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# Moral Fire

*Musical Portraits from America's Fin de Siècle*

Joseph Horowitz



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

*Berkeley · Los Angeles · London*

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*For Agnes, Bernie, and Maggie*



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# Introduction

Fully twenty years ago, I decided that the most dynamic decade for classical music in the United States was the 1890s—a finding that contradicted conventional wisdom both about American music and about the “Gilded Age.” The latter term, roughly designating the period between the Civil War and 1900, originates with Mark Twain’s first novel, co-written with Charles Dudley Warner in 1873: *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day*. Its genesis was a conversation in which the two writers expressed discontent with the state of American fiction. They also shared their discontent with the state of American democracy. The result is a long and tangled tale of Washington politics. Hypocrisy and bribery, poverty and violence are major themes. Readers of the book easily recognized Senator Abner Dilworthy as Kansas’s Senator Samuel Pomeroy, a watchdog for temperance and the Sunday School, who was caught offering cash for a nominating vote—and yet was cleared by a committee of Senate colleagues. The Crédit Mobilier scandal of 1872, in which a fraudulent company was found to have siphoned federal railroad money, was equally a fresh national memory. To many, the harsh iconography of *The Gilded Age* seemed just. And the label, with its pejorative associations, stuck.

I am far from being the only present-day writer for whom Mark Twain’s notion of a Gilded Age mischaracterizes a time and place he himself embodied. To be sure, historians need to periodize and label; to

be sure, all such distinctions and designations generalize and mislead. That said, not only is “Gilded Age” atypically pejorative, as far as historical labels go; it also happens to be a belated polemical construct. Unlike “Elizabethan” or “Victorian,” “Progressive Era” or “New Deal,” “Gilded Age” was not employed during the decades it identifies. True, it originates with Twain and Warner. But not until the 1930s did works of history commonly apply this term.\*

Its general usage, that is, originates not with *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day*, but with the “Young Americans” movement after World War I. This quest for a “usable past” devoured the parental generation in favor of venerable antebellum ancestors and a vital present. Chapter 3 of Van Wyck Brooks’s *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920), titled “The Gilded Age,” marks the first influential deployment of “Gilded Age” as a tool of periodization, evoking an era in which the pursuit of wealth was a “sacred duty,” and in which a “vast unconscious conspiracy” crippled “the creative life”; Twain is depicted crushed between commercial and genteel forces. Following his mentor Brooks, Lewis Mumford, in *Sticks and Stones* (1924) and *The Golden Day* (1926), engaged in “a bit of preliminary house-cleaning and rubbish removal” by way of discarding “the barbarism of the Gilded Age.”<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, such significant historians as Charles and Mary Beard, and Vernon Parrington, as well as such influential popularizers as Matthew Josephson, embedded the rubric and imagery of Gilded Age America.

In retrospect, this genealogy tells more about interwar intellectual life than about the period in question. Brooks and Mumford, especially, were writers of irresistible panache. Their exhilarating polemics successfully instigated new thinking: they cast a shadow on the past in order to brighten the present. But their books remain polemics whose pertinence and plausibility have long faded. Just as the Young Americans needed to rediscover Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau, others would subsequently make startling discoveries amid the ostensible rubbish of turn-of-the-century America.

My own such discoveries include the momentous contributions of Henry Higginson, Henry Krehbiel, and Laura Langford. Charles Ives

