The Midway’s most lucrative attraction at the Wold's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the Street in Cairo, featuring the belly dancer Little Egypt. Its most notorious, however, was the Dahomeyan Village, featuring scantily clad Africans with swords and spears dancing to drums and bells. Americans, commented the Chicago Tribune, were thus afforded “an unequalled opportunity to compare themselves scientifically with others . . . tracing humanity in its highest phases down almost to its animalistic origins.” The Dahomeyans were “blacker than buried midnight and as degraded as the animals which prowl the jungles of their dark land,” reported Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly. “In these wild people we easily detect many characteristics of the American negro.” J. M. Buell, in his guidebook The Magic City, further observed, “They have apparently relaxed none of their horrible customs, among which cannibalism is chief.” He categorized the Dahomeyans as “a strong athletic people, possessing much cunning, and considerable intelligence.” Like the Inuits, Indians, Tartars, and tattooed Polynesians similarly on display, they helped Americans “better to appreciate the blessings of Christian civilization and the loving direction and guidance of God.”

From these gawking perspectives, Henry Edward Krehbiel stood apart. Assessing the Dahomeyan war dances, he reported:

The harmony was a tonic major triad broken up rhythmically in a most intricate and amazingly ingenious manner. The instruments were tuned with excellent justness. . . . The players showed the most remarkable rhythmical sense and skill that ever came under my notice. Berlioz in his supremest efforts with his army of drummers produced nothing to compare in artistic interest with the harmonious drumming of these savages. The fundamental effect was a combination of double and triple time, the former kept by the singers, the latter by the drummers, but it is impossible to convey the idea of the wealth of detail achieved by the drummers by means of exchange of the rhythms, syncopation of both simultaneously, and dynamic devices.

This observation, recalling the Exposition, occurs in Krehbiel's Afro-American Folksongs of 1914. Reporting directly from Chicago in 1893, he devoted three substantial New York Tribune dispatches exclusively to matters Native American. Presented by Putnam’s assistant Franz Boas, a group of Kwakiutl Indians from Vancouver Island offered a series of Winter dances. Krehbiel used a phonograph – a novelty he had already employed among the Iroquois of Ontario, in whose songs he had documented the use of micro-intervals – to record and transcribe their music. Like “most savage or semi-civilized peoples,” he reported in a 2,700-word Tribune article with musical examples,
the Kwakiutls made “ingenious use of contrasted rhythms.” He cited a “Hamatsa song” in duple rhythm, accompanied in triple meter – “a common phenomenon in primitive music, but one that is rare in the highly developed Occidental art.” Though his reportage is of its time – no one today would attribute to the Iroquois “so much nobility of character and real moral and intellectual gentleness” in contradistinction to “the lowest African and South Sea savages,” or observe races passing “in their progress toward civilization” – Krehbiel’s spirit of disinterested inquiry has not dated. His circumnavigatory prose, serene in its slow disclosure of direction and purpose, conveys such fresh intelligence as this overview of the Midway experience:

Here fraud and humbug are rich, and “fakirs” of all kinds ply their vocation with so much impudence that the spectacle at last becomes almost amiable. The kaleidoscopic pleasure ground in classified under the head of Ethnology, however, and even if one be inclined to smile at the stamp of scientific dignity thus impressed upon it, a little reflection shows that it all depends on the visitor whether or not its significance shall by summed up in the antics of the “fakirs.” It is easy to make a field for scientific study even out of the Midway Plaisance.³

The ponderous eloquence of Krehbiel’s leisurely sentences and paragraphs, majestically imparting content ever acute and often fervent, mirrored the outward and inward propensities of Krehbiel the man. His pontifical tone and vast learning made him the acknowledged “dean” of New York City’s music critics. He stood tall, broad-shouldered, and erect. Both his complexion and rebellious curly hair were ruddy. In luxurious girth, he was commonly observed to resemble William Howard Taft. He was also observed, by Max Smith of the American, flushed “with indignation when his ideal were trampled upon,” and with eyes filled “with tears when they were realized.” When in later life Krehbiel taught at New York’s Institute of Musical Arts (later the Juilliard School), he would weep with emotion at the lectern.⁴ The tonnage of words he weekly committed to print could rise to epic heights of effusive advocacy.

