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Where Music is Not the Devil Enters: Children's Music Instruction in Late Nineteenth-Century Milwaukee

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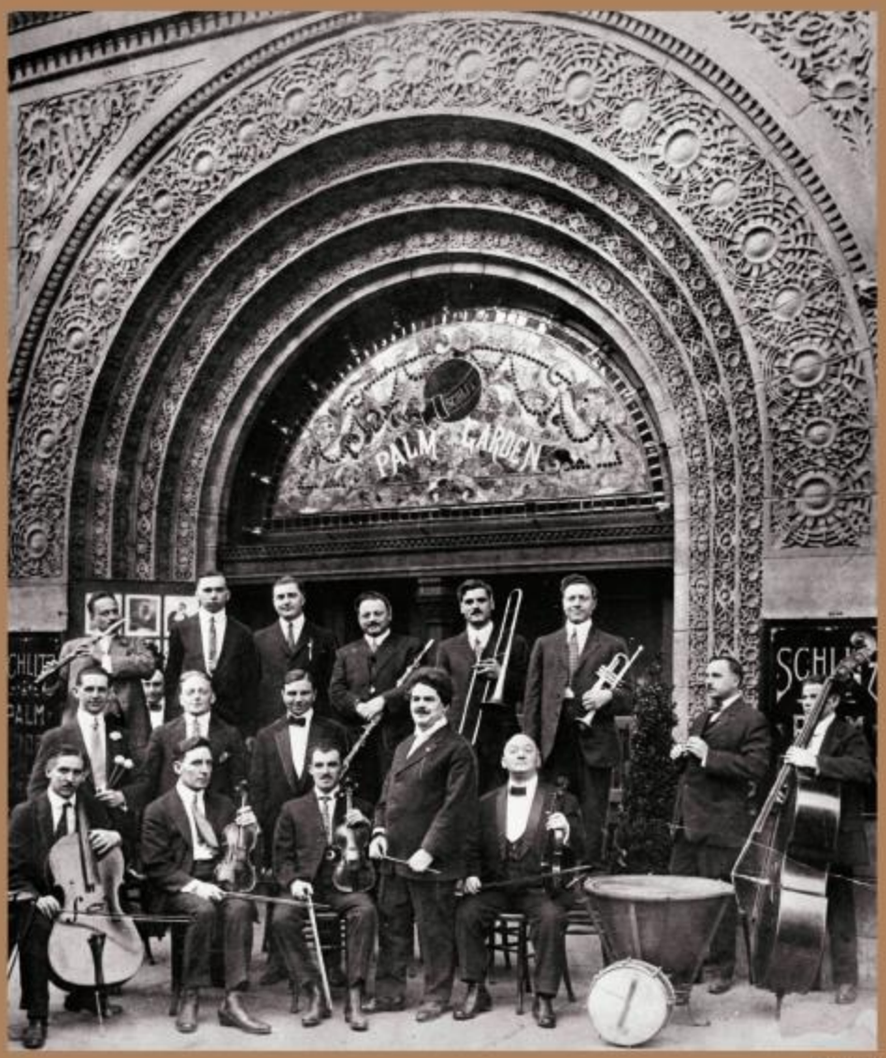
Where song is, there 'tis good to dwell.
For wicked, songs no joy foretell.[1]

By Ann M. Ostendorf

William Mitchell and his six daughters formed Mitchell's Concert Band.

In nineteenth century America, Victorians believed they could eliminate the evils of society by reshaping a person's character based on moral laws. This belief influenced child-rearing techniques, suggesting that parents could and should prevent evil habits from taking root in their children's characters, eliminating the need for reform later in their lives. Many parents believed in a world that was slipping into crime and depravity. They were raising their children to face a world that was becoming very different from the one they had known in their youth as industrialization brought new social ills to the forefront.

Parents often touted exposure to music as a protector of children and an antidote to the corruption in society. It could easily be incorporated into a child's training, softening a child's character and functioning as a disciplining influence.[2] Examining the development of music education in Milwaukee clearly exhibits the special place music held as a moralizing force in Victorian America.



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Orchestra members in front of the Schlitz Park Concert Hall. Public concerts were frequent and inexpensive throughout the mid-nineteenth century.

