

The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word

Paige Lush

McHenry County College

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Lush, Paige. "The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 100-102.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12557>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

buying of Senate seats and stealing of elections. Rival governments, each claiming a majority, jockeyed for control in Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas. In this case, context would do more than enrich; it would inform. One could argue, for example, that the most visceral outrage against thieving that congressmen faced did not come from Credit Mobilier but from their acceptance of a retroactive pay hike, and, contrary to the impression that Mitchell may leave, the scandal of '73 had almost become an afterthought within three years: for muckrakers, there was treasure everywhere. All true, but that makes Mitchell's contribution no less useful. Then and since, Credit Mobilier *was* the "King of Frauds," and for a revelatory moment in stripping the gilding from the Gilded Age, readers should give this book a royal welcome.

The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word, by Marian Wilson Kimber. Music in American Life series. Urbana, Springfield, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017. xvii, 324 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$28.00 paperback.

Reviewer Paige Lush is director of bands and instructor of music at McHenry County College. Her research and writing have focused on the role of music in the chautauqua movement.

It is not entirely surprising that elocution has received little scholarly attention relative to other Progressive Era American phenomena. It was performing written word, but not exactly acting. It could be musical, but was not exactly music. By the early twentieth century it was derided as trite and dated by many performers, some of whom were arguably still practicing (repackaged) elocution. And many of its leading figures were women, often professional performers who specialized in reinforcing traditional gender roles, despite their very presence on stage challenging those same conventions. Marian Wilson Kimber's *The Elocutionists* provides a much needed examination of the elocution movement in the context of turn-of-the-century America.

Kimber's analysis of women's dialect recitations offers valuable insight into women's place on the stage and in broader performing culture. The use of child dialect to reinforce maternal roles for girls while also providing a voice of rebellion against those same social structures is an intriguing paradox that Kimber explains thoroughly without becoming tedious. Her description of the career of child-dialect specialist Kitty Cheatham provides valuable insight into the relationship of the spoken-word performer in general, and the dialect speaker in particular, with the audience. For instance, Kimber quotes from a *New York Times* review stating that Cheatham's performances "seem to appeal

more especially to those that would like to be children than to those who are" (140).

In chapter two Kimber provides excellent examples of the musical component of elocution, which is no small feat considering the scarcity of surviving sheet music in archives related to the practice. Her musical analyses are deep enough to be useful but are never tedious and would not deter the non-musician. The analysis of the notation systems used in various elocution texts is fascinating. The obvious parallels between many of the notation systems used for elocution and standard musical notation speak to the paramusical quality of elocution, which becomes even more clear when elocution is paired with music as in many of Kimber's examples.

Kimber analyzes the role of music in either legitimizing or cheapening recitation, depending on context (44). Particularly interesting is the discussion of the practice of reciting, rather than singing, the text of an art song while the piano performs its original music. This is addressed in the career profile of Jane Manner, one of several performers whose career Kimber uses to tell the story of women in elocution.

In chapter five Kimber uses the discussion of the practice of Delsarte and its place in midwestern society in the early twentieth century to examine Meredith Willson's 1957 Broadway musical *The Music Man* and its complex relationship with the small-town Iowa society it depicts. Kimber artfully connects Willson's depiction of River City embracing the arts with issues of women's role in performance discussed earlier in *The Elocutionists*. "When the males are involved in the creation of River City's cultural life, only then will it be significant, in a way that Marian's piano lessons and Mrs. Shinn's patriotic pageants are not, as they are merely women's efforts" (106).

Kimber's brief biographies of Phyllis Fergus and Frieda Peycke show just how uneasy Progressive Era Americans were with women—especially professionals—in performing roles. Fergus and Peycke were just two of many women whose livelihood depended, at least in part, on performing domesticity for women's clubs. This is a recurring theme in *The Elocutionists*, one that Kimber weaves throughout the work, culminating in chapter ten's discussion of musical recitations by female composers in the waning years of the art.

The Elocutionists does, at times, suffer from a lack of a clear chronology. This is likely unavoidable, as the rise and fall of public recitation is not entirely linear. For instance, choral speaking gained acceptance well into the decline of solo elocution. It is appropriate to avoid a completely chronological telling of the story of women in elocution, but it would be helpful for the reader to have some familiarity with early twentieth-

century platform culture and history in order to keep track of the various threads of the narrative.

The Elocutionists would be of interest to scholars of midwestern culture in general and Iowa in particular. Kimber's discussion of Delsarte centers on Iowa and addresses not only Delsarte and elocution but also the performance venues (public and private), training institutions, and leading figures of chautauqua and other closely related (and largely midwestern) phenomena.

The Fort Dodge Line: Iowa's Feisty Interurban, by Don L. Hofsommer. Central Electric Railfans' Association Bulletin 149. Chicago: Central Electric Railfans' Association, 2018. 188 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes. \$65.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Simon Cordery is professor of history and chair of the Department of History at Iowa State University. He is the author of *The Iron Road in the Prairie State: The Story of Illinois Railroading* (2016).

Interurban railroads developed at the end of the nineteenth century by connecting two or more urban areas, often running electric-powered equipment. Don Hofsommer's latest book chronicles the development and decline of one such line linking the capital of the Hawkeye State with Fort Dodge, 84 miles to the northwest. The book relies heavily on contemporary newspapers, government publications, and the extensive secondary literature on Iowa railroading, much of it produced by Hofsommer himself. Arranged chronologically, it fits the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern line (FDDM&S) into the larger picture of state and national developments.

Hofsommer has, with his customary panache, written a fine summary of the corporate life of the FDDM&S. He opens with a brief account of riding the line to Des Moines, admitting his "affection" for it (3). Its origins were far from romantic, however, as he explains. The FDDM&S emerged in the wake of a failed attempt to mine coal in central Iowa for the railroads of James J. Hill, the "Empire Builder." Hill-backed entrepreneur Hamilton Browne, "genetically enthusiastic and chronically optimistic," moved to Newton and, in 1902, created the Newton & Northwestern, a "most improbable route" (14, 17). It grew slowly and, in 1905, collapsed quickly. Boston investors purchased it and installed Homer Loring as president. Loring shifted the focus to a Des Moines to Fort Dodge artery with an Ames branch. The new line operated electrified passenger service alongside steam-hauled freight, giving it a "dual personality" (32).