

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN WARS

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DURING World War I, a great many people in the United States objected violently to performances of German music or of anything of any vintage whatever in the German language. This attitude extended to all so-called "art." But it is a curious fact that an army at war has often – past and present – employed music borrowed from the enemy to bolster its morale. The music of our own national anthem is English; it was adapted to Key's words which were conceived in 1814 when we were at war with England. During the Revolution *Yankee Doodle* began as a British song deriding the Americans; the Americans promptly appropriated it to themselves. Today, we are told, the Nazis march to the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* singing Third-Reich-approved sentiments to it.

The whole history of war songs in America is, while strange, fairly consistent. With but few outstanding exceptions all the most successful earlier ones – that is up to the Spanish-American War – were adaptations from our own past or (as was pointed out above) simply thefts from overseas. About, or just before, 1898 something special seems to have affected our national conscience because then our previous war-song procedures underwent a complete change.

Until the Spanish-American War, stirring ballads and anthems were written in celebration of decisive battles, cherished leaders, or deaths of national heroes. Washington's triumphal entry into Trenton, his inauguration and his death stimulated cantatas, odes, sonatas, and songs. The defeat of General Burgoyne was made the subject of hundreds of ballads. Sherman's bloody drive to the sea marched on in song. The Stamp Act and the boycott of tea produced countless tributes. Many of these were

rousing fight songs, many others were for the ladies of the colonies alone (1774):

Begone, pernicious, baneful tea
With all Pandora's ills possessed
or

Rouse every generous thoughtful mind
The rising danger flee
If you would lasting freedom find
Now then abandon tea.

But from the war of 1898 on, no trace remains in our music of particular issues or battles. All songs become general victory pep-talks.

There is, however, a deeper and more important difference between the two periods. The later songs have undoubtedly lost character. Look at the most popular of each time. William Billings, the Boston tanner, held first place in the Revolutionary Army with *Chester* (1778) for which he wrote both words and music. In many respects it is crude, the four-part writing is amateurish, but there is conviction and strength and an attractive, rough heartiness. Its basic dignity made it available for church and general assemblies, for the camp as for the field of battle. Andrew Law's *The American Hero, or Bunker Hill* (1775) was also sung by everyone, and in general style it belongs in a class with Billings' music.

from BUNKER HILL (1775)

NILES LAW

And, if pre-served, and, if pre-served, in so great a contest, life is re-doubled.

Nathaniel Niles closed his words to *Bunker Hill*:

Life for my country and the cause of Freedom
Is but a trifle for a worm to part with;
And if preserved in so great a contest,
Life is redoubled.

Everything about this work remains valid today. I have often performed it before concert audiences who have been deeply moved by it.

Both *Chester* and *Bunker Hill* continued to be included in anthem collections more than a century after the war they importantly served. Earlier than either of them was *The Liberty Song* or *In Freedom We're Born* (1768) which became the official song of the famous Sons of Liberty. This, like so many other patriotic pieces, was an adaptation. The tune by

Dr. William Boyce, was written in 1759 for David Garrick and originally called *Hearts of Oak*. The words changed often, but the old music turns up again and again to serve history. In 1812 it was especially popular with a new text.

In 1812 the *American Star* was also a leader, and like *The Liberty Song* its melody was an adaptation, the source being James Hewitt's *Wounded Huzzar*. The author, John M'Creery, ends the piece:

Then Freemen, file up! Lo the blood banner's flying,
The high bird of Liberty screams in the air,
Beneath her, oppression and tyranny dying –
Success to the beaming American Star.

The best of the Civil War songs are still the best we have today. They are almost as effective now as they originally were. *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, *Dixie*, *Tenting on the Old Camp Ground*, *Listen to the Mocking Bird*, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, *Tramp Tramp Tramp*, *Just Before the Battle Mother*, *Marching Through Georgia* and *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* are extraordinarily vital. Most of them were used continuously and effectively in 1898 and in World War I, and they are being sung right now by our new army.

Of the countless songs written and widely popular during the Spanish-American War and World War I, none has had any enduring consequence either for words or music, and perhaps that is why so many of the best of our older war songs remain in the army repertory today. In 1898, the Spaniards in Cuba thought our national anthem was *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*. Close to it in popularity were *Goodbye Dolly Gray*, *Just Break the News to Mother*, and *On the Banks of the Wabash*. But the soldiers returned after this war, as they did later in 1919, singing *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, which goes back to 1863. All the songs provoked by the Spanish-American War itself were maudlin and sentimental; the period left its obvious mark. Most of them were revived in 1918; what we added then were chiefly two-decade-later versions of the same things: *Over There*, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, *K-K-K-Katy*, *Pack Up Your Troubles*, *Smiles*, *There's a Long, Long Trail*, *You're in the Army Now*, *I Hate to Get Up*. These fit nicely into any men's lunch-club-Thursday-go-to-meeting fellowship song book. They are pep songs or songs of friendship and every one of them is of the music-hall variety. Some have a kind of racy humor which by now we can recognize as typically American and which finds musical expression chiefly in war-

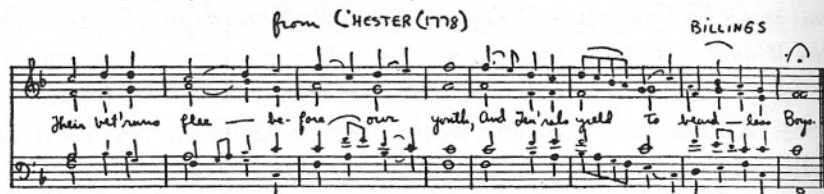
time. In '98 the humor was robust and full; during World War I it sounded more like whistling in the dark.