German Immigrant Influences Music in Milwaukee

As a father in the 1890s, Dr. Louis Frank set about building a new home at Twenty-third and Grand around one main feature: a magnificent two-story balconied music room. This imposing space symbolized the central role music played in the Frank household. He and his wife played piano nearly every night, and his two children, as well as other local musicians, staged performances. While it seems obvious that Frank's lifetime love of music inspired him to add such a lavish addition to his home, an interview illuminates other motives. According to Frank, he built the room for his children. He wanted them to learn and know music in its purest form, "[t]hat no defect of instrument or environment shall mar such music; that they shall associate it with what is beautiful in art . . . If my children grow up with this for a daily lesson I shall never fear for them."[3]

It seems natural that a father would want to impart his love of the beautiful art of music to his children, but he had another goal in mind as well. Louis Frank, along with many other Milwaukeeans, subscribed to a view of music education as a protective force for their children. Much of this sentiment stemmed not only from the momentum of the Victorian reform, but also from these German immigrants' musical tradition.

Many historians agree that the Germans, in both the old

and new world, typically considered music to be a central feature in their daily lives. Because German immigrants were usually better off financially than other ethnic groups and confident in their cultural heritage's superiority, they were willing and able to promote their musical traditions in America.[4] "Prussian schoolrooms become the abode of peace and love," stated Horace Mann, who was known for bringing music into American public schools. Milwaukeeans were aware of their own traditions as one writer noted in the *Milwaukee Sentinel,* "[t]he German child is born into a musical atmosphere."[5]

Since such a large percentage of mid-nineteenth century Milwaukeeans were of German heritage, their view toward the role of music in life influenced the climate of the city. Public concerts were frequent and inexpensive throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Conducted as family affairs, children learned the value of music through these public events. Beginning in 1864, Christopher Bach and his orchestra gave Saturday afternoon concerts in downtown Milwaukee's Turner Hall during the winter and at Schlitz Park in the summer. Tickets were ten cents for children and twenty-five cents for adults. Women packed picnic lunches and took the family out for an afternoon of socializing and music. Theodore Mueller recalled the joy such events brought to him as a child. "[T]he music . . . the harmony . . . the beauty of it all . . . *wie herlich. . . wunderbar* . . . who could forget those Sunday afternoon concerts during the golden years of the 80s and 90s in Milwaukee."[6]

Milwaukee seemed to have an overabundance of musical instructors due to a multitude of musicians in town. Because the German population was so supportive of community music and because Milwaukee promoted cultural activities, the city became known to some as "The German Athens" or "The Athens of the West."[7] The city's reputation as a center for musical culture enticed many musicians from the area, the country, and, at times, even Germany, to settle in Milwaukee. Most of these musicians needed to supplement their meager incomes secured from performances and, typically, did so by offering their skills as instructors. For example, after a good review in the newspaper of a concert given by a Mr. Weinberg in 1857, the writer encouraged all families in need of "the services of an accomplished music teacher [to] try Mr. Weinberg. He not only plays admirably both on the Piano and Violin, but he gives lessons on both."[8]

Numerous Milwaukee individuals devoted themselves to educating children musically. As early as 1846, a Mr. Dye opened a school to teach children music—free of charge—in the basement of Milwaukee's new Baptist church. His classes were extremely popular among Milwaukee's young population and enrollment was often full. Others soon followed his lead holding classes for nominal fees in the Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian church basements as well. As more and more ministers throughout Milwaukee promoted musical education in their churches, it seems evident that these ministers saw children's music lessons in light of their spiritual value.[9]

Occasionally, Milwaukee's private music instructors explicitly linked morality to their motivation to teach music to the city's youth. In one of Mr. Dye's first advertisements in the *Milwaukee Sentinel,* he promoted his lessons as a way to "improve the morals, [and] to soften and refine the feelings and manners of children."[10] W. L. Tomlins also listed morality as the reason he established his music classes for children in Milwaukee between 1880 and 1886. He taught classes at three locations in Milwaukee; his classes were deemed so important that children were excused from public school for the Wednesday morning training.