Krehbiel’s head was weighted, and his heart suffused, with German learning and German music. It was from German art and from Richard Wagner – a contemporary pinnacle -- that Krehbiel absorbed the notion that great music is nationally specific – that culture and race are bound inextricably. He assiduously documented the folk music of Jews, Slavs, Magyars, Scandinavians, and Russians. He hence understood high art not as an elite hereditary privilege, rarified and obscure, but as an emanation of folk customs admired without discriminatory qualm. “The more the world comes to realize how deep and intimate are the springs from which the emotional element of music flows,” he believed, “the more fully will it recognize that originality and power in the composer rest upon the use of dialects and idioms which are national or racial in origin and structure.”⁵ This mode of thought, democratically poised, supported another lifelong line of inquiry – into “America.”

It follows that “Indians” most enticed Krehbiel in Chicago, and that he wrote his landmark book on plantation song. Though his notion that black Americans were inherently “musical” is dated, Krehbiel’s awakening to folk song, with its assiduous attention to details of rhythm and mode, was anything but quaint. And whatever he may have made of races in more ”primitive” times, he did not set Anglo-Saxons above Slavs
and other contemporary ethnic groupings; an egalitarian spirit of tolerance infuses his researches. A typical piece of Krehbiel advice was his urging that Jewish composers explore such synagogue tunes as "Kol nidre" and "An Hamelech"; equally typical was his scholarly awareness that cantors in Vienna, Paris, and Munich had used "traditional melodies in their settings of Hebrew services." His conviction that slave songs struck a deeper chord than other indigenous musical strains partly reflects the more belated discovery of Anglo-American folksong. And yet Krehbiel was aware of the Appalachian findings of Cecil Sharp and other collectors. His continued allegiance to Negro melodies was ultimately an allegiance of the heart.

* * *

Krehbiel’s quest for American roots was partly a product of his own tangled roots as a self-made German-American polymath. Like other children of immigrants – unlike the Boston Brahmins with whom he joustet over issues of national identity – he felt the need to investigate what it meant to be American. Born in Ann Arbor in 1854, he grew up speaking English and German with equal fluency (and later acquired a reading knowledge of French, Italian, Russian, and Latin). He studied law in Cincinnati, where his father, a Methodist preacher, settled in 1864 (and where young Henry conducted the church choir), but wound up a reporter and critic for the Cincinnati Gazette; his assignments included baseball games, for which he invented a new method of scoring.

New York – in which city Krehbiel joined the staff of the Tribune in 1880 – was as of 1890 27 per cent “German” according to the country-of-birth–of-mother criterion used by the Census Bureau. With Vienna and Berlin, its Kleindeutschland, situated within the Lower East Side, was one of three capitals of the German-speaking world. The late nineteenth century influence and prestige of German learning and culture in the United States generally, and in New York especially, is a story yet to be adequately told – and one in which Krehbiel was a prime mover.

An insatiable autodidact in the American manner, Krehbiel was self-taught in music, and taught himself well. He edited collections of songs and arias and was American editor of the second edition of Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians. He translated opera librettos from German and French. He lectured regularly and gave private lessons. He completed the first English language edition of Thayer’s monumental life of Beethoven. He wrote a dozen books. In addition to Afro-American Folksongs, these include a two-volume history of opera in America (unsurpassed by any subsequent study), the earliest history of the New York Philharmonic (for which he served as program annotator), a probing exploration of Wagnerian music drama, a survey of music for the piano, and – for laymen – a Book of Operas (in two volumes) and How to Listen to Music (reprinted 30 times). The purposes of this output ranged from refined intellectual pleasure to robust pedagogy and advocacy.

Krehbiel took for granted his esteemed membership in a community of artists. Before radio and television, automobiles and airplanes, telephones and emails, the restaurant or club, sidewalk, streetcar, or parlor were daily appliances of communication and transportation. At the finest hotel restaurants, the “free lunch counter” furnished hearty meals, for a five cent tip, to all who purchased a cocktail, beer, or milk-and-seltzer. Artists and newspapermen there intermingled with businessmen and lawyers. At night,
Union Square was a Germanic cultural hub, with Luchow’s and Fleischmann’s, Steinway Hall and the Academy of Music. Elsewhere, the Lotus Club or Metropolitan Club informally hosted the musical elite. The prodigious liquid intake of Albert Niemann, the greatest Tristan of his day, the imperious conviviality of his Metropolitan Opera Isolde, Lilli Lehmann, the spontaneous communal fiddling or pianism of a Eugene Ysaye or Rafael Joseffy – these were not exceptional spectacles, but a representative species of public banter.

