

# What Small-Town Music Needs

Gordon Balch Nevin

*The Musical Forecast*, June 1922, courtesy of Kathie Logan, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

There is a fable, hoary with age, to the effect that a gentleman of rural residence once went to a circus, entered the animal arena, was startled by the strange appearance of the giraffe, and gave utterance to the majestic words: "Gosh; there ain't no such animal!" Now this yokel was unknowingly doing what has been characteristic of small-town musicians (and some larger town ones, also)—denying the existence of something that was standing in concrete form before his very eyes. From the pulpit we often hear the passage

which contains the words: "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks," and in like manner we may say—it is very hard to controvert facts that have long existed. Small-town music is a fact. Nevertheless, there are some things wrong with small-town music; that is freely admitted by most thinkers. Small-town music, in some form or other and in various types of manifestation, exists throughout the length and breadth of the land. What then is the matter with it? The first and most important thing that is wrong with it is this: There isn't nearly enough of it!

Go to Gopher Prairie in May, or to Little Juniper in November, and what will you find in musical activity? In the first town you will find that typical American oasis in a dusty desert—the May Festival of three to five days' length, with from two to three sessions each day, the whole tending to a violent crop of musical indigestion induced by gorging. Or turn to the second town in November, and what will you discover on the billboards of the "Grand Opera House?" The annual tour of Geraldine Garzenauer, leading soprano of the Metropolitan Opera Company, is to include Little Juniper in her itinerary; O lucky, thrice lucky Little Juniper, to be included on this grand tournee! (Parenthetically it might be said, of course, that Little Juniper will be \$1,500 or perhaps \$2,000 shy, tomorrow morning when the great song-bird has flown, but look at the glory that has been shed upon the little city by the presence of this great diva!) Little Juniper will have its day in the sun, and of course after



Courtesy Johnstown Ledger

Gordon Balch Nevin at the Organ

that it will take at least a year for the local management to get over the strain of Gerald Garzenauer's fee. After which they will be fit prey for the wily advance representative of another high-priced soloist who is ready to go out on "the sticks" for a consideration.

And what does this all indicate? Simply this, that the country as a whole is still in its P. T. Barnum period of musical activity, a phase of development which must be gone through with just as a child must inevitably pass through a chain of infant diseases. It is the big name, the heavy advertiser, those who take the full page spreads, who are contracted for by the small city managers; especially those who are successful record makers are demanded.

How much better would it be if the \$1,500 fee were distributed over a series of five or six lesser luminaries, good artists, capable of presenting a worthy program, thus giving a small town a constant inspiration and spur to new activities in its own "home-grown" music through the fresh impetus brought in from outside! For when all is said and done, the only lasting good which may be accomplished through the traveling artist is the good brought about by waking-up the local musical workers. There may be, and should be much pleasure and profit derived from outside musicians but the permanent good comes through the incentive which should be left with local musicians to improve their own work.

There are some practical difficulties in the working out of this idea. The moderate fee artist is often an unknown quantity. And no local manager wishes to take the chances on an unknown performer. He or she may prove to be a dumb-bell, as the present lingo has it. There is too much at stake, both financially and from the viewpoint of future patronage, to make it worth while. Furthermore, it is no secret that little or no reliance can be placed upon quoted newspaper comments, unless it is expressly stated that such comments are quoted verbatim, for doctoring of press reports has become little less than a scandal. What then is to be done?

Two avenues of approach may be suggested. First, demand a list of places where the artist under consideration has appeared, together with names of those managing such appearances; then obtain through correspondence a statement as to the qualities and success of the person considered. There should be no great difficulty in securing a few lines from such managers—especially if an offer to reciprocate with similar information were made at the time of writing. Most busy persons will take the time to help another in the same line of endeavor in another city, especially if a stamped envelope be enclosed! And the second method, less practical however in many cases, is to make a trip to the larger cities from which come nine-tenths of the traveling musicians, and hear them before engaging them. This method is only feasible where the distance involved is not too great, but it is the best method of all.

As the matter now stands, the trouble is that the managers upon whom one could place reliance as to the statements made regarding qualifications of artists, are the very ones who will look politely bored when any sum less than \$500 is mentioned for a single performer; and unfortunately, some of the managers handling lower-priced artists are not entirely dependable. Until the reliable ones can be made to see that they are, by their high-price attitude, doing more to retard music growth than all other forces combined, it will be necessary for the local manager to get his information "at the source," and get it himself unaided. When the men who now blandly mention \$500 to \$2,000, or more, wake up enough to see that there is a tremendous field for the \$75 to \$250 artist, there will be music aplenty, and for all—in small cities as well as in the nearly-surfeited larger ones. When the P. T. Barnum days have passed there will be dates in abundance for many young and worthy performers who, as matters now stand, can scratch together but a baker's dozen or so in a year.

Small cities need more outside music than they are now getting, but they do not need it in floods—as at May festivals, nor in grand orgies—as in single \$2,000 dates. They need a series of attractions which shall extend throughout at least eight months of the year, varied in type, and reasonably popular in appeal. You cannot make a town suddenly musical by bringing in a symphony orchestra or an opera star once a year; it must be done like water dropping on stone, and gradually making its impression.

Paradoxical as it may seem, those who have watched this sort of thing in action know that the more of fine quality outside music you bring into a town, the more you help the musicians working in that town. Musical activities are things that grow by accretion; the more you add to the local field, the more the field itself grows, and the more fertile it becomes. So that the great need of small towns and cities is more good music from the outside, and it will inevitably follow that there will be more healthy activity in the local or “home-made” brand. It will be either a case of inoculation or stagnation; you can take your choice!

*This article originally appeared in a newspaper from 1922 and is presented here in a form to fit common printer and paper sizes. Please distribute widely.*

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