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Larry Hamberlin explores a previously unexamined aspect of the relationship between high and low culture in early-twentieth-century America in his book Tin Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era. In his innovative study, Hamberlin analyzes lowbrow Tin Pan Alley novelty songs that made use of highbrow operatic references to comment on issues of race, class, and gender in the first two decades of the twentieth century. According to historian Craig Roell, “in [these] years Tin Pan Alley came to define…the style of popular music being produced and even the historical time period itself,” so it is with good reason that Hamberlin chooses his subject.¹ The overarching goal of his analysis is, to quote Hamberlin, “to suggest how one may track opera’s changing position in American society, by looking not at opera itself but at its reflections in popular culture”¹(11). Beyond that, opera’s position in American culture can help in understanding the cultural development of this evolving society. Lawrence W.

Levine, author of *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, states that “although opera was not, then or now, totally divorced from popular culture...by the end of the nineteenth century it, like Shakespearean drama, was no longer part and parcel of the eclectic blend of culture that had characterized the United States.” Where Levine’s work stops—at the end of the nineteenth century—is where Hamberlin’s begins.

Hamberlin cleverly organizes his analysis by topic, rather than chronologically, to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the argument. The book’s three major sections are divided as follows. Part I, which includes Chapters 1 and 2, focuses on immigrants, specifically Italian immigrants, and their place in the American class system. Part II, containing Chapters 3, 4, and 5, addresses portrayals of women in popular song as a response to early feminism, which risked upsetting the organization of gender in society. Finally, Part III, which encompasses Chapters 6 and 7, discusses issues of race as they related to class and high culture. The author makes use of ample musical examples, lyrics, and sheet music cover art throughout to illustrate his points.

Hamberlin’s book is premised on the idea that art (in this case, popular music) is reflective of the society in which it was created. His examination of the popular novelty songs of Tin Pan Alley from 1900-1920 echoes Levine’s point that, “because the primary categories of culture have been the products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable.” Hamberlin goes beyond Levine’s research to more closely analyze the effects of what Levine calls “sacralization,” or the elevation of the arts to hold a sacred place in society. Hamberlin does this by not only examining classical music’s place in society, but also by examining a medium in which references to classical music and popular culture come together.

The evolution of the use of operatic references in popular songs truly shows the evolution of the relationship between classical music and popular culture in American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. This relationship is especially true because, as Thomas Hischak argues, “no other industry better served as a barometer of the public’s temperament [...]. Tin Pan Alley accurately reflected the heart and soul of the country.”

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3 Ibid., 8.

significance of this phenomenon, therefore, gives Hamberlin’s work an especially noteworthy significance.

Throughout his text, Hamberlin observes the juxtaposition of highbrow and lowbrow culture, how it evolved, and the development of an American national cultural identity as seen through Tin Pan Alley popular song. Hamberlin’s arguments are strongest when discussing issues of race and class in society. He draws clear connections between the equality of the social status of Italian immigrants and that of African-Americans in the eyes of the elite. Portrayals of Italians in ragtime novelty songs that include operatic elements can be understood by examining, as Hamberlin does, “the contrast between the two musical styles [which] … were also a contrast between two cultural subgroups.” (17) Here the author also draws substantial comparisons between African-American opera lovers, viewed as “social climbers,” and Americans in general, viewed as social climbers on a global scale. According to Hamberlin, Americans made futile attempts to claim European high musical culture as a part of the American cultural heritage by largely ignoring their own musical heritage, including that found in ragtime music.

The section on gender, unfortunately, falls flat in its depiction of the high/low cultural dynamic. Hamberlin presents the high/low trope in Chapter 3 when discussing songs such as “Tra-la la la!” by Irving Berlin, which uses the operatic ambitions of women to signify social climbing. This was disappointingly unclear in the subsequent two chapters on Salome and Madama Butterfly, which only discuss how these two operatic characters were portrayed in novelty songs, but not how this reflected American ideals. This section unfortunately takes away from Hamberlin’s argument. Indeed, this portion lacked consistency with the other sections of the book. One might expect the three chapters grouped together in Part II to share a common theme, and they fail to do so, resulting instead in a disconnect between the chapters of this section.

The other theme throughout Hamberlin’s text is the assertion and establishment of American cultural identity in the face of European culture. At the turn of the century, Americans began to pull away from identifying with European high culture while trying to develop and situate their own cultural identity in the midst of sociocultural change. This transition, however, was still very much in progress at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, as Charles Hamm has suggested, “general attitudes as to where [a song] should fit into American culture were…shaped by the climate and taste of New York.”

elite of New York City, during the era between 1900 and 1920, still favored European high culture, resulting in a significant number of operatic influences in American ragtime novelty songs. Hamberlin’s book examines this subject more closely than the work of previous scholars. He compellingly shows that it is important to consider just how influential these popular ragtime novelty songs were, especially with regards to the development of an American cultural identity. These songs were the beginning of, as David Joyner indicates, “[America’s realization] as it pulled away from its European origins, that its emerging identity was comprised of African-American as well as European-American cultures.” Hamberlin’s work helps to underscore this in unprecedented detail.