\*A historian who searched could find only two uses of “Gilded Age” from 1873 to 1919 “that referred to the present generally and were not direct references to the book [*The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-Day*] or the play [the book as adapted for the stage].” See Alan Lessoff, “Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and The Gilded Age: Provenance of a Usable Past,” a talk delivered March 2, 2005, at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

was of course discovered by others, but not long enough ago. Seeking candidates from the Oedipal generation of Brooks and Mumford, Serge Koussevitzky's Boston Symphony Orchestra searched in vain for a Great American Symphony during the interwar decades. Ives's Second Symphony, an American masterpiece from 1900–1902, only came to light in 1951. By then, Brooks and Mumford, their purposes served, had both recanted. As early as 1931, Mumford was singling out such figures as Albert Pinkham Ryder, Thomas Eakins, and Louis Sullivan en route to a revisionist perspective. Brooks—in *New England: Indian Summer, 1865–1915* (1940) and *The Confident Years, 1885–1915* (1952)—undertook his own sympathetic reassessment of reviled Victorian decades. As Mumford later approvingly observed, both he and Brooks had “purged” the “negative” and “querulous” tone of their earlier writings. But Mark Twain's notion of a barbaric Gilded Age remained.

Indulge in a moment's reflection. We think of the caliber of the founding fathers: intrepid. We think of the pre-bellum culture bearers the Young Americans extolled: bracing. We think of the interwar modernists: clever, subtle, fresh. Think now of post-bellum arts and letters: of Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt, James Russell Lowell and William Dean Howells: Victorian, reverent, naïve; fettered, whether by habit, belief, or attire. But the earnestness of this period, its seriousness about life and its responsibilities, may also be read as a strength—the “moral fire” of my title.

Will “Gilded Age” ever be popularly displaced by a better nomenclature? Alternatives have been floated. In the pages that follow, I nominate “fin de siècle” for the culturally eventful closing decades of the nineteenth century—and ponder the ways that Europe's fin de siècle did or did not resemble America's.

• • •

When *Moral Fire* was in its final stages of creation, a distinguished publisher advised me that my book would prove a hopeless marketing challenge because it “fell between the cracks,” the cracks being American Studies and Music. I had to smile ruefully: between the cracks is where I live.

As a cultural historian specializing in classical music in the United States, I have long explored subject matter ignored by nearly all other cultural historians. When not writing books, I produce concerts. While I would never claim that the beleaguered men and women who administer orchestras and present concerts don't read, American concert life,



generally, is securely divorced from American intellectual life. Separated by a crack, classical music occupies a more isolated niche in the world of contemporary culture than do film, dance, or theater.

How I wound up between the cracks began with a job and a book. The job was reviewing concerts for the *New York Times* from 1976 to 1980—an activity that persuaded me that most classical music events were redundant or otherwise superfluous. The book, *Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music* (1987), was my first attempt to comprehend the classical music cul-de-sac.

One thing led to another. I no longer review concerts, except on rare occasions for the *Times Literary Supplement*. My eight books mainly deal with the distinctive institutional life of American classical music. Two of them, *Wagner Nights* (1994) and *Classical Music in America* (2005), incorporate admiring cameos of Henry Higginson, Henry Krehbiel, Laura Langford, and Charles Ives—portraits greatly expanded in the present volume.

As my *Toscanini* jeremiad also led to an unexpected opportunity to run an orchestra—the Brooklyn Philharmonic at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—I today spend about as much time creating musical events as I do pondering their past and future. In Washington, DC, I am the artistic director of PostClassical Ensemble. I frequently curate festivals for orchestras and presenters throughout the United States. My approach, invariably, is thematic and cross-disciplinary: an attempt to infuse fortifying humanities content into the classical-music agenda. Naturally, I seize every opportunity to translate into public programs the topics I write about. “Dvořák and America,” “American Roots,” “The Russian-American Jazz Connection,” “American Transcendentalists,” “The Gershwin Moment,” Copland and the Cold War,” “Hollywood Composers,” “The Idea of the West,” and “Artists in Exile” have all generated concerts including film, theater, dance, and pertinent scholarship.

My efforts to bind History and Music have also included a pair of “Dvořák and America” projects sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The first spawned a young readers book and an interactive DVD (by Robert Winter and Peter Bogdanoff) for Social Studies classrooms; the second instructed teachers (grades 3 to 12) in how to use them. *Moral Fire* represents my most concentrated effort, to date, to wishfully encroach on American Studies with all my classical music paraphernalia in tow.

