“The Heart of the Nation”: The Significance of Music in the American Civil War

Louis Reed-Wood*

Abstract

Music and lyrics are valuable for studying the values and opinions of a historical era. This article uses historical lyric sheets from the American Civil War to examine the impact of music on the mindsets of both civilians and soldiers, their ability to cope with the war’s hardships, and their emotional motivation to press on. Music reinforced existing Christian beliefs, as well as each side’s justifications for war. It also served as a way of expressing one’s feelings about the war, slavery, secession, and other contemporary issues. Many individuals were directly employed through music, working either in the wartime publishing industry or as regimental musicians. Music also proved a useful tactical tool, allowing commanders to control the movements of their troops and to garner information about enemy troops’ activities. For these reasons, the study of music during the Civil War is far more than simply the study of wartime entertainment.

Keywords: American Civil War, music, media, culture

Popular music both reflects and affects public opinion, and the music of the American Civil War is no exception. Music was prolific during the American Civil War, providing people with an accessible medium through which to express concerns about violence and reactions to emotional trauma. The growing printing industry in the mid-nineteenth century United States, coupled with the popularity of music during the Civil War, presents an opportunity for analysis of this music. The popularity of music during the Civil War emerged because it helped soldiers to cope with war, acted as a motivational tool on behalf of the two militaries and governments, and provided a means of expressing one’s feelings concerning the war. An examination of the music itself reveals that music affected people’s experiences of war through its impact on the psyches of soldiers, its battlefield applications, and its ability to reflect and reinforce public opinion.

The proliferation of printed song sheets during the American Civil War offers a wealth of lyrics and music to examine. More than half of the examples, quotations, and sources cited in this article are from Union songs, since the Union printing and publishing industry was better established and more materially productive than its Confederate counterpart. Therefore, Northern lyrics sheets

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*Department of History, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
Correspondence: lwr691@mail.usask.ca

are better represented in the historical record. This discrepancy does not necessarily indicate that music was less popular in the South; songs may have been shared orally, instrumentally, or through other non-written ways more frequently than in the North. A limitation of the sources is that it is difficult to determine to what extent music changed public opinion, and to what extent it represented existing views. The degree to which music reflected or affected opinion during the American Civil War poses a historical challenge, and warrants further research.

Music was prevalent throughout the armies of both the Union and the Confederacy. Soldiers played and sang songs in camp, when marching, and even on the battlefield. At least ten bands took part in the Battle of Gettysburg, while at least a dozen played at the Battle of Stones River. Music, however, was not simply an idle presence; commanders valued its impact on the psyches of soldiers. Music boosted morale and, when upbeat and encouraging, it could spur soldiers to fight harder. Both sides recognized this function of music and utilized it on the battlefield. John Porter of the 76th Pennsylvania Infantry, for example, wrote of the Battle of Chaffin’s Farm that “General R.S. Foster […] ordered up all the bands to the front and set them to playing patriotic airs such as the Star Spangled Banner, etc. By the time those Johnnies were well enough charged with streachem to tackle us, we were all patriotic enough to hold the fort.” Music could also soothe soldiers’ nerves before or after a battle. Of course, music also provided pleasure and entertainment for soldiers; listening to it in camp provided a means to pass the time. A member of the 10th Vermont Infantry Band, writing in January 1864, from a camp near Culpeper, Virginia, remarked on the enthusiasm with which encamped men and women consumed music, “We are doing some good playing lately. Last night we went up to General Morris’s (by request) and played for the ladies. We

then went about a mile and a half to serenade Captain Chase… Tonight we are to play at General Haus’s for a party.” The positive effects of music did not go unnoticed or unappreciated by soldiers. Elisha Hunt Rhodes, a member of the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, described music as making service in the army significantly more pleasant.

Not all the effects of music on soldiers’ psyches were positive. As it does today, music during the Civil War could evoke strong emotional responses and could dampen the spirits of soldiers. Music was known to make soldiers feel homesick, making their absence from home all the more difficult. Charles Russell Lowell, a Union colonel from Boston, wrote to his wife in September 1864, from Ripon, West Virginia, that the musicians in camp “were quite sentimental in their choice of music, and I grew as homesick as possible.” David Anderson describes how “Home, Sweet Home’ was certainly an emotive song for both Union and Confederate soldiers, so much so that regimental bands were sometimes prohibited from playing it.” Music, therefore, did not always improve the moods of soldiers, but could also detract from their morale.