The themes of American cultural identification are particularly present in Part III of the book, which discusses ragtime as the quintessential American music. This opinion of ragtime is shared by many, as pointed out by Joyner in his essay “The Ragtime Controversy” when he writes “perhaps Moderwell, Stravinsky, and others were correct in their observations that America’s most significant and unique contribution to world music is its popular music, an entity...born in the form of ragtime.” Through this artistic pallet, American musical culture truly began to develop and find its place in the international cultural landscape. By marking both ragtime and opera as parts of American musical culture at the turn of the century, it becomes clear that, as Levine points out, “American culture, from the very outset, was a divided one, replete with ethnic, class, and regional distinctions.” Hamberlin’s study of the mixing of ragtime with Tin Pan Alley opera proves this. As Hamberlin argues, “although the lyrics [of the Tin Pan Alley novelty songs] describe irreconcilable differences, the music says that those differences are merely surface features of an underlying unity” (243). This artistic mixing of culture classes is a significant aspect of the music Hamberlin consults in his book, underlying many of its arguments, giving the book overall consistency, and further strengthening many of the arguments made.

Hamberlin situates his and case studies in richly detailed historical and social contexts, throughout. The importance of such a methodological approach is underscored by Peter Etzkorn, author of “The Relationship Between Musical


7 Ibid, 246.

8 Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 9.
and Social Patterns in American Popular Music”, who states “that music, wherever found, is a product of social circumstances and is consequently to be evaluated in terms of these very circumstances and their implications for the total social structure.” Hamberlin gracefully acknowledges this by providing his reader with sufficient historical and social background information through which to grasp the social climate from which the music discussed in his book arose. Initially, I was a little frustrated by the amount of background information provided by the author. It seemed unnecessary, and for knowledgeable readers, this information might also seem redundant. I did, however, come upon situations where I would have known very little about the context of the argument had the author not provided me with the necessary information. For example, without understanding the tensions present between the United States and Japan near the turn of the twentieth century, I would not have fully appreciated the tragic story of Madama Butterfly and its American origins. It was at these points in my reading that I realized how essential the background information provided was to the functionality of the book. It is the well-explained background that gives this book its highly-accessible nature.

The other aspect of Hamberlin’s book that makes it effective is the abundance of musical examples, including analyses of lyrics that are at times even accompanied by the sheet music’s cover art. The best use of this approach occurs in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, when discussing Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, the most detailed example provided by Hamberlin coincides with his discussion of “Poor Butterfly” by Raymond Hubbell. Hamberlin describes this song as “the quintessential butterfly song” (157) and then proceeds to analyze the relationship between the music and lyrics, and the resulting effectiveness of the piece. The remaining portions of the chapter relate all content back to this one example, to reinforce his argument. In Chapter 6, “National Identity in ‘That Opera Rag’” Hamberlin focuses the entire chapter on one song: “That Opera Rag” by Ted Snyder and Irving Berlin. The general idea of this novelty song can be clearly understood through John Dizikes’s statement that “while the Diamond Horseshoe at the Metropolitan still dominated the [New York] social scene, a new and expanding audience, transcending the familiar ethnic boundaries and unconcerned with opera’s old hierarchical associations, was coming to opera houses in all the major cities,” and consequently blurring the dividing lines of

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By delving into his analysis of this song, Hamberlin presents a strong argument concerning “That Opera Rag”, giving himself solid evidence with which to back up his arguments. Furthermore, this excerpt provides the perfect example of a song that expresses the tensions between high and low art and the changing nature of American opera audiences at the turn of the twentieth century.

Disappointingly, Hamberlin’s use of musical examples is underwhelming in Chapters 1 and 2 where topics of the sacralization of opera, Italian immigrants, and the social classes are covered, and in Chapters 3 and 4 in the section on gender. While these chapters boast many good examples, they would have been more convincing had Hamberlin chosen an isolated sample upon which to focus in each sub-section. His analyses are not entirely convincing, because of how quickly he passes over them without presenting detailed evidence. Other reviewers have taken similar issues with this aspect of the book. For example, in Edward Berlin’s review of it, he argued that “one could debate some of [his] interpretations,” stating that Hamberlin’s linking of said questionable interpretations to his arguments cause them to fall flat. Hamberlin is instead most effective when focusing on one major example, augmented by a selection of less detailed examples featuring similar themes.

Hamberlin’s book elucidates the grey area between high and low culture that is thematized in the Tin Pan Alley repertoire. Sacralization and the development of a high/low system of cultural classification in the early twentieth century are shown as directly linked to the simultaneous development of and desire for an American cultural identity. This phenomenon, especially as it concerns the evidence presented in this book, gives us the impression that highbrow and lowbrow aspects of culture, and cultural development, are not all cut and dry. Perhaps relationships between the two arenas are intertwined in a more complex way than would have previously been considered. Hamberlin’s thought-provoking, and entertaining look at the phenomena of sacralization and the development of cultural identity contributes to the discussion of high and low culture in a positive and imaginative way, while opening up the potential for further exploration of this relationship as it pertains to twentieth- and twenty-first-century musical practices.


For Further Reading