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Alan Lessoff, a historian who has tenaciously excavated the genealogy of “Gilded Age,” has invaluable supported my work on *Moral Fire* with advice and encouragement. So have Paul Boyer and Wayne Shirley. Diane Sasson enriched and complicated my prior knowledge of Laura Langford. The Boston Symphony Orchestra and New York Philharmonic—orchestras that care about their histories—have exceptional archives and exceptional archivists; as in the past, I am indebted to Bridget Carr in Boston and to Barbara Haws and her assistant Rich Wandel in New York. My agent, Elizabeth Kaplan, and my editor, Mary Francis, valuably fortified my belief in this book.

I used to think that writers required special domestic prerogatives. My wife, Agnes, my son, Bernie, and my daughter, Maggie, long ago disabused me of this silly notion. I now more or less gratefully tolerate the distractions they variously impose.



FIGURE 1. The White City. Image courtesy of the Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology.

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# Prologue

## *Screaming Wagnerites and America's Fin de Siècle*

Music and moral passion—Revisionist portraiture—Framing  
“fin de siècle”

Work on the present book, celebrating cultural achievements a century and more ago, coincided with a signature twenty-first-century entertainment: the twenty-ninth Summer Olympic Games, hosted by the People's Republic of China. The opening ceremonies, on August 8, 2008, were unprecedented in scale: fifteen thousand performers (including exactly 2,008 drummers) riveted an outdoor audience of ninety-one thousand, and millions more on television the world over. The four-hour production, conceived by the film director Zhang Yimou, reportedly cost \$300 million—more than ten times what Athens had spent on its opening ceremonies four years previous. Defying gravity, athletes eight months in training raced around a suspended globe, some running upside down, some perpendicular to the turf below. Dancers used their writhing bodies to inscribe calligraphy on a gargantuan scroll that unfolded itself on the stadium floor. The Olympic torch was conveyed aloft by a flying sprinter while a pyre materialized to light the sky. Celebrating hoary centuries of history, shedding decades of twentieth-century subjugation and insularity, preening with futuristic technological wizardry, China showed the world a sleeping giant prodigiously awake, an archaic Golem become a sleek Goliath, rousing the new century.

The ceremonies posed a double meaning. The invention of paper, of movable type, of the compass; the sayings of Confucius; the sights and sounds of Beijing Opera and of *tàijíquán* catalogued Chinese refinement and learning. The choreographed acrobatic hordes, the lightning

succession of magic tricks on the largest possible scale, each topping the one before, advertised protean resources of manpower, expertise, and cash. One decisive ingredient was the soundtrack. When Lang Lang played the *Yellow River* Concerto, when Chinese and British pop singers sang the commissioned confection “You and Me” to acres of smiling children’s faces, the slick mélange of Western and Eastern ingredients reduced China to an exotic costume drama, a superficial pentatonic topping to the banal realities of Western pop and glitz.

How similar, yet different, was the White City of 1893. At the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a young nation proclaimed a new dawn. “The apotheosis of civilization” showcasing “all that is beautiful, useful, wonderful,” H.N. Higinbotham, president of the exposition’s board of directors, called it. “We celebrate the emancipation of man,” pronounced Chauncey Depew. Though Depew, president of the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad, added that the fair belonged “not to America, but to the world,” the world—gaping at the artificial waterways and lagoons, at the ersatz Graeco-Roman structures and statuary—understood otherwise.<sup>1</sup> This, surely, was the American intent. The Chicago fair was three times bigger than the Paris Exposition of 1889, to which it favorably compared itself. More than two hundred buildings had been rapidly erected on more than six hundred acres of reclaimed swampland. Some 27.5 million visitors—about half the United States population—were logged over a period of six months. From Lake Michigan, the Columbian Exposition was a beckoning mirage. Aglow at night, its electric lights streaking the water, it was a colonnaded alabaster fantasy, a post-Venetian wonderland fabricated outside time and space.

