disrupted this process. In mocking foolish and transgressive subjects, comic songs helped delineate the distinctions. In providing opportunities to embody the comic identity, however, in both body and voice, they disrupted this process.

Altering the Self to embody comic identities allowed parlor performers to explore repressed lowbrow actions even as Americans pushed to remove them from society. The songs, made acceptable by their mocking nature, served as a potent psychological release valve for the tensions in Victorian era society. Performers could safely distance themselves from comic identities by deriding them, yet still incorporate the experience of being lowbrow by embodying it through performance. As established in Chapter One, many Americans linked their assessments of social value to engagement with what Hiram M. Stanley called the “higher pleasures.”³⁷⁰ But, as the examples I have explored, and a plentitude of others demonstrate,

³⁷⁰ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 225.

comic songs brought the low “pleasures” of “eating, drinking, smoking, society of the other sex,...dancing, [and] music of a noisy and lively character”³⁷¹ into the home.

While attending a public performance allowed audiences to deride and laugh at the staged presentation of an Other, home performances allowed consumers to try an identity on, embodying it at least temporarily via mimesis. The importance of considering home-life in the study of musical cultures cannot be overstated. As Candace M. Volz argued in her essay on early twentieth-century homes, “to study the domestic life of any era is to hold a mirror to its culture.”³⁷² There is perhaps no greater insight into a people’s life-ways than studying the behaviors of the home. At home we engage with our intimate personal relations and in the activities that most define us. The home is also a unique set of soundscapes. Each room engenders special sets of abstract behaviors and expectations. Thomas J. Schlereth found, in his study of American home-life, “how special rooms, some for special people...and often requiring special furnishings, conditioned...special behaviors.”³⁷³ The items that went into the parlor were shaped by constructed ideologies and the room itself prescribed the behaviors displayed there.

The parlor was a powerful microcosm—a potent site for the political, gendered, racial, and class discourses observed at larger social levels. While the majority of sources provide easy access to commercial processes (stage programs, theatre reviews, printed music), I argue that the individual consumer who engages these sources needs more consideration. The music of

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Candace M. Volz, “The Modern Look of the Early Twentieth-Century House: A Mirror of Changing Lifestyles,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 46.

³⁷³ Thomas J. Schlereth, “Introduction: American Homes and American Scholars,” in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 5.

this era has been expertly treated by authors such as Hamm, Finson, and Sanjek, but how people have interacted with this music and how they used it in constructing their own, individual worlds, has received less attention.

Parlor musicales hold a special position in American musical history as one of the most interactive popular musical forms. The scope of my research, 1865 to 1917, corresponds not just with the subject of Levine's study, but also the height of popularity for song sheet performance in the parlor. Song sheets reached more homes than ever at this time due to technological advances in printing and the vast expansions of railways in the United States. While consumers still interact and identify with popular musics today, home performance of song sheets involved a tremendous amount of identification. Song sheets were mass produced, but required production and interaction at every level. Songwriters and publishing houses had to create songs they felt would have resonance across a broad and diverse population. Consumers would have felt some sense of identification with a piece in order to purchase it. They also would have created all of the music themselves, in their own homes, using their own voices and instruments. Every performance was unique and mired in deep, overlapping layers of social meaning. I have accounted, where possible, for the multiplicity of meanings achievable from individual performances. How performers interacted with these texts, inserting their own gestural accompaniment or vocal intonations, would have given the pieces unique meaning to them and their audiences.

Since we do not have audio or video recordings of the parlor at this time, the development of phenomenological approaches is important. While much of my evidence comes

from song sheets, these objects are not merely scores, they are guides to production. Additionally, performing in the parlor was about more than just producing the notes on the page; thus I have sought out examples that clarify the important role of the body and voice in musical production. I also have placed the music within the parlor soundscape and the set of conditioned behaviors that gave meaning to parlor performances. As demonstrated by the examination of popular trends such as Delsartism, the way the body moved and the way the voice sounded carried deep, informative meaning. The presentation of the body, as I have extended from the arguments of Butler, Taussig, and Le Guin, informs others of identities in the representational framework of what is seen and heard, and assists the Self in constructing its own identity through the experiences it incorporates. Through movements and vocalizations, parlor performers took on an altered Self.

The presentation of the body and voice were guided by the influence of Victorian-era genteel beliefs. Comic characters, however, could operate outside of the structured, controlled highbrow body. The comic body could be clumsy, inelegant, grotesque, diseased, sexualized, criminal, over-indulgent, violent, and even animal; it was humorous because it was everything the ideal Victorian body was not. The comic voice could express that which the highbrow could not; it could swear, stutter, engage in bodily functions (e.g., cough or belch), make innuendo, criticize others, and express thoughts which highbrow ideals repressed. Performing the comic character allowed performers a taste of freedom from the high ideals that guided their bodies in other daily interactions.

Many comic identities and much of nineteenth-century humor came from stereotyped ethnicities. The ethnic, in nineteenth-century Western thought, was not only a potent method of exploring idiosyncratic and exaggerated extremes of human behavior; it was a pressing social issue for Americans. White Americans expressed ethnic tensions in songs, asserting white supremacy via mockery, and as Eric Lott has explored, a sense of “love”³⁷⁴ in their appropriation. White Americans both pushed away the ethnic identities they confronted in the nineteenth century, and drew them closer, by embodying them in performance.

Parlor performers, in taking on alternate identities and how they identified with popular music further defined their own identities. In his study of “postmodern” popular music, George Lipsitz used the cases of “Puerto Rican musicians playing Black-oriented Latin Bugalu music in New York” and “Chicano punk rockers in Los Angeles” to argue that these groups “can become ‘more themselves’ by appearing to be something other than themselves.”³⁷⁵ He compared their “strategic anti-essentialism,”³⁷⁶ their use of another’s identity, to nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Lipsitz pointed to how “the white man in blackface...was the first self-consciously ‘white’ stage performer in history; his whiteness could be created only by imitating and then denying blackness.”³⁷⁷ In the same way, performers in every sub-genre of comic songs used Otherness to define themselves. Their own ideals and identities became clearer by mocking Others.

³⁷⁴ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³⁷⁵ George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994), 63.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

Highbrow and lowbrow identities only become clear when juxtaposed. There cannot be one without the other, because they are, in fact, defined in opposition to another. The highbrow position requires a lowbrow to build itself above—something to scoff at and attempt to remove from society via refinement. The lowbrow requires a highbrow to break away from—some repressive belief that labels an activity as a social ill. Comic songs provided a fertile ground to explore all of these conflicts. They positioned the low as a subject of derision, but simultaneously kept it alive, allowing performers to escape into it. Returning to George Foertsch’s 1892 song, “Laugh, Ha-Ha, Ha-Ha,” laughter may just have been the best medicine for the ills of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for even those struggling with the new social distinctions of the era could still laugh at their problems:

Who cares if wealth is hard to earn,
 What odds if books are dull to learn,
 Why fret because our clothes are old,
 Our rich neighbors manner cold?
 The joy of life is ours to quaff
 So long as we can lightly laugh.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁸ Geo. Foertsch, and Kate Kauffman, “Laugh Ha-Ha, Ha-Ha” (Cincinnati: J.C. Groene & Co., 1892) Box 25, Edison Sheet Music Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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Vita

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