Bugle Resounding: Music and Musicians of the Civil War Era

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of Grant’s moves in the winter of 1863 and of the siege operations from May 23 to July 4. Illustrative and rarely published photographs of the siege works are another plus.

The book’s weaknesses—it is difficult to summarize well-known, complex operations and always make the telling sound fresh, and the maps tend to be of minimal usefulness—are far outweighed by its strengths. This will be the standard history of the Vicksburg campaign for classroom students, enthusiasts, and scholars who do not want an exhaustively detailed discussion of the events.

Of course, Iowa contributed enormously to the capture of Vicksburg. Its regiments were represented in many brigades in Grant’s army. And, as a Mississippi valley state, its residents had a good deal of interest in opening the river to northern navigation and commerce.

Now we have a good general history of Vicksburg, but we still need detailed, tactical-level studies of the individual battles of the campaign.


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Music was central to the Civil War. Before the war, planters cited songs from the quarters as evidence that their slaves were contented. Abolitionists sang of “bereaved slave mothers” torn from helpless children. During the conflict, Union soldiers marched off singing “John Brown’s Body” while Confederate troops drilled to “The Bonnie Blue Flag.” In later decades, soldiers held emotional reunions, openly weeping at the playing of regimental bands. With its wealth of sources, music holds much promise for illuminating and complicating assumptions about the era’s values, conflicts, and lived experiences. Accordingly, the goal of this collection is to provide an “interdisciplinary model” for understanding this music. The results, roughly split between musicological and historical approaches to the material, are mixed at best.

The essays reflecting a standard musicological approach are limited by tendencies toward categorization and strict functionalism. Bruce Kelley’s overview places the period’s music into ten broad categories. Although this approach gives a sense of the subject’s scope, some of these categories are ideological and problematic. Certainly “African American music” should include more than “slave songs.”
One wonders how Elizabeth "the Black Swan" Greenfield or the African sea shanties of white sailors would fit in this framework. Similarly, Leonora Cuccia places the war's songs about women into four categories of idealized femininity. Yet without reference to the period's gender ideologies, her conclusions reveal little: songs such as "The Homespun Dress" and "The Yellow Rose of Texas" merely show that women supported the troops and soldiers missed their sweethearts. Deanne Root on Stephen Foster's songs, David Thompson on Confederate piano music, and Kirsten Schultz on Confederate songsters treat music as a functionalist tool. Accordingly, Foster's blackface songs "humanized" slaves for northern audiences, piano music allowed beset southerners to socialize and dance, and songsters gave soldiers a "culturally acceptable" way to express friendships and deep emotions. These same topics and conclusions may be found in Charles Hamm's classic account of popular music, *Yesterdays* (1979).

The essays with a better grounding in the period's history have more promise. Michael Saffle places his survey of Irish songs in the context of immigration and identity, arguing that with its visible Irish regiments and resort to Irish songs as national airs, the Civil War marked a shift away from the stereotypes of "Paddy" songs to more accepting images of Irish Americans. Richard Spicer and Eric Campbell both focus on the lived experience of musicians, Spicer on the activities of a New Hampshire regimental band, Campbell on Charles Wellington Reed, a bugler in Massachusetts's Ninth Regiment. While both narratives are interesting, both make obvious main points: martial music inspired soldiers to fight and march. Finally, Walter Powell and Mark Snell explore relationships between music and memories of the conflict. Powell focuses on the origins of Henry Clay Work's "The Silver Horn," arguing that although this 1883 elegy was something of a failure, what mattered was its inspiration: the constant reminders of the war—statues, cemeteries, and veterans—that Work experienced while living in a small village in upstate New York. Snell explores the music inspired by the Battle of Gettysburg, tracing out a narrative from the dramatic hymns dedicated to the high cause of the North in 1863 to the "bloody shirt" campaign songs of Republican politicians, and finally to turn-of-the-century odes on national reconciliation.

Promising as they are, these essays stop short of using their focus on music and musicians to complicate the standard and sometimes ideological interpretations of the period. Overall, the essays in this collection clearly establish the centrality of music to the Civil War. Yet they show that scholars have a long way to go if they want to deliver on the promises of this rich topic.