In such a jostling milieu, a music critic’s role was participatory. William J. Henderson of the *Times* kept a weekend salon; he also wrote librettos (including one for Walter Damrosch’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, given by the Metropolitan Opera), poems, biographies, and a novel, and taught both at the College of Music and Institute of Musical Art. Reginald DeKoven of the *World* was a successful composer of operettas. The silver-tongued James Gibbons Huneker, a café raconteur as legendary as Falstaff, taught and administered at the National Conservatory, wrote short stories and a novel, and entertained a loyal yet irreverent coterie when not reviewing concerts, plays, novels, and paintings for a variety of newspapers and magazines. The melee of voices (many of them German), of some 40 daily newspapers and of rival weekly music journals, countenanced tacit critical alliances and open journalistic wars, blatant bias and potent feats of opinion-making frankly informed by intimate knowledge of persons and institutions.

Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the dominant musician in New York City during the final decades of the nineteenth -- the conductor Anton Seidl -- forged a close friendship with Henry Krehbiel. In the context of Wagnerism -- a dominant leitmotif of American cultural life in the 1880s and 1890s -- Seidl and Krehbiel furnish complementary studies of German-American identity in late nineteenth-century New York: the larger subject matter of the present portrait of the pre- eminent music critic of fin-de-siecle America.

* * *

Krehbiel was a habitue of Fleischmann’s, Luchow’s, and other watering hotels of the Union Square vicinity. In conversation, he was known to be jovial, witty, far less formal than in print. With Huneker, who called him “Harry,” he enjoyed a long and warm friendship notwithstanding the hiatus between Krehbiel’s allegiance to the Classical/Romantic past and Huneker’s espousal of the proto-modernist future; in one 1904 letter, Huneker was moved to avow, “I confess nothing would wound me more than the loss of your affection or respect.” Richard Aldrich, who worked under Krehbiel at the *Tribune* before succeeding Henderson at the *Times*, wrote that Krehbiel “brooked little opposition”; Aldrich also wrote, “He made himself easily the first of American critics in the soundness of his judgment [and] his deep and comprehensive knowledge.” Aldrich was one of many junior critics to testify to Krehbiel’s patriarchal courtesy and kindness. Gilbert Gabriel of the *Sun* felt privileged “to share the imposing geniality of a huge, handsome old gentleman with a leonine man and a red ribbon in the buttonhole of his Prince Albert.” According to Deems Taylor of the *World*: “Most of us who saw him... night after night called him ‘Pop’ and thought of him as ‘Pop.’”

In 1887, Krehbiel visited Anton Seidl’s East 62nd Street brownstone, to observe Albert Niemann (whom he would come to regard as the supreme singing actor of his day)
learning the role of Siegfried, in *Gotterdammerung*.

The two men sat at a table with the open score before them. Seidl beat time to the inaudible orchestral music, and Niemann sang *sans* support of any kind. Then would come discussion of readings, markings of cues, etc., all with indescribable gravity, while Frau Seidl-Krauss . . . sat sewing in a corner. After the performance of the drama, I sat again with Niemann and Seidl over cigars and beer. 8

Seidl was the beacon light of musical New York – Krehbiel’s model of cultural leadership, marrying the New and Old Worlds. Born in Budapest in 1850, he had served as Wagner’s Bayreuth amanuensis in his early twenties and went on to precocious fame as a master Wagnerite conductor. In Manhattan, he was chief conductor at the Met beginning in 1885. When a boxholders’ rebellion put an end to seven seasons of German opera, he became conductor of the New York Philharmonic.

