

The Music of the Street*

Brian Flora

As a collector of organ-related material, I am particularly fond of vintage magazine and newspaper articles about organ grinders. Seldom written from the point of view of the itinerant performer, these articles reflect the social and political climate of the times.

Should you think that the life of the itinerant organ grinder in the “good old days” was romantic, just read the following bigoted article. Try to visualize the organ grinder's life along with the smell of horse manure in the streets! What a treat...

It certainly requires a very considerable quantity and a very brilliant quality of imagination to see any poetry in the life of a street organ grinder. And yet, easy and idle as the life appears to be, it is by no manner of means all sunshine.

The able-bodied organ-grinders of New York are nearly all Italians, who have left their native hillsides with strange ideas of this blessed land of liberty, and reaching here are very much astonished to hear the first official authority in the land declare that “freedom means the liberty to work,” and that men actually have to work for their daily bread. Naturally they seize upon pursuits that require no previous preparation or acquaintance with the language, and become either fruit-dealers, image-peddlers, or organ-grinders—generally the latter.



It has long been a custom both here and in Europe for speculative Italians to induce their countrymen to emigrate by paying their passage and loaning them organs for street music. The conditions are that a certain sum shall be brought home nightly, the over-plus being retained by the employee. This business has been conducted in past years with great success, and has in many instances realized moderate fortunes.

In this city there are establishments also where organs are loaned for about twenty-five cents a day, to itinerants, who often realize from two to three dollars daily by their use.

All these people are apt, on arrival, to betake themselves to the vicinity of the Five Points, where both sexes, to the number often of a dozen or more, occupy promiscuously one room, and sleep in an atmosphere of dirt, grease, and onions, mingled with the fumes of bodies more or less diseased. The floor, or a thin, filthy mattress, is their only bedding, with a covering either of their day-clothes or a ragged blanket of the most repulsive kind.

In the hot nights of summer they fly from this atmosphere of vermin and suffocation to the roof, while their fellow-lodgers, Irish and colored, resort to the carts lying in the street or to the sidewalk. Sometime for a brief hour of prosperity they escape from these purlieus, but oftener they have no roof of any sort under or on which to seek shelter or cooling breezes.

But everybody does not look on the subject in this sentimental light, as witness one of our poets on the same subject, but in a very different strain:

Yes, the war-whoops of the Indian may produce a pleasant thrill
When they're mellowed by a distance that one feels increasing still;
And the shrilling of the whistle from the steamer's brazen snout
May have minor tones of music, though I haven't found them out.

In the orchestra of Nature - in the wind, the wave, the cloud -
There are harmonies unnumbered, though the style is rather “loud”.
Nay, I'm willing to acknowledge that, throughout the realms of sound
With one dreadful reservation - there may melody be found.

But oh, human fellow-creatures, of the cheering faith possessed
That there lurks a charm in music to beguile the savage breast,
Now I put it to you meekly, did there ever bosom beat
With a throb of joy responsive to the Music of the Street?

Did you ever know a brother, whether civilized or wild,
From the pale-faced son of Europe to the dusky Africa child,
Who could find a charm of music in the strangulatory wheeze
That is twisted from the organ of the nomad Genoese?

Was there ever human tympan so inveterately hard
That it was not wrenched with torture by the strolling Savoyard,
When with grimy little talons he is plucking at the sharp,
Tintinnabulating catgut of his wretched little harp?

Ah! No wonder fabled Orpheus moved the stolid rocks and trees,
If his efforts “held a candle” to such fearful ones as these;
Nor that Pluto, in the anguish of his music-troubled sleep,
Sent Eurydice to stop him, and believed the bargain cheap.

Up and down the highways gathered in a heaven-ascending pyre,
Should those dreadful organs perish in a holocaust of fire,
And if any swarthy beggar thenceforth broke the rest of sound
I would grind him by the Powers, finer than the tunes he ground!

Additional images and information about the history of the street organ are available at the web site, www.floraco.com/organs.

*Harper's Weekly, October 26, 1867 (in the Flora & Company Collection)

After careers in radio, advertising, and performance art, mid-life crisis resulted in Brian Flora becoming an organ builder. Married to Jan, his child bride of 31 years, with two extraordinary children, Brian builds a variety of street and chamber organs in the high mountain desert.