

## Score Review

Lars Helgert, ed., *Herrman S. Saroni, Complete Songs 1844–1889*. Recent Researches in American Music, vol. 91. Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2023, 197 + xlii. \$425.00

Herrman Saroni, an 1844 German immigrant to the United States, consistently contributed to music criticism and journalism circles and generated original compositions. Some of these compositions can still be found scattered through collections of music that have survived from the period. Lars Helgert's new addition to the A-R Editions' Recent Researches in American Music (vol. 91), provides a compilation of Saroni's songs from 1844 to 1889. The publication shows the typical attention to detail we expect in the Recent Researches series. The annotations on the texts, including representative frontispieces where the lithography and publication information are striking, are particularly noteworthy.

Helgert's introduction gives fresh and pointed attention to those features in American sheet music we often presume to be evident or of lesser importance – a particular strength of the volume. Here we also find the context of Saroni's experience in the United States: Helgert weaves a tapestry of the struggles of publishing immigrant and American musicians. What becomes apparent in the material is that Saroni was an accomplished composer in the German style, while also being keenly aware of the trends of the time and country he now inhabited. Saroni termed the Germanic aspects of compositions artistic merit. Helgert compares these 'artistic' aspects with the facets of Saroni's music that are more representative of a drive for commercial success, ascribed as American traits. In doing so, Helgert extends his earlier work on Saroni and lists the attributes of Saroni's music that fall into these 'artistic' vs 'commercial' considerations (xii).<sup>1</sup> This list of features (complex harmonic language, text expression devices, voice-leading and expressive and varied piano accompaniments in contrast to popular lyric authors, modest technical difficulty, syllabic settings and strophic form) is an example of the immediately accessible information that increases the scholarly value of this publication.

Helgert also forays into the slippery and difficult world of sheet music as a business in the United States. Publishing houses, much to the dismay of researchers, largely do not have archives, nor have libraries received business records about publishing houses. We know, anecdotally, how difficult publishing was for composers, but this is largely on a case-by-case basis and includes whatever slight mention might be found in individual correspondence (often not from the publishing house side or on any year-after-year basis).<sup>2</sup> Helgert's bibliography in this section is valuable and draws together resources in new ways to help us consider industry conditions and make comparisons with European publishing subsidies. While this

<sup>1</sup> See also Lars Helgert, 'Herrman S. Saroni: Paths to Success as a Composer in New York', *American Music* 40/2 (2022): 141–79.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Deane Root, 'Performing Foster', *Music, American Made: Essays in Honor of John Graziano* (Sterling Heights: Harmonie Park Press, 2011), 285 and 1870 Board of Music Trade, *Complete Catalogue of Sheet Music and Musical Works*, ed. Dena Epstein (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).

is primarily in the section on 'The Business of Sheet Music in America' (xi), other nuggets of information are spread throughout, including that composers were paid based on their page count; and that Saroni therefore put music to each strophe rather than engaging in the more common practice of listing subsequent texts to the verse after all the music. Helgert points out that Saroni's changes to the verses were cursory and designed merely 'to increase his payment' ('Text Expression', xv).

Saroni's own words on music are often cited, which serves to foreground the composer's journalistic and critical stances into the present analysis of his compositions. This edition of Saroni's songs is not the place for a full exegesis of Saroni's musical writings. A weakness of the volume is that the popularity of Saroni's critical commentary, found in *Saroni's Musical Times*, is only to be surmised by the number of references to that journal. Citing from Saroni's writings, Helgert hints at Saroni's other musical career, that of writing about music, in the discussion of influences on Saroni's style – namely Robert Schumann, Friedrich Schneider, and Carl Loewe – by utilizing Saroni's writings ('Influences', xxvii–xx). While this is deeply contextualized information, it does not give a sense of how far afield *Saroni's Musical Times* was read. Articles by Saroni are still widely available and can be found clipped into bound collections, suggesting the scope of Saroni's influence may have been as much, if not more, in theoretical and pedagogical areas than in composition.<sup>3</sup>