Known in New York as “Die grosse Schwieger” (“The great silent one”), Seidl was Krehbiel’s antipode in personality. “When Seidl was silent you could almost hear him thinking,” Huneker quipped; Krehbiel early on observed in him “a singular combination of youth, perspicacity, calm and inflexible determination and strength of character . . . a countenance which has behind it a huge reserve force.” Nor was Seidl the scholar that Krehbiel made himself become; rather he was, as Krehbiel put it, “an empiric.” Drawing on the Michigan experiences of his circuit-riding father, Krehbiel further observed:

In [Seidl], impulse dominated reflection, emotion shamed logic. It was much to his advantage that he came among an impressionable people with the prestige of a Wagnerian oracle and archon, and much to the advantage of the cult to which he was devoted that he made the people “experience” the lyric dramas of his master in the same sense that a good Methodist “experiences” religion, rather than to “like” them. 9

It was a crucial point of pride and endearment that Seidl the confirmed Wagnerite swiftly became a confirmed American. He took American citizenship, spoke (fractured) English, disliked being addressed as “Herr,” purchased a summer home in the Catskills, and extolled American freedoms. His silence notwithstanding, he rode the streetcar, dined at Fleishmann’s, and was recognized at sight everywhere he went. He testified that New York had the highest concentration of expert orchestral musicians of any city in the world. He eagerly supported the American composer, and influentially championed Edward MacDowell (whose music he preferred to Brahms) and Victor Herbert (whose Second Cello Concerto he premiered, with Herbert – his frequent assistance conductor or principal cellist – as soloist). With Krehbiel, he was a prime participant in the American Composers Concerts movement. He told Krehbiel that Wagner himself (having once talked of emigrating to the “fertile and more helpful soil” of the United States 10) had anointed him his New World emissary. Seidl’s most famous trans-Atlantic precursors – an Anton Rubinstein or Hans von Bulow – had feverishly criss-crossed the young nation and returned home with fistfulls of cash. No European musician of comparable eminence had ever come to the United States and stayed. Seidl’s commitment to New York was
validating.

And Seidl, man and artist, radiated integrity. Krehbiel esteemed him as a pure vessel of enlightenment, a purging agent who inspired a new ripeness of reception: listeners who held their applause in thrall to deep musical and dramatic currents, not “easily pleased or attracted by curiosity alone” but predisposed to a “keen and lofty enjoyment.” When, craving the glamour of expensive Italian and French voices, the Met’s boxholders (who were also shareholders) announced the termination of German opera, the entrenched Wagner audience greeted the final 1890-91 performance with 30 minutes of applauding, cheering, and stamping; only the appearance of workmen breaking down the sets persuaded the crowd go home. Krehbiel tabulated box office receipts to refute claims that Wagner had lost popularity. He deplored the forfeiture of a reformist audience “with intelligent tastes and warm affections,” and flung this denunciation at the house’s new operators: “The fickleness of public taste, the popular craving for sensation, the egotism and rapacity of the artists, the lack of high purpose in the promoters, the domination of fashion instead of love for art, the lack of real artistic culture – all these things have stood from the beginning, as they still stand, in the way of a permanent foundation for opera in New York.”

* * *

As Wagner’s American prophet – a role he maintained as the city’s busiest symphonic conductor and frequent visitor at the Met – Seidl embodied a Wagnerism fortified with moral fiber at every turn. Krehbiel’s influence on the American Wagner movement, pedagogical or oracular, was scarcely less significant: he was the voluble Aaron to Seidl’s taciturn Moses. These were years in which the Ring of the Nibelung, Tristan und Isolde, and Die Meistersinger received first American performances. “The critic should be the mediator between the musician and the public,” Krehbiel wrote in How to Listen to Music. “For all new works he should do what the symphonists of the Liszt school attempt to do by means of programmes; he should excite curiosity, arouse interest, and pave the way to popular comprehension. But for the old he should not fail to encourage reverence and admiration.”

The same book also includes this remarkable directive: “The newspaper now fills the place in the musician’s economy which a century ago was filled in Europe by the courts and nobility. Its support, indirect as well as direct, replaces the patronage which erstwhile came from these powerful ones.” Addressing the Wagner operas new to America, Krehbiel told his readers how Wagner culled his librettos from myth and literature, how music was applied to the stories, how the operas played at the Met under Seidl’s baton. Explicating the sources of the Ring, Krehbiel ranged effortlessly among Greek, Roman, Norse, Egyptian, Hindu, and Persian sources. He also cited J. G. Hahn’s Sagwissenschaftliche Studien, which extrapolated “a formula according to which the families belonging to the Aryan race have constructed their most admired tales.” For Tristan, he surveyed English versions by Thomas Malory, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, and Swinburne as well as Gottfried von Strassburg’s thirteenth century epic poem (and a later edition of the same by Sir Walter Scott). He pertinently noted the etymology of “Tristan” (from triste) and stressed how Wagner’s deviations from all previous variants heightened the story and its characters. Addressing Die Meistersinger, he knew which
Hans Sachs songs were authentic and which were not. He shared, in detail, a master song by Sachs with words by Pogner (also in Wagner’s opera) “which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been printed or written about.”