Music not only affected the morale of soldiers, but it also reflected their religious beliefs. Soldiers would sing hymns in camp, in hospital, and even before battle. For example, soldiers in the Army of the Tennessee sang hymns together prior to the Battle of Chickamauga. Pocket hymn books were popular with soldiers in both the Union and


4 Davis, “Music and Gallantry in Combat During the American Civil War,” 146.


Confederate armies, and were carried by many soldiers both as a testament to their faith and for their enjoyment and comfort. Religious music provided soldiers with hope, as hymns reinforced the belief that God was supporting the listeners’ side in the war. God was also invoked in song to make men better soldiers and toughen their resolve, as demonstrated by “Battle Hymn of the Virginia Soldier”:

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Father of earth and heaven! I call thy name!
Round me the smoke and shout of battle roll;
My eyes are dazzled with the rustling flame;
Father, sustain an untried soldier’s soul.
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When hope was not enough and their forces faltered, religious music helped soldiers deal with death. In addition to comforting the living after the death of another, a function of music still carried on at funeral services today, religious music was known occasionally to comfort dying soldiers. There are several accounts of soldiers singing Christian hymns as they lay dying on the battlefield. The religious nature of the music, coupled with the ability of music to comfort, made these soldiers’ passing easier.

Beyond traditional Christian hymns, many popular wartime songs further connected the war effort to Christianity. A large number of songs invoked the idea that God was on their side, and reinforced the belief amongst soldiers that their side was righteous. Oliver Wendell Holmes’ “The Army Hymn,” a Northern wartime song, includes the following verse which strongly ties religious conviction to the war effort:

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Wake in our breasts the living fires
The holy faith that warmed our sires;
Thy hand hath made our Nation free!
To die for Her is serving Thee.
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On the Southern side, “God and Liberty” assures Confederate soldiers that God supports the Southern cause:

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In the name of God! Amen!
Stand for our Southern rights;
On your side Southern men,
The God of battles fights!
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These songs are examples from a group of songs stating God’s support for one side or the other. How strongly these songs affected soldiers’ beliefs about the war and to what extent the songs strengthened their religious convictions is unknown. That said, it is likely that these songs would have deepened the connection of the war effort to the religious convictions of many men.

Soldiers were not the only ones who had their views reflected and affected by music. Among soldiers and the civilian population, music served as a form of expression of opinions and feelings regarding the war effort. George Frederick Root, a well-known Civil War-era songwriter with Chicago’s Root & Cady publishing firm, described his attitude toward wartime songwriting:

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When anything happened that could be voiced in song, or when the heart of the Nation was moved by particular circumstances or conditions caused by the war, I wrote what I thought would then express the emotions of the soldiers or the people.
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In both the North and the South, this expression of public opinion often promoted the writer’s side, leaders, and cause. While patriotic music was not directly sponsored by the governments of the Union or the Confederacy, the music written by their respective populations generally served to foster support for their side. This rudimentary

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10 Ibid., 81.
12 Spann, “Hymns and the Civil War,” 84.
form of propaganda was twofold: some songs attempted to promote a side in the war and others attempted to vilify the opposition while numerous songs attempted to do both. In a forceful condemnation of the South and promotion of the Union, “The Gallant Soldier” poses the following question:

What demon-fiend of malediction wrought such evils in our land,
When all was pleasure, peace, and plenty work and wages for each man!  

The song “The One Hundred Days’ Man” promotes the lives of soldiers as happy and carefree, and attempts to encourage others to enlist:

Oh, who would not be a soldier gay and free,
And serve the Union cause for awhile--
When honor may be gained, all bloodless and unstained
For a hundred days of service in the land. 

Another Union song, titled “Jeff Davis,” presents the Confederate president (and by proxy, the Confederacy as a whole) as being at fault for numerous problems apparent in the lives of Northerners:

Once I could eat my fill of good meat.
And whiskey galore I could roule into me;
I could strele up and down every street in this town,
With always a quarter to go on a spree.
My clothes they were good, I ne'er thought of wood,
A pig or a spade never entered my mind,
But now I'm in grief since the black-hearted thief
Jeff Davis he brought these hard times unto me. 

While many of these songs of propaganda described the individual experiences of suffering caused by the enemy, many songs also reinforced rhetorical war aims. Union and Confederate music alike asserted each side’s narrative about why the war began and what each side was fighting for. The extremely popular Southern song “The Bonnie Blue Flag,” for example, asserts the notions of an oppressive Northern regime and secession as a defence of liberty:

As long as the Union was faithful in her trust,
Like friends and like brothers we were kind and just;
But now when Northern treachery attempts our rights to mar,
We hoist oe [sic] high the bonnie Blue Flag that bears a single star. 