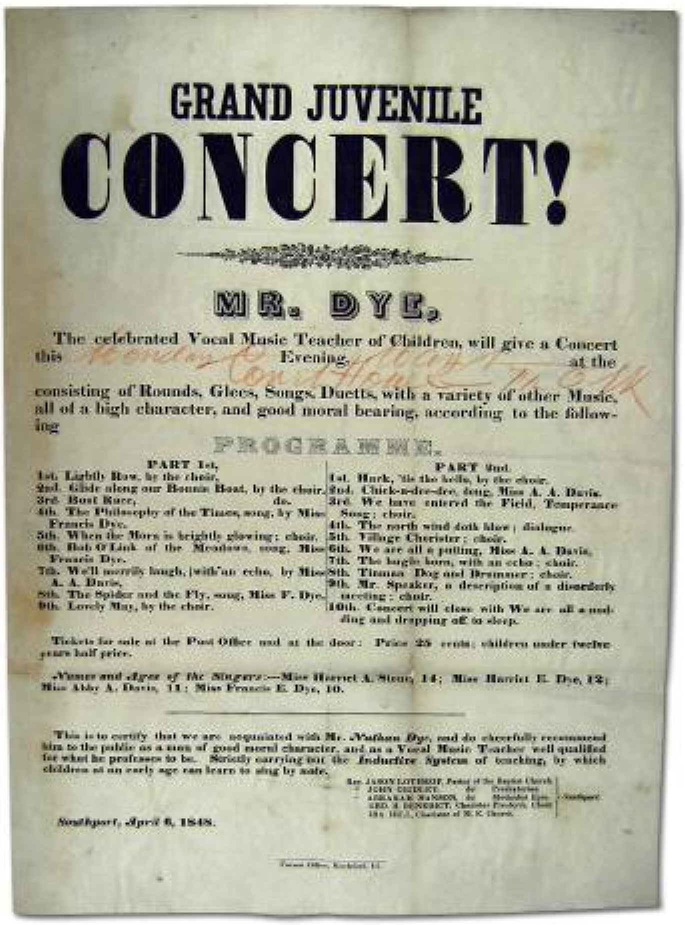
Tomlins received national acclaim as the director of the children's choir for the twenty-fourth *Saengerfest,* a massive yearly German choral festival, held in Milwaukee in the summer of 1886. He began preparations for this concert early. At a Milwaukee music festival the summer before the *Saengerfest,* Tomlins gathered a group of 500 children, half from Milwaukee and half from Chicago, to perform at what was billed "the greatest feature of the music festival." The children's performance went off smashingly and "elicited great praise even from high musical authorities." By the following summer when the *Saengerfest* finally arrived, Tomlins conducted one thousand children. Eight hundred of these youth later performed with the 2,500 voice choir, a highlight of the festivities.[11]

Milwaukee's public actively supported these budding musicians based on the popularity of their concerts. Most teachers held a public performance at the end of each term. These concerts were free and were held in various churches. A general invitation was posted in the newspaper welcoming the public. An 1880 show was so well attended that it was repeated the following weekend for the benefit of those who could not get a seat for the first performance. Frequently, the concert was lauded in the newspaper the following day.[12]

Music in Milwaukee's Public Schools

Although many Milwaukee youth were exposed to music either through their family or through private lessons, it was actually the movement to introduce music into the public schools that affected the greatest number of nineteenth-century youth. The Victorian Era saw a general moralizing trend in all forms of education with music as the one subject that promoted the greatest virtue.

Moral education was expected to be part of a school education. To some parents character training was even more important than intellectual discipline. Horace Mann and



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Mr. Dye first taught his popular music classes in the basement Milwaukee's Baptist church. Five ministers from various denominations listed their names on this poster to certify Mr. Dye as a man with good moral character in addition to his skill as a music teacher.

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A large crowd gathered to attend the 1886 Saengerfest, a massive yearly German choral festival.

other reformers regarded moral education as the foremost goal of public education.[13] Out of this emphasis grew the movement to introduce music to the curriculum because of its uplifting nature. In 1838, after much hard work by Lowell Mason and other reformers, Boston became the first city to establish music classes as part of its public school curriculum. Mason argued to Boston's school board that music was the "handmaiden of virtue and piety," and would produce greater social order.[14]

Although Milwaukee's youth seemed to have plenty of opportunity for exposure to the moralizing influences of music in their family activities, the community music scene, or through private lessons, some thought Milwaukee should keep up with the rest of the nation and include music in its public schools. As early as 1847, an excerpt reprinted from a *Chicago Journal* article announcing that city's decision to provide funds for a public school music program, elicited a response from a Milwaukeean who viewed this "as an example well worthy of imitation in our own city." The writer called on music's power to soften the "ruder dispositions," refine manners, and assist in discipline. Five years later, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* once again commended the example of Chicago and appealed for Milwaukee's public school system to appropriate money for the same cause.[15]