Like the Beijing Olympics to come, the Columbian Exposition was an act of cultural reconsolidation postdating internal turmoil by three decades; no less than the Beijing Olympics, the White City possessed a double meaning. Explicitly, it inventoried American learning, science, and the arts. The Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building (reputedly the largest structure in the world, spanning more than four city blocks and incorporating a stage larger than the entire Metropolitan Opera House), the Transportation Building, the Woman’s Building, the Electricity Building were crammed with evidence of New World achievement. As music director of the fair, the conductor Theodore Thomas planned “a perfect and complete exhibition of the musical Art in all its branches.”<sup>2</sup> There would be a noontime concert every day and two evening concerts of lighter music with a split orchestra—all free of

charge—plus ticketed concerts of a more serious nature. Addressing the American Historical Association at one of the fair’s scholarly conclaves, Frederick Jackson Turner—in what would become famous as his Frontier Thesis—explored the American origins of self-made enterprise and daring. Binding the whole was an ordered aesthetic vision enforced by the architect Daniel Burnham in concert with the pioneering landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

If Burnham, who sixteen years later would publish a landmark Chicago city plan, secured an orderly artistic template for the fair’s sprawling heterogeneous contents, the countervailing display of financial and technological muscle could scarcely be overlooked. As iconic as the Statue of the Republic fronting the Court of Honor was the first Ferris wheel, a structure 264 feet high with room for sixty people in each of thirty-six cars (one of which contained a band). The mythic nocturnal illumination was a supreme feat of applied science, the first large-scale test of alternating current; all told, the fair consumed three times as much electricity as the entire city of Chicago.

Like most Gilded Age culture, the White City suffers a tarnished reputation. Louis Sullivan, whose Transportation Building contradicted the prevailing Beaux-Arts motif, famously denounced Burnham for “setting back architecture fifty years.” The “Midway Plaisance” notoriously flaunted African “cannibals” and other “barbarian” species from places far away. Thomas’s high-toned symphonic concerts—including one with Paderewski, whose instrument had to be smuggled in because Steinway was not one of the fair’s authorized piano firms—were abandoned for lack of patronage. But by 1900 Thomas’s Chicago Orchestra had triumphantly won its place in the civic pantheon of Chicago. Sullivan jealously failed to appreciate that the artificiality of Burnham’s designs supported their magic; what is more, their influence endured: a “city beautiful” movement, traceable to Burnham’s influence, would transform public buildings and parks in countless American cities, big and small. The racial hierarchies embedded in the Midway’s living exhibits—which not so incidentally introduced Americans to Indonesian gamelan, African drumming, and other exogenous creative feats previously unknown—were of course perniciously false; but, as my example of Henry Krehbiel will show, chroniclers of the Midway have failed to adequately survey or contextualize the contemporaneous discourse on culture and race; the ideologies of Madison Grant and Adolf Hitler were decades away. Alan Trachtenberg’s seminal *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982) treats the White City as a sham

façade as false as the plaster-like “staff” Burnham applied to whiten the gigantic steel-frame structures. The Columbian Exposition, he writes, “insinuated” the primacy of art and culture. Its hierarchical plan, with the Midway at bottom, ostensibly imposed “unity through subordination.” It theoretically embodied a sinister reality of capitalist hegemony.