Unsurprisingly, Union songs reflected conflicting war aims. William Cosgrove’s “Hurra for the Union!” suggests that the Union fights to uphold the Constitution and implies that those in opposition are traitorous:

Our ship's the Constitution, and good patriots, at the helm.
Will bring us into action, and our foes we'll overwhelm.[]

Other Union songs, such as John L. Ziebler's air “John Brown,” conflates the war with the intention to end slavery (or at least, the Slave Power):

Then give a cheer for Freedom's Sons, and for our Country three,
And six for all who are opposed to Negro Slavery. 

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Music clearly served to reinforce each side’s distinct set of motivations in the Civil War. Music emphasized the justifications for war and sought to establish the righteousness of each side. Though the narratives extolled by each side’s music in the Civil War were distinctive, Northern and Southern music shared the purpose of consolidating support for their cause.

While Northern and Southern music shared similar functions, they promoted distinct messages. These differing songs paralleled the North’s and South’s respective values and beliefs. As previously exemplified, the lyrics of Northern songs and the lyrics of Southern songs emphasized different reasons for the purpose of the war. Southern song lyrics emphasized the idea that Southerners were fighting a war to defend their rights, whereas Northern lyrics emphasized the upholding of the Union, as well as emphasizing emancipation later in the war. Southern songs also reaffirmed the idea that slavery was a benevolent institution; according to Caroline Moseley of Princeton University, Southern songs were frequently “peopled with nostalgic blacks who long for plantation life.” Southern songs reflecting Northern and Southern beliefs would have likely acted to reinforce the beliefs already held by the populations of each side.

Songs of the Union and of the Confederacy did not just differ in areas directly relevant to the war; they also reflected broader differences between Northern and Southern culture. Some Southern songs were disdainful of the more mixed immigrant population of the North, calling them ‘impure’ in comparison to the South’s Norman heritage. Additionally, Southern music strongly emphasized the chivalric notion that soldiers were fighting to protect women and home. The Confederacy’s music was “heavy with the rhetoric of chivalry and feudalism, with praise for southern noblemen.” The Southern song “The Merry Little Soldier” includes the following verse:

Pretty maids with arms extended,
For protection loudly call;
We from harm will try to shield ‘em,
Or for them in glory fall.25

Northern songs contained references to protecting maidens, but relied far less on this theme than their Southern counterparts. Northern songs more often derided Southern chivalry, accused the Confederates of treason, and denounced Southerners as cowards. These songs served as a musical counter-argument to the Southern lyrical claim of being the honourable side in the war. The following excerpt from “The Traitors’ Land,” a Northern adaptation of “Dixie,” exemplifies some of these characteristics:

Away down South in the land of Treason,
Where coward souls our forts are seizing—
Look away, look away, look away to the Traitors’ Land!27

Songs containing these messages influenced soldiers’ beliefs about the other side. They served to exacerbate the perception of difference between Union and Confederate populations.

African-Americans emphasized very different themes in their music than did the white populations fighting for either the North or South. Michael C. Cohen’s examination of music authored by ‘contrabands’ – former slaves being held by the Union army as confiscated property prior to the Emancipation Proclamation – reveals several interesting trends in African-American music during the Civil War. Unsurprisingly, contrabands placed great importance on

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23 Ibid., 49.

24 Ibid., 49-52.


the idea that the Civil War was a war to end slavery; even from very early in the war, songs such as “Let My People Go, A Song of the ‘Contrabands’” and “Song of the Negro Boatmen” feature themes of freedom and the end of bondage by military means. African-American music also affected the opinion of the white Northern population. According to Cohen, contraband songs “circulated through the networks of evangelicalism and antislavery to produce meanings sympathetic to emancipation, reconstruction, and the Union.” Songs such as “At Port Royal” helped to bring the issue of abolition to the forefront and to make the freedom of the contrabands a more visible issue.

While music had a number of cultural and ideological functions and effects, songs also had practical applications on the battlefield. As previously discussed, music could motivate soldiers in combat situations and promote bravery and gallantry. Music also had the ability to create consistent responses in a manner similar to muscle memory; commanding officers recognized that playing the same song when soldiers were drilled and when they faced combat situations elicited similar results. James A. Davis describes this reflexive reaction of soldiers to military music: “For the soldier facing combat for the first time, the sound of a familiar tune could trigger responses even when the mind was overcome by fear. For combat veterans, such familiar sounds became another way to wrestle control from their surroundings.”

Another practical application of music in the Civil War was its utility as a communication tool, both on the battlefield and in camp. Music’s ability to quickly and loudly transmit sound across a camp or a battlefield has made it an important component of the experience of the Civil War. Music was used as a means of regulating the daily schedule in camp, as a method of synchronizing marching, and as a tool for transmitting orders on the battlefield. The prevalence of song in military life made music an important part of the lives of many soldiers, who frequently found their military lives dictated by song.

