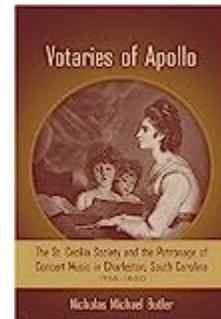




Nicholas Michael Butler. *Votaries of Apollo: The St. Cecilia Society and the Patronage of Concert Music in Charleston, South Carolina, 1766-1820.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. xx + 375 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-705-4.



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Playing and Paying for Music in Early Charleston

In a 1775 painting by English artist Joshua Reynolds, a young woman dressed in a loose fashionable gown sits at an organ, accompanied by two singing children. Although the title of the painting—*St. Caecilia*—and the glimpse of a wing over one child's shoulder reference the ancient story of a Roman martyr, the image would have spoken to its audience of elegant, sophisticated, Enlightenment culture, from the familiar visage of the model (Elizabeth Linley Sheridan, celebrated London soloist), down to the classical stool on which she sits. The picture, according to Nicholas Butler, illustrates *St. Cecilia's* versatility as a cultural symbol for the Charleston elites who, flush with prosperity and confidence after the Seven Years' War, gathered in 1766 to form the first polite private musical society in British North America. Invoking the patron saint of musicians in naming themselves, these elites, whose wealth rested on the labor of black slaves, portrayed themselves as fashionable, moral, dignified, and enlightened.

Supported by subscribing members, the *St. Cecilia Society* hosted regular concerts that joined music, danc-

ing, and sociable conversation, often all at the same time. With this winning format and a good supply of professional and amateur musicians, the society survived war, financial crises, and generational turnover, but by the 1820s, changing cultural styles that viewed serious music and sociable networking to be at odds forced members to abandon their roles as patrons of music and musicians. Butler traces the history of the *St. Cecilia Society* as “epitomiz[ing] the contemporary transformation of Charleston's cultural life from the confident cosmopolitanism and ambitious expansion of the late colonial era to the onset of economic decline and isolationist attitudes at the advent of the antebellum era” (p. xii).

In part, this study is “a microhistory” (p. 257) and a model of impressive local historical detective work, especially given that the early records of the society itself have not endured. To make up for the lack of material that would furnish a traditional institutional biography, Butler plumbs all other conceivable Charleston sources—plats of the taverns in which concerts took place; court records of the lawsuits launched in pursuit of delinquent

membership fees; newspaper advertisements indicating the availability of musical instruments. He uncovers the local social and business connections of Charleston elites that permitted the society to thrive for more than five decades. He adds fascinating details to our understanding of elite white Charleston culture. We learn, for example, that male concert-goers could receive a season pass to the society's concerts, but the women who accompanied them and guaranteed the success of an event (as well as the "gentleman strangers" visiting the southern hub) had to present a separate, signed and dated ticket for each concert. The tensions between exclusivity and hospitality, as well as between male camaraderie and female sociability, played out at the door of each gathering.

Butler does place the story of this Charleston institution in several larger contexts. He argues that the trajectory of the St. Cecilia Society coincided with the apogee of the classical period in western European music and carefully delineates the changing styles of contemporary composition and performance. He also highlights the role of institutions such as the St. Cecilia Society in fostering polite sociability, a social and intellectual movement of the late eighteenth century that demanded mixed-sex gatherings, refined conversation, and the cultivation of aesthetic taste. In making both arguments, Butler draws useful and interesting parallels with polite musical societies in Britain. This comparison helps him to fill some of the gaps of St. Cecilia's story; more importantly, it underlines a central theme of his work: that Charleston in the late colonial, revolutionary, and early republic periods was fully part of an integrated economic and cultural world that included London, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and multiple Caribbean ports. The book makes a strong argument for including Charleston in our analyses of early American cities. Charleston in this period was not an isolated exception or a southern oddity; rather, it shared instrumental scores, violin players, and polite fashions with cities to the north, south, and east. Butler's book, connecting these cities in an Atlantic world context, opens the musical, and by extension, larger artistic world of the North American colonies more fully to the transatlantic context in which contemporaries understood them.

One of the primary reasons for the sense of connection between different cities of the Atlantic world lies in the nature of artistic patronage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Butler carefully lays out, cultural institutions tapped into the quotidian business

ties of merchants, bookstore owners, and even church vestrymen. The tavern where members met on business could, with the proper improvements, serve as concert hall or ballroom. Local connections quickly drew in more far-flung agents. When Charleston's St. Philip's Church needed a new organist, the vestry looked to London bookseller James Rivington for help, hoping that his previous success in recruiting a minister and president of the St. Cecilia Society portended success.

While patronage joined local and international networks, the repertoire was more one-sided. The St. Cecilia Society performed orchestral music, chamber music, and concerti composed by contemporary European musicians. There is no evidence of a desire to champion local composers or, in the early years of the new United States, an "American" style of music; instead, Charleston, like other American cities, looked to the European continent. Local influences, however, did shape the nature of this cultural cosmopolitanism. The influx of refugees fleeing the revolution in St. Domingo beginning in 1793 spawned an intense engagement with French music and musicians. Professional French musicians found employment and French colonial ladies and gentlemen trained in polite arts were able to convert their avocations to self-supporting gigs with the society's aid. The concert bill, too, gained a distinctly French cast, including pieces from French comic operas deemed too insubstantial for London tastes. Butler's study raises interesting questions about how local relationships and Atlantic cultural currents shaped each other. How, for example, did connections with average businessmen, businesswomen, and slaves running errands direct the content or political implications of elite cosmopolitanism? What influence did the practices of colonial amateur societies have on their European counterparts, in turn?

Butler's thematic approach, with chapters detailing the venues, management, membership, performers, and repertoire, does result in some repetition. Information about the make-up of the audience and the economic struggles of the society appears in several chapters, and Butler does not always move beyond repetition and description to build new insights from these familiar themes. But the sustained attention to a specific institution also yields a significant payoff in giving a convincing narrative and material ballast to the familiar historical concepts of cosmopolitanism, sociability, and the Atlantic world more broadly.

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