However, Milwaukee did not join the ranks of the public school systems that taught music until 1872. This was nearly twenty-five years after Chicago and well behind other Midwestern cities. There are several possible explanations for Milwaukee's delay in initiating this reform. One explanation might be that Milwaukee was a much smaller city during the 1840s and 1850s than those initiating curricular changes. Furthermore, Milwaukee was not incorporated as a city until 1846, and, by 1850, two years after Chicago instituted music into their public schools curriculum, Milwaukee only had a population of 21,000. Additionally, many parents seemed to be satisfied with the musical education their children were receiving either at home or in the community. In 1870, two years before music was taught in Milwaukee schools, there were already 915 pianos and melodeons (small reed organs in which a suction bellows draws air inward through the reeds) in Milwaukee for a population of 71,000. Vocal music was even more popular as it did not require the purchase of instruments and was easily taught in families of all economic standings.[16]

Although music was not officially part of the curriculum before 1872, certain individuals did take it upon themselves to teach children music at school. Teaching academies had trained their teachers in music since the 1850s, and while there was no systematic school music instruction in Milwaukee, teachers often brought music into the schools as they saw fit. The grammar school principal of the Seventh Ward School, Mr. H. Coe, began giving vocal music instruction to

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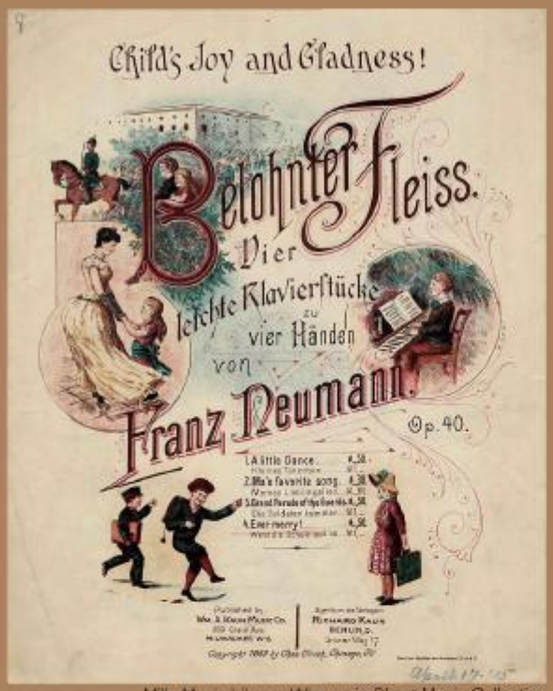
Musical skills were an important part of family tradition in the mid- to late- nineteenth century.

Mills Music Library, Wisconsin Sheet Music Collection

Titles for sheet music and books were often printed in both English and German.

Mills Music Library, Wisconsin Sheet Music Collection

This composition by Carl Heins was written for the pianoforte—an early version of the piano.



Mills Music Library, Wisconsin Sheet Music Collection

Franz Neuman's compositions were written for four hands—two children played the piece together at one piano. "Ever Merry," is an interesting English translation of the fourth piece. The German title, "Wenndie Schule aus ist," actually means "When School is Out."

Mills Music Library, Wisconsin Sheet Music Collection

F. Hensler, director of the Hensler Juvenile band, dedicated this musical composition to Captain Frederick Pabst. A world famous beer baron and partron of the arts, Captain Pabst was also of German heritage.

his pupils for free and often outside regular school hours. Between 1868 and 1869, the Milwaukee Academy boasted a fine—if short lived—Glee Club, although this may have been initiated more by a certain group of pupils than an educator at the school.[17]

By the late 1860s and early 1870s, public encouragement continued and Milwaukee began to introduce some experimental trials of music in the schools. A school board report from the Committee on Music, Drawing, and Calisthenics published in their 1870 Annual Report first mentioned incorporating music into the public school curriculum. In this report the committee claimed that, "The study of music introduced into our schools, would, in a great measure, improve their moral character." Music would also help promote order in the classroom and encourage the general happiness of the children. These were the same arguments educators had been using to bring music into public school curriculums since the 1830s.[18]

The following year was one of experimentation. For the first time, Milwaukee's public schools hired a special teacher to teach vocal music, and the introduction of music as a regular branch of study began. The school board initially secured the services of one man, a Mr. F. W. H. Priem. He was in charge of over 11,000 Milwaukee children, but worked in conjunction with each grade's regular teacher in a highly organized and well-scheduled system.[19]