Latter-day critics of the White City are oblivious to the sheer magnitude of achievement realized by fin-de-siècle idealists. Was the White City a national brainwashing? Charles Eliot Norton did not think so; he called the fair’s general design “noble, original, and satisfactory.” Eugene Debs spoke of “the lofty ideal” of the fair and its “healthful influences” on working men and women for whom “the beautiful in art as well as nature” furnished “a form of worship entirely devoid of cant and hypocrisy, superior to any worship narrowed by creeds and dogmas.” “I went to the fair at once,” wrote Owen Wister, “and before I had walked for two minutes, a bewilderment at the gloriousness of everything seized me . . . until my mind was dazzled to a standstill.” A quintessential genteel sentiment was articulated in *Century* magazine by the architect Henry Van Brunt—that the fair’s quotient of “sweetness and light” could counterbalance “the boastful Philistinism of our times.”<sup>3</sup> To dismiss such sanguine responses as naïve is to reduce men of sensibility and intellect to dupes. The same fin-de-siècle Chicago energies that realized the White City produced the Art Institute of Chicago (1879), the Chicago Orchestra (1891), the University of Chicago (1892), the Field Museum (1893), and the Newberry and Crerar Libraries (1887, 1897)—a consolidated demonstration of civic zeal in fact more unthinkable today than any of the fair’s gaucheries.

NBC’s Beijing commentators, straining toward high rhetoric in 2008, proclaimed a China “both outside time, and bursting every which way in a bewildering rush of transformation. They have made themselves anew, relentlessly, devotedly, so they might on these days step into history. They’ve submitted to an uncompromising search for mastery. . . . It is time for the universe of shimmering, still-to-be-written biographies. It is time to chase eternal youth.” How much more impressive, in 1893, was James Fullarton Muirhead, the writer of a Baedeker handbook about the United States, for whom the fair’s whiteness signified a fortifying purity of purpose:

We expected that America would produce the largest, most costly, and most gorgeous of all international exhibitions; but who expected that she would produce anything so inexpressibly poetic, chaste, and restrained, such an absolutely refined and soul-satisfying picture, as the Court of Honor, with

its lagoon and gondolas, its white marble steps and balustrades, its varied yet harmonious buildings, its colonnaded vista of the great lake, its impressive fountain, its fairy-like outlining after dark by the gems of electricity, its spacious and well-modulated proportions . . . the aesthetic sense of the beholder was as fully and unreservedly satisfied as in looking at a masterpiece of painting or sculpture, and at the same time was soothed and elevated by a sense of amplitude and grandeur such as no single work of art could produce. . . . The glamour of old association that illumines Athens or Venice was in a way compensated by our deep impression of the pathetic transitoriness of the dream of beauty before us, and by the revelation it afforded of the soul of a great nation.<sup>4</sup>

For millions of turn-of-the-century Americans, high culture cut a broad swath in the national experience. They drew galvanizing instruction and aspiration from the White City—as from Henry Ward Beecher and William Jennings Bryan, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and the Social Gospel. They benefited from the initiatives of individuals who undertook what otherwise would not have been attempted. My portraits are studies in heroic application. My topic is fin-de-siècle uplift.

. . .

In the course of researching my *Wagner Nights: An American History* (1994), I read that “middle aged women in their enthusiasm stood up in the chairs and screamed their delight for what seemed hours” when Anton Seidl conducted Wagner at New York’s Metropolitan Opera.<sup>5</sup>

My first reaction was disbelief: I could not envision this wild vignette. Only with the acquisition of further knowledge did it acquire reality. I absorbed that during the Met’s “German seasons”—1884 to 1891—the boxholders, who fashionably enjoyed Gounod and Bellini, ceded artistic control to zealous Wagnerites for whom *Tristan und Isolde* was a necessary catharsis. Never again would the Met be so convulsed by fraught intensities of feeling and belief. Seidl, Wagner’s onetime amanuensis at Bayreuth, exuded mystery and latent power. Albert Niemann, the Met’s Tristan, was the supreme singing actor of his day, a red-bearded colossus who inhabited Tristan’s ravings with reckless veracity; when in act 3 he tore off his bandages, women swooned. Lilli Lehmann was a true Isolde: imperious. In her memoirs she wrote: “In the whole world there was nothing that could free greater emotions in me than [my] *Tristan* performances in New York with Niemann, where the audience sat still for minutes, silent and motionless in their places, as though drunk or in a transport, without being conscious that the opera was over.”<sup>6</sup> At



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