Today the new Army sings a mixture of these bonbons plus the Civil War tunes, and a number of folk-like American songs: *Oh! Susanna*, *Home on the Range*, *The Last Round-up*, *I've Been Working on the Railroad*. It also sings *God Bless America* which everyone will tell you is loved by the entire country. The radio feeds it continuously, the record sale is enormous and has been for several years, and all juke boxes fry it out. Through these latter three popularizing mediums the country also knows *Remember Pearl Harbor*, and *Goodby Mamma, I'm Off to Yokohama*. The music-hall stamp is dominant still and it is difficult to foresee any change.

Of course sentimental songs always play an important role in all army repertoires. But it is precisely in this category that character has so notably declined. *The Mocking Bird* and *Just Before the Battle Mother*, from the Civil War, are still fresh and enchanting; when played today they are not laughed at. But *Just Break the News to Mother* is a scream! As for World War I, its sentimental ditties are still too tied-up with personal memories to be heard with detachment.

I don't have an all-embracing theory for this change. Yet one fact is significant and I shall point it out. Our wars since 1898 have been waged and won abroad. The Revolution (to begin with) was fought at home. The threat to life of all the Colonists was immediate and constant. A song of braggadocio was the sublimation of a mere round-the-corner incident:

Their Vet'runs flee before our Youth
And Generals yield to beardless boys.



So sang Billings in *Chester*. Billings, the country's most successful propagandist, lived through the siege of Boston. Its fall would have meant certain death for him. Law composed *Bunker Hill*, a deeply serious song, when he was only a twenty-six year old soldier in the Revolutionary Army. James Lyon, another composer, begged General Washington to let him lead his army through Nova Scotia, a region with which he was very familiar. The 1812 War was also fought at home. The seriousness of it could be perceived, not in a telegraphic despatch, but — by the rockets'

red glare, bombs bursting in air – right here in Baltimore. The Civil War absorbed the attention and energy of every man and woman in the nation. For four long bitter years it turned the country into a battlefield, and most homes (particularly in the South) into fortresses. This fighting at home not only gives an air of urgency to the songs; it keeps alive the feeling for landscape, the region, the folk, and so heightens intensity. Sectional characteristics found in religious and folkmusic everywhere, permeate our war songs from 1775 to 1865. The urgency of the cause and the sense of home are monumentally combined.

This may explain something about the war songs of 1776, 1812, 1861 and those of 1898, 1914 and 1941. In '98 we left home (but we did not go far) to fight an enemy known to be weak and depleted, we accomplished our purpose quickly, returning like sportsmen from the hunt. In 1918 we went farther from home, and what we may have lacked in belief was made up in spirit and even hysteria. The music-hall is not a bad servant for hastily improvised crusades.

Today the whole world is our backyard and we are fighting in it. This is so because of the enormously increased speed of transportation. And now any new song must include everybody, everywhere because it will reach every remote spot at once via the radio. The radio indeed may prove to be the great controlling factor. In the old days, a well known tune was often called into use because it would have been next to impossible to have an entire army learn a new one. But radio can teach any new song without a soldier's being aware that he is learning it and every single person in the world can be learning it at the same time. *Battle Hymn*, good as it is, may no longer be sent over short-wave since our allies are Mohammedans, Brahmins, and Buddhists who are likely to take offense. The government has recognized that fact.

Joel Barlow, writer of patriotic verse in the Revolution, entered the United States Army in 1775 and wrote in a letter:

"I do not know whether I shall do more for the cause in the capacity of chaplain than I could in that of poet; I have great faith in the influence of songs; and shall continue, while fulfilling the duties of my appointment, to write one now and then, and to encourage the taste for them which I find in the camp. One good song is worth a dozen addresses or proclamations."

The trials which lie ahead have never been equalled in our history, except perhaps in the experience of those robust souls who helped establish the country. Their song-writers set a sturdy example for us to follow.

In 1759 an anonymous master wrote, in honor of the fall of Quebec, the ballad called *Brave Wolfe*:

Cheer up your hearts young men, let nothing fright you.
 Be of a gallant mind, let that delight you, —
 Let not your courage fail, till after trial,
 Nor let your fancy move, at the first denial.

BRAVE WOLFE (1759)

4 cheer up your hearts young men, let nothing fright you, - let not your cour-age
 4 Be of a gallant mind, let that de-light you, -

fail, till af-ter tri-al, Nor let your fan-cy move, at the first de-ni-al.

Nearly two centuries old and still more practical than *God Bless America*, my home sweet home.

The wide world has now been brought close around us; when we fight in far-off Java we still fight at home. The present urgency is like that of the time of Billings and of Law when they helped to create the country. Still there is no assurance that a just cause, even a sense of immediate or cosmic danger will of themselves generate new and enduring songs. Help in the form of "morale" may be presented to our army from Broadway by way of entertainment — with the songs Broadway knows how to write. But when *the* song comes it must come out of the heart of the war itself: the song of experience, the song of men marching to preserve what other soldiers once fought for and sang about. And when it comes the radio will pause and listen.