Krehbiel’s interpretive exegeses of these operas (in additional Tribune articles) were wholly his own. For contemporary European commentators, the Wagner operas were shadowed by Schopenhauerean gloom or scented with a decadent sensualism; they brandished socialist polemics or nihilistic abandon. For Krehbiel, as for Americans generally, Wagner was about uplift. He did not attend to the Germanic nationalism of Die Meistersinger – arguably tainted by anti-Semitism – or to the weary pessimism of Sachs’s “Wahn!” monologue. Rather, he reveled in this opera’s Shakespearean “delineation of character” and added: “although its fun is a little brutal (as becomes the place and period with which the play deals), it is not at all malicious, and is always morally healthy.” As for the Ring, with its ambivalent ending: “Wagner’s ethical conception seems to be that the era of selfishness and greed of power and gold gives place to an era of the domination of love.” The downfall of the gods is “a just and righteous necessity,” “a stupendous deal of morality.” Of Siegfried (the third of the Ring operas), he wrote:

There is something peculiarly sympathetic to our people in the character of the chief personages of the drama. In their rude forcefulness and freedom from restrictive conventions they might be said to be representative of the American people. They are so full of that vital energy which made us a nation. . . . Siegfried is a prototype, too, of the American people in being an unspoiled nature. He looks at the world through glowing eyes that have not grown accustomed to the false and meretricious.

(Frederick Jackson Turner’s popular “frontier thesis” of 1893 – five years subsequent to the Krehbiel passage cited above – argued that the pioneer’s arduous westward route forged an American type combining “coarseness,” “strength,” “inquisitiveness” a “practical inventive turn of mind,” a “restless, nervous energy,” a “buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom.” He is in fact Wagner’s Siegfried scrutinized through rosy American lenses.)

Where in Tristan and Parsifal Krehbiel was confronted with inescapable evidence of darker Wagner truths, he did not soft-pedal (as other American commentators did). Tristan and Isolde pursue their carnal passion in violation of Tristan’s knightly duty to convey Isolde as bride to King Marke. Their tidal surrender thrilled and discomfited Krehbiel: he is the very bellwether of unjaded Gilded Age intensities. At the Met, he witnessed his companion, an experienced actress, “grow faint and almost swoon” when Niemann, as Tristan, ecstatically tore the bandages from his bloody wound. The reticent New York response to this erotically crazed gesture – which Niemann did not repeat at subsequent New York performances – gauged the uncontrolled excitement it inflamed. Wagner, Krehbiel wrote of Tristan, should never devolve into “a mere sensual indulgence.” “Reflection and comparison,” conditioned by recognition of “the themes and their uses,” should modulate the experience. Music may directly attack feeling, “but it is chiefly by association of ideas that we recognize its expressiveness of significance.”

If this warning connects with New England Puritan strains, it equally connects with
Friedrich Nietzsche, who decried Wagner “as a danger.”

One walks into the sea, gradually loses one’s secure footing, and finally surrenders oneself to the elements without reservation: one must *swim*. In older music, what one had to do . . . was something quite different, namely, to *dance*. The measure required for this, the maintenance of certainly equally balanced units of time and force, demanded continual *wariness* of the listener’s soul – and on the counterplay of this cooler breeze that came from wariness and the warm breath of enthusiasm rested the magic of all *good* music. Richard Wagner wanted a different kind of movement; he overthrew the physiological presupposition of previous music. Swimming, floating – no longer walking and dancing. 17

Nietzsche, the German, sensed the risk of an emotional totalitarianism. Krehbiel, being German-American, sensed risks not societal but personal.