Music also provided a means of gathering information and intelligence regarding enemy forces. Even if one was unable to see the enemy force, one could gain valuable information by listening to their music. At a basic level, listening to the enemy’s music could help one confirm their presence, as well as determine their direction and approximate distance. The presence of a band typically indicated a relatively large enemy force, with a correlation existing between the size of the band and the number of troops. Listening to the enemy’s band(s), therefore, acted as a form of reconnaissance. Musical information was observed at the Battle of Shiloh by the Confederates, and provided Union forces with additional information during the Confederate assault into Missouri in late 1864.

With both sides realizing the utility of listening to each other’s music, each faction occasionally created musical diversions to misinform the other. Some examples of musical diversions and deceptions included using music to create false troop movements, suggest the arrival of additional troops, and imply that one’s force was larger than it actually was. Although it is difficult to assess how great an impact this musical observation and subsequent deception had on the outcomes of battles, that it was a factor on the battlefield at all is another reason music was an important component of the experience of the Civil War.

Of course, the popularity of music during the Civil War directly affected the writers and publishers who produced music, as well as the musicians who played the music. Musicians during the war represented a reasonably large group of people. For much of the war, each brigade was (at least theoretically) assigned a twenty-four piece band. In practice, many of these bands did not operate at full strength, making it hard to establish concrete counts. Band

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29 Ibid., 286.

30 Ibid., 281-282. “At Port Royal” is partially a song and partially a poem.

31 Davis, “Music and Gallantry During the American Civil War,” 152.

32 Ibid.


34 Ibid., 88-90.


36 Ibid., 97-99.
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members varied from highly skilled and professional (such as Gilmore’s 24th Massachusetts Band, one of the well-known regimental bands that went on to be popular after the war), to unskilled and amateur. Some individuals who were morally opposed to killing joined regimental bands, which presented a means of serving their side without having to fight. The 26th North Carolina Band, for example, was composed of a group of Moravian pacifists. It is also possible that inexperienced musicians sought service in bands as a means of avoiding danger. Although bands were known to suffer casualties during the war, the status of musicians as non-combatants meant they were less likely to be placed in dangerous scenarios.  

One result of regimental bands was the inclusion of children in the Civil War. Children would often serve in musical roles in support of the army, taking up positions such as regimental buglers and drummers. Although some teenagers joined the army while underage, the participation of child musicians extended participation in the Civil War to much younger children than were cleared for regular military service. In this case, Civil War music created military positions for children that exposed them directly and immediately to the horrors of war, which would otherwise have been avoided.

The Civil War also affected the music industry by creating additional work for songwriters, publishers, and lyricists. The production of patriotic music became a highly successful and lucrative industry for those involved. Root & Cady, a successful music publishing firm, claimed to have produced over 258,000 pieces of sheet music and close to 100,000 books of music in 1863 alone. George Frederick Root, author of many popular Root & Cady wartime songs, wrote in his autobiography that “the growth of our business after the war commenced was something considerable. The name Root & Cady went all over the land on our war songs.” Although not every publisher saw the same level of growth, the war provided an increased market for patriotic music and an opportunity for significant profit.

The music publishing industry was more active in the North than in the South, due to a greater number of publishers with a greater capacity for production. This productive paradigm provides a partial explanation for why it was significantly more common for songs initially composed in the North to be used in the South (with rewritten lyrics) than the reverse. Though many songwriters and publishers were driven (at least partly) by patriotism to produce this music, some saw it solely as a means for making profit. Harry McCarthy, who wrote the lyrics to several popular Confederate songs including “The Bonnie Blue Flag,” intentionally evaded the Confederate draft and ran away to Pennsylvania in 1864.

Music had a large number of functions and impacts for both sides during the American Civil War. Examining Civil War music is more than the study of entertainment; the music conveys a wealth of information about the thoughts, feelings, and opinions held by those who experienced the war. This music helped soldiers to cope with war, motivated them to continue the fight, and provided an avenue for expressing feelings regarding the war. Music affected the mental states of soldiers, had battlefield applications as a tool for the respective militaries, and reflected and reinforced the population’s religious and patriotic beliefs. The lives of many individuals, such as musicians and those employed within the music industry, were directly affected by the proliferation of music during this period. Many Civil War songs remain well-known in the American population today, from the recurring melody of “Dixie” in The Dukes of Hazzard and Elvis Presley’s 1956 adaptation of “Aura Lee” into “Love Me Tender,” to the familiar tunes of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.” The fact that many of these songs have remained memorable for so long is a testament to their strong cultural meaning, their powerful emotional impact, and their ability to entertain.

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38 Ibid., 192-193.
40 Root, The Story of a Musical Life, 139-140.
42 Ibid.

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