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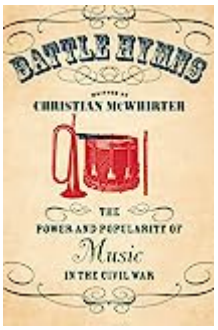


**Christian McWhirter.** *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. viii + 321 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3550-0.

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## The Musical War

Music was particularly important in mid-nineteenth-century America. Nowadays, it is rare to hear voices unified in song, except inside a church. But music accompanied most events in this era. Particularly during the Civil War, people engaged in group singing at outdoor public meetings and rallies. They held musical soirees to raise money for the troops or entertained friends and family with private concerts. And soldiersâ daily lives were entirely structured by music, which not only provided solace and amusement in camp but also announced each military event, from reveille and drills to meals and battles. Comments about music are thus ubiquitous in Civil War participantsâ diaries, letters, and memoirs. But although scholars often note this fact, few have considered how music functioned during the war or explored the role of music in daily life. This is what McWhirterâs book sets out to do. Exceptionally well researched and engagingly written, *Battle Hymns* is a welcome addition to a growing scholarship on popular culture in the Civil War era.

The war took place in the midst of what McWhirter calls Americaâs first âmusic boomâ–one for which the conflict itself was largely responsible (p. 15). The prewar decades had seen the price of pianos decrease enough to make them a fixture in most middle-class parlors. A craze for musical evenings had also taken hold, driven by the growing sentimentalization of family life. These trends provided the impetus to churn out increasing amounts of music to meet rising demand, both for a new generation of American songwriters, such as Stephen Foster and Henry Clay Wook, and for publishing houses like Chicago-based Root & Cady. The outbreak of war dramatically increased this burgeoning market. McWhirter estimates that somewhere between nine and ten thousand songs were published as sheet music in the North during the war years. In the South, the situation differed: due to a smaller population, fewer presses, and lack of supplies caused by the Union blockage, only around six or seven hundred songs were published in the Confederacy. On both sides, however, the production of new music significantly outstripped any other form of literary output. By warâs end, commentators were asserting that

more sheet music was being printed and distributed in America than anywhere else in the world. Cheap to produce (a piece of sheet music cost roughly fifteen cents to create and between twenty-five to fifty cents to buy), music quickly became âthe most profitable printed medium in America,â McWhirter writes, transforming some sheet music publishers into a new monied elite (pp. 16-17).

People used music differently in the past than they do today. In the absence of recorded sound, listeners felt free to reinterpret what they heard, altering lyrics or adding verses to suit their needs or situations. This insight provides McWhirter with an entry point for discussing why some songs and not others became popular during the conflict. Some of the songs that we now think of as Civil War classics–particularly Julia Ward Howeâs âThe Battle Hymn of the Republicâ–were not well loved during the war itself. Ordinary soldiers played the largest role in determining a songâs appeal, being ânot only musicâs most enthusiastic consumers but its most effective distributorsâ (p. 3). And they viewed lyrics like Howeâs as too literary to be easily remembered, and too polished to be malleable. According to McWhirter, a songâs malleability–along with the obvious appeal of a tune, especially one that offered a good marching tempo–was a key criteria for success. The most popular songs on both sides–âJohn Brownâs Bodyâ in the Union, and âDixieâ in the Confederacy–shared this trait, being lyrically flexible and thus constantly rewritten.

*Battle Hymns* identifies the popularity of a song not just by examining the sale of sheet music but also by looking at what the Civil War generation said about music in their letters, diaries, and memoirs. The primary research at the heart of the book is considerable: almost a hundred archival collections held in twenty separate archives across the United States, material culled from many dozens of magazines and newspapers, along with a huge variety of sources from digitized collections. It thus provides the strongest evidence we have for assessing which pieces of music were most often discussed during the war. Given that claims about the popularity of certain types of music or particular songs form an important component of McWhirterâs arguments, however, it would have been useful to have a more explicit discussion about the pitfalls of trying to assess popularity: in light of well-known archival biases toward certain classes and social groups, for instance, it is obviously impossible for even the most comprehensive search to yield a full range of opinions. Similarly, the structural conditions of the music market surely played a role in determining popularity. If there were no popular songs written by, say, black songwriters at this time, perhaps the reason might lie as much in the reception of their work by white printers as in the tastes of ordinary people.