Krehbiel’s Wagner articles spawned his book-length *Studies in the Wagnerian Drama*. Seidl toured widely with the Met and with his own orchestra. The Wagner movement was national, a dominant factor in general intellectual discourse during the closing decades of the century, when – as any perusal of the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s*, and other genteel periodicals will confirm -- classical music was a cultural common denominator more favored than the visual or theater arts, a mark of breeding more necessary to Americans than at any time since. Henry Adams attended *Götterdämmerung* in New York and reported “paroxysms of nervous excitement.” Albert Pinkham Ryder went for two days without sleep or food, painting “Siegfried and the Rhine Maidens” following his New York *Götterdämmerung* experience of 1888. W. E. B. Du Bois knew the sorcery of *Lohengrin*. For Robert Ingersoll – the “great agnostic,” the most popular orator of his day – Wagner told “of all there is in life” and touched “the longings of hopes of every heart.” George Curtis and Richard Watson Gilder, who as editors of *Harper’s Weekly* and *Century* Magazine helped to shape the life of the American mind – were both supporters of the Wagner cause. 18 Grover Cleveland attended the 1890 “*Parsifal* entertainment” at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, libretto in hand.

Women comprised a special precinct of American Wagnerism. Willa Cather, whose *The Song of the Lark* is partly inspired by the Wagner soprano Olive Fremstad, unforgottably wrote of Kundry, in *Parsifal*: “She is a summary of the history of womankind. [Wagner] sees in her an instrument of temptation, of salvation, and of service; but always an instrument, a thing driven and employed.” For M. Carey Thomas, the founding dean and, in 1894, second president of Bryn Mawr College, Wagner anchored an impassioned inner self; upon attending *Tristan* at the Met in 1891, she wrote to her intimate friend Mary Garrett: “I never in a public place came so near to losing my self control.” 19 The writer Kate Chopin, the arts patronesses Mabel Dodge Luhan and Isabella Stewart Gardner were Wagnerites. So were the Seidl Society members who thronged Wagner concerts in Brooklyn. Cather’s 1904 short story “A Wagner Matinee” speaks to the stranded situation of Gilded Age housewives and home-makers, strangers to a man’s world of commerce, for whom Wagner jarred awake dormant feeling.

Like Krehbiel, like Seidl, American Wagnerism was a German-American hybrid. Buoyed by New World optimism, it furnished an intellectual tonic, a visceral shock, a
gripping therapy for bookish, parched, or sequestered lives. Clinching this German-American equation, Krehbiel believed that Wagner would lead the way to an indigenous “national” opera. America’s Teutonic ancestry – that is, the languages, myths, and ideas of Germany, England, and other northern European lands – conditioned a special receptivity to German opera, he believed, in contradistinction to Mediterranean French and Italian genres. German opera, he wrote, insisted on dramatic veracity. Resistant to the tyranny of wealth and fashion, it was compatible with democratic ideas. Krehbiel further prophesized that opera in America would remain “experimental,” an “exotic,” “until the vernacular becomes the language of performances and native talent provides both works and interpreters.” This latter prediction was accurate insofar as opera in English never ignited in the United States – and American composers never produced a viable operatic canon. As for the logic of Wagner as boon to a native operatic tradition, it can at least be observed that, whereas connoisseurs of Gounod and Bellini were frequently seduced by the prestige of foreign tongues, both Krehbiel and Seidl bravely espoused Wagner in English. Seidl actually embarked on a Hiawatha opera to an English-language libretto. Thus was the American discovery of Wagner entwined with Seidl’s discovery of America, a transaction mediated, in the Tribune, by the most influential, most comprehensive explicator and chronicler of American Wagnerism.

Seidl’s sudden death in 1898, at the age of 47, was greeted with incredulity and dismay. For nearly a week, every metropolitan daily recounted his final hours, the cause of death (he was thought to have died of food poisoning; an autopsy revealed gallstone and liver ailments), the memorial services, the cremation. Some 15,000 persons applied for tickets to his funeral at the Metropolitan Opera House; some 4,000 – a surging, smothering human mass in which ticketholders clasped hands with the ticketless – managed to get in, with standees packed five and six rows deep. Women outnumbered men 20 to 1 in the downstairs seats. The New York Philharmonic played Siegfried’s funeral music. Carl Schurz, the designated eulogist, could not bring himself to speak. His place was taken by Henry Krehbiel, who read a dispatch from Robert Ingersoll. James Huneker, a gilded wordsmith not normally disposed to high sobriety, observed: “A genuine grief absorbed every person in the building. . . . . the quaver in [Krehbiel’s] voice, a thousand times more significant than the rhetorical phrases he uttered, set many sobbing. Alas! That Anton Seidl is dead.” Krehbiel wrote of Seidl’s passing, “It was a loss not to one community, but to many; not to a single artistic institution, but to art itself.”