The superintendent admitted that he did not expect to see much progress in that first year, but when reflecting back he felt enough was accomplished to continue music instruction in the schools. The school board recommended using Lowell Mason's *Musical Charts* and *Musical Reader* to ensure more instruction of the fundamentals and less mere singing. To emphasize just how seriously the school board took music's place in school as a regular subject, they specifically stated that no student would be promoted to the next grade without passing a satisfactory music exam. They incorporated music into the curriculum because it added to culture, brought happiness, cheered labors, promoted order, obedience, kindness and love, "and, in the hands of a skilled teacher, constituted a most valuable aid in the preservation of discipline and order."[20]

Interestingly, during the same year Milwaukee schools

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Waterloo Juvenile Band members pose with their music teacher.

introduced music into the curriculum, the school board was dealing extensively with attendance issues. The first topic discussed in the school board's Annual Report for the year 1871 was the need to bring more children under the public school's influence. Just over half of Milwaukee's 20,606 children between the ages of four and fifteen were regularly attending school. With the help of good teachers responsible for the moral training of the youth, the school board felt they had the opportunity to "turn a child away from the path of wickedness." In their eyes, more children needed to be brought under the influence of the schools to ensure that "much greater attention . . . be paid to the *moral culture* of those, upon whom soon must rest the responsibilities of Society and State."[21]

In 1872, the school board, with an increased sense of their moralizing mission and the achievement of Mr. Priem as proof of success, took the advice of the 1870 Committee on Music, Drawing, and Calisthenics, and budgeted $1,500 for music training. This allowed the board to hire three music teachers. They anticipated certain benefits from this music instruction. Whether it was music's "elevating and refining tendency" or the way "it smooths the rough corners of our nature," music was a moralizing force in the schools at a time when it seemed, according to the school board, Milwaukee's youth needed it most. At the end of the 1872–1873 school year, the committee was thoroughly satisfied with the results achieved by these three music teachers. The parents and the pupils, the committee claimed, approved of keeping music instruction in the schools. It was decided by the school board that music was a necessary part of a good education.[22]

Despite the training Milwaukee teachers had in the fundamentals of music and the well-intentioned decision of Milwaukee's school board, the children did not necessarily embrace the music they were taught. Due to the scarcity of sources, it is difficult to determine accurately how Milwaukee's youth were affected by their music instruction; however,

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The First Lincoln High School Orchestra is pictured here in 1904. Although music classes in the Milwaukee public schools were first instituted in 1872, Americans continued to view music as a moralizing force well into the twentieth century.

there is some evidence that they enjoyed their musical training. One Milwaukeean, when reflecting back on his life, remembers fondly the martial music played on the piano as they did exercises, calisthenics, and singing drills in school. In the Milwaukee children's magazine *Our Young People*, several young girls from Milwaukee's St. Rose's Asylum wrote to the editor of their music lessons in positive terms.[23]

While much had changed in educational theory by the end of the nineteenth century, music's ability to instill morality remained important to educators. For example, *The Souvenir* reprinted William Tomlins' address to the Wisconsin Teachers Association in 1898 called "Music, Its Nature and Influence." In this address he cautioned Milwaukee's educators, "the germs of evil . . . will gradually spring up and get control of the boy unless they are eradicated. There is a great relation between music and the heart of the boy. His nature may be cultivated by music until evil will not have a chance to control him."[24]

Americans continued to view music as a moralizing force well into the twentieth century. What began early in the nineteenth century in Boston's public schools as a way of shaping the youth eventually influenced the structure of Milwaukee's educational system. In 1872, the Milwaukee public schools instituted music classes for the first time, allowing exposure to the moralizing effects of music to more children than ever before. Because of Milwaukee's extensive musical community, children had widespread opportunities for public and private lessons as well as the opportunity for musical contact through community events. It is also hard to imagine that many of the city's youths were not trained with musical skills as part of their family traditions. Milwaukeeans believed, as did other Americans in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, that instructing children in music could shape them into better citizens, build character, and save their souls. At a time when the industrializing world seemed threatening, and the preparation they had received as children no longer seemed adequate for the new conditions, this belief gave parents, like Dr. Louis Frank, comfort.