Explaining popularity in terms of a songâs malleability–its openness to being rewritten or differently interpreted by diverse people–also tends to sideline the analysis of content for that of form. *Battle Hymns* does not dwell very deeply on what particular songs meant for those who sang them–examining, for instance, why so many people sought out songs that imagined the words of dying soldiers but not those of men lying wounded or sick in hospitals, or those that imagined the feelings of mothers but not of fathers or siblings. Yet surely not every song that had a catchy tune and supple, easily memorized lyrics caught on. The meaning that people attached to particular words, motifs, or imagery might well have made the difference between popularity and obscurity–something best determined by discussing music alongside the appeal of other wartime cultural outputs, from painting to poetry. McWhirter acknowledges that lyrical content was crucial to a songâs success, given the emphasis in this era âon verse over chorusâ (p. 18), but his analysis does not give great weight to this topic. In a different but related vein, analyzing nineteenth-century discussions about how music affected the imagination or the emotions might have added another useful angle on how people at the time interpreted and assessed the importance of music to daily life.

*Battle Hymns* does, however, contain an additional intriguing argument to explain the popularity of particular songs, focused on the performative contexts in which they appeared. There are interesting discussions of how early performances of âJohn Brownâs Body,â âThe Battle Cry of Freedom,â and âDixieâ helped to cement their appeal. George Frederick Rootâs âThe Battle Cry of Freedom,â for instance, apparently did not catch on before being adopted by the Lumbard Brothers–a family singing group based in Chicago. After performing the song at war meetings in that city, they gave a series of concerts for General Ulysses S. Grantâs army during the Vicksburg campaign in 1863. At a low point in the war, their rousing rendition of this tune came to be associated with the Union victory that took place shortly thereafter. Similarly, a quirk of fate helped to make âDixieâ–a song composed by Daniel Emmett, a Northerner–into the Confederacyâs de facto anthem, when a military bandsman decided to play the song at the inauguration of newly appointed Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

One of the bookâs most important arguments, how-

ever, concerns the political power of music during the Civil War. *Battle Hymns* opens with a fascinating discussion of a musical concert in which singers were heckled for expressing abolitionist sentiment while performing before a group of soldiers in early 1862. Some audience members wanted the singers expelled from camp, while others stood up in their favor. When several officers almost fought a duel over the issue, General George McClellan–well known for anti-abolitionist views–banned the group from holding further concerts and revoked their military pass. But this is not where the matter rested. Instead, members of President Lincolnâs cabinet involved themselves in the controversy, eventually reinstating the musiciansâ pass and allowing them to continue performing for the troops. This is one of the many incidents that McWhirter has uncovered to demonstrate the widely acknowledged influence that music held in this era. He highlights the way officials and elite Unionists worked to promote or suppress certain musicians and songs–with one officer hiring a songwriter to appeal to a particular ethnic group, and another official banning the sale and performance of a song for allegedly inciting treason. Both sides held (failed) competitions designed to create a stirring anthem; masters forced slaves to sing âDixieâ and forbade freedom songs; Southern women snubbed occupying forces by playing Confederate airs, while Union soldiers expressed their scorn by singing patriotic tunes as they marched through the South. In the context of a highly musical society, everyone recognized that singing had immense propaganda value.

McWhirter convincingly demonstrates that music held many additional functions at this time–from its educative value to its ability to unite participants or provide emotional catharsis. Organized thematically, *Battle Hymns* has eight chapters that deal successively with attempts on both sides to produce a definitive anthem; the role of music on the home front and in the armies; the way African American singing transformed the minstrelsy tradition; the fate of Civil War music in the postwar years; and a final chapter on the legacy and revival of Civil War music–particularly the political uses to which songs like âDixieâ or âThe Battle Hymn of the Republicâ were put in the modern era, and thus the new meanings these songs acquired. *Battle Hymns* will profit scholars who work on popular culture in nineteenth-century America, Union and Confederate nationalism, the history of music, and Civil War memory. The bookâs clear writing and interesting subject matter will also make it a useful text for university classes in these areas.