A place in which Helgert excels is informed and inferred biography. Some aspects of the composer's life cannot be fully confirmed. Of particular note here is that many nineteenth-century texts on Saroni mention a connection to Felix Mendelssohn. This has been continued into contemporary scholarship and is attributed to Saroni himself.<sup>4</sup> Helgert finds this connection unpersuasive, while noting how significant German Lieder styles were to Saroni. The Mendelssohn connection is significant given the lack of prominent interest in German Lied in the United States, in favour of English-language songs and ballads.<sup>5</sup> Mendelssohn was well known and lauded for his instrumental works. Any reference to him would necessarily have increased a composer's stature and 'pedigree'. Another intriguing aspect of the biography ripe for further research is Saroni's travel when he was not residing in New York. Helgert's mention of Saroni in Nashville in the 1850s parallels that in research by Maeve Nagel-Frazel on the Nashville sojourn of violinist Camilla Urso. The two studies suggest that a network of immigrant musicians may have been more connected than previously understood in places remote from New York. However, it is unlikely that Saroni and Urso were in Tennessee at the same time.<sup>6</sup> Looking at the nexus of musical people beyond the cultural centres of New York and Boston, and concurrent East-Coast-centric scholarship, enriches our understanding of how expansive musical life was in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> The collection of Emma Battell from Vermont, for example, includes an article by Saroni on musical conventions and her notes on the article. Swift – Stewart – Battell Music Collection, Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, Middlebury, Vermont.

<sup>4</sup> David Urrows, 'Herrman S. Saroni (ca. 1824–1901) and the "First" American Operetta', *Society for American Music Bulletin*, 34/1 (2008): 9–11.

<sup>5</sup> See Heather Platt, *Lieder in America: On Stages and in Parlors* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Maeve Nagel-Frazel, *Becoming Camilla Urso: A Female Celebrity Violinist and the Transformation of American Musical Culture*, Undergraduate thesis, University of Denver, [https://digitalcommons.du.edu/undergraduate\\_theses/12/](https://digitalcommons.du.edu/undergraduate_theses/12/).

The bulk of this volume is, naturally, the edited songs of Saroni. The volume reads as a sampling of the favoured topics and styles of parlour music in the mid to late century in the United States. Topics include the expected works on grief ('The Child's First Grief'), love ('I've Thought of Thee, Dearest!'), family ('Thou Art Welcome Dearest Sister'), nostalgia for homes far away or times gone past, and exotic locations or people. For someone living in the United States at the height of Civil War, Saroni's music would have been a means of respite. Thus, not surprisingly, there is only one Civil War song included ('Camp Troubles! Hark the Bugle Resounds'). Publishing information per sheet is also detailed in the Critical Report (pp. 175–186).

The songs run a broad spectrum not merely by topic but also by characteristics. 'The Child's First Grief' meets the expectations of many parlour works: a clear, strophic song in D minor with accessible harmonic writing, narrow vocal and dynamic range with no ornamentation. 'The Gipsy of the North' is also in D minor, but contrasts in its inclusion of multiple tempo shifts, chromaticism, and virtuosic runs in the piano and voice. 'The Saw Mill' lies between the two in terms of difficulty and musical interest. A fun and unexpected inclusion is the appendix, comprised of the sole manuscript-only song by Saroni known to be extant, 'Leave it With Him'.

This edited volume of Saroni songs is a valuable inclusion in the Recent Researches series. Helgert acknowledges that Saroni is one of history's forgotten composers whose music still represents what he terms 'distinguished' quality (ix). In a world of scholarship in which many question the existence or necessity of the canon, this volume brings into relief a living working musician who engaged in the daily economic necessities of the culture and profession with which he aligned. History is richer when we look beyond the well-known names in Europe and the United States to understand musical culture.<sup>7</sup> Helgert brings Saroni's representation of life as a musician-composer in the mid-nineteenth century into bold relief through his biographical detail, industry information, and song repertory exposition.

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<sup>7</sup> Earlier Recent Researches volumes have looked at plenty of other composers well known in their own time but lesser known now, including Rayner Taylor (vol. 43), George Root (vols. 9–10), and Clara Kathleen Rogers (vol. 42), alongside those more immediately recognizable, such as George Chadwick (vols. 28, 55, 58, 60) and Amy Beach (vols. 32, 57, 84).