Notes

1. German Proverb as printed in the Milwaukee periodical, *The Souvenir: A Journal Devoted to Music and Musical Literature* 4 (May 1898), 5.
2. B. Edward McClellan, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1999), 16–17; Craig H. Roell, *The Piano in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 3–4; John Higham, *Hanging Together: Unity and Diversity in American Culture*, ed. Carl J. Guarneri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 154 and 156.
3. Louis F. Frank, *Musical Reminiscences and Reflections on the Cultural Life of Old Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1897), introduction, 6–7.
4. Victor Greene, *A Singing Ambivalence: American Immigrants between Old World and New, 1830–1930* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2004), 19–23; James A. Keene, *A History of Music Education in the United States* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1982), 154.
5. Michael L. Mark, ed., *Music Education: Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 72–73, 90–93; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 6, 1885.
6. Over eighty percent of all the children enrolled in Milwaukee public schools in 1881 were of German parentage. "Meeting of the School Board," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 6, 1881, [online], Children in Urban American Project; available from http://xserver1.its.mu.edu/; Ann Bakamjian Reagan, *Art Music in Milwaukee in the Late Nineteenth Century: 1850–1900* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1980), 28–30; Theodore Mueller, "Christopher Bach-Musician," *Historical Messenger* 23 (September 1967), 86.
7. Michael G. Corenthal, ed., *The Illustrated History of Wisconsin Music, 1840–1990: 150 Years of Melodies and Music* (Milwaukee: MGC Publications, 1991), 12; Reagan, *Art Music in Milwaukee*, 218–219.
8. Howard Louis Conard, ed., *History of Milwaukee Country from it Earliest History to 1895*, vol. 2 (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1895), 97; Scrapbook Relating to the Milwaukee Musical Society, 1857–1860, Milwaukee Public Library, Fine Arts Rarities, 55; Charles K. Harris, *After the Ball, Forty Years of Melody: An Autobiography* (New York: Frank-Maurs, 1926.); Harry H. Anderson and Frederick I. Olson, *Milwaukee at the Gathering of the Waters* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1981), 52.
9. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 3, 19, 22, July 14, September 11, 26, 1846; May 31, 1852; June 2, 1854; September 20, 1860; October 26, 1865.
10. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 26, 1846.
11. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 6, 1885; Ann Bakamjian Reagan, *Art Music in Milwaukee in the Late Nineteenth Century: 1850–1900* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1980), 183; Michael L. Mark, ed., *Music Education: Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 95–96; Souvenir of the 24th Festival of the North American Saengerbund, held July 21–25, 1886, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee; Oskar Burckhardt, *The Musical Society of Milwaukee: A Chronicle, 1850–1900*, trans. Wisconsin Writers Project (Milwaukee: Musical Society of Milwaukee, 1900), 74.
12. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 14,16, September 11, 1846, September 20, 1860, March 10, 1880, November 7, 1886, February 13, 1887.
13. Priscilla F. Clement, *Growing Pains; Children in the Industrial Age, 1850–1900* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1997), 81, 84, 86; Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Education* (Chicago: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1935), xii, xiv, 58–61, 82, 125, 143.
14. Michael L. Mark, ed., *Music Education: Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 74; James A. Keene, *A History of Music Education in the United States* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1982), 119; Craig H. Roell, *The Piano in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 18.
15. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 24, 1847; April 24, 1852. Harry H. Anderson and Frederick I. Olson, *Milwaukee at the Gathering of the Waters* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1981), 52.
16. Reagan, *Art Music in Milwaukee*, 220; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 21, 1870; Howard Louis Conard, ed., *History of Milwaukee Country from it Earliest History to 1895*, vol. 2 (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1895), 485.
17. Marvin H. Koch, "Music Teacher Training in the Public Normal Schools of Wisconsin: A History Focused on the School at Milwaukee" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1975), 79; "Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners to His honor the Mayor and the Common Council of Milwaukee" (Milwaukee: Ben Franklin Printing House, 1871), 44; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 20, 1858; "The Scroll," the Yearbook of the Milwaukee Academy, 1989, Milwaukee County Historical Society, 50.
18. "Annual Report," 1870, 40.
19. "Annual Report," 1871, xxxiv–xxv; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 7, 1871. In this letter to the editor a concerned Milwaukee citizen criticizes parents who often only value education for advancement of their child's future pecuniary interest. Riches are no proof, they say, of "moral power . . . The heart and mind ought, however, to be developed simultaneously."
20. "Annual Report," 1871, 111–112, xxv, 1872, 10.
21. "Annual Report," 1871, 9,22, 1872, 10.
22. "Annual Report," 1871, 44–45; 1872, 56,93.
23. Reminiscences, An Evening at Home, file 440, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee; *Our Young People* (January 13, 1894): 403, (April 7, 1894): 532, (December 14, 1895): 255.
24. *The Souvenir* (July 3, 1898): 3.

About the Author

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