* * *

The music critic Oscar Thompson, who succeeded W. J. Henderson at the New York Sun in 1937 (Henderson having moved there from the Times in 1902), eulogized Henderson and his generational colleagues as a distinctive “American school of criticism.” Singling out Henderson, Krehbiel, Huneker, Richard Aldrich, and Henry Finck in New York, and Boston’s Philip Hale, W. F. Apthorp, and H. T. Parker, he observed that they did not “draw opinions” from abroad. And he further discerned an alignment with American newspaper journalism. Of Henderson, whom he considered “the greatest music critic America has produced,” Thompson observed that he “liked to regard himself as first of all a
newspaperman; he was a reporter – with a specialty, music.” 22 Henderson’s other specialties included yachting; his Elements of Navigation (1895) was used as a naval training manual during World War I. He had in fact begun at the Times not as a critic but as a reporter. Though he was the pre-eminent American authority on the singer’s art, Henderson refused to call himself a “musicologist.” He wore his learning lightly. He cultivated a prose style notably clear, fresh, and plain.

Henry Krehbiel, whom Henderson considered the greatest music critic America had produced, wore his learning not arrogantly or even proudly but matter-of-factly, like a thick coat required by heavy weather. His prose trundled weighty words and thoughts over great distances – its very syntax was German-American – and yet, Henderson testified, “he wrote, as a newspaperman must, swiftly and pregnantly.” His indefatigable scholarly energy and high Olympus of learning, whether applied to the history of opera in the United States or the mechanics of Wagnerian music drama, were remote from daily reportage. His surviving notebooks include densely scribbled researches in German and English into musical education in ancient Greece, the “Black Stone of the Mohammedans,” the songs of Chief John Buck, ethnic migrations, “Anthropology vs. Philology,” prehistoric European civilization, and the hymn quoted by Dvorak in his Hussite Overture. And yet Krehbiel the German-American began his journalistic career covering baseball games and murders in Cincinnati. In New York, he initially manned the city desk or wrote editorials. He considered himself a newspaperman – “proud of journalism as a liberal profession,” “incessantly jealous of its honour and high standing,” according to Aldrich, whom he mentored at the Tribune. 23

Krehbiel’s German contemporaries, pondering musical event for the papers of Berlin or Munich, were not mobile messengers of daily events. They were professorial, thorough, methodical; their reviews did not run the morning after. Krehbiel, by comparison, was a “professor” and yet an empiricist – an American. He disdained Harvard’s Francis James Child, who too much scanned folksong from his Cambridge armchair. To research cantorial chant, he visited synagogues. To research Die Meistersinger, he visited Nuremberg to scrutinize the historical record and what was left of St. Catherine’s Church (where the opera begins). Like Henderson, who went to Italy to exhume information about certain forgotten castrato singers, he went to Germany not to sit at the foot of foreign authorities, but to discover and report at first hand what he needed to know. Krehbiel’s notion of the newspaper as arts “patron” was an activist notion. As we have seen: when the Met claimed Wagner no longer made money, he tabulated box office receipts; when he previewed Dvorak’s New World Symphony, he met with the composer.

This was not the methodology of German music critics. And no German critic could have produced a volume instructing classical-music novices. Krehbiel’s How to Listen to Music: Hints and Suggestions to Untaxed Lovers of the Art was much used in its day; the printings are dated from 1896 to 1924. A central source of instruction for generations of American music-lovers, its 350 pages enshrine a proud definition of the critic’s role: “that the first, if not the sole, office of the critic should be to guide public judgment. It is not for him to instruct the musician in his art. . . . he labors to steady and dignify public opinion.” To fulfill this “great mission,” a “vast responsibility,” the critic should be “catholic in taste, outspoken in judgment, unalterable in allegiance to his ideas, unswerving in integrity” – a mentor, that is, in equal measure pragmatic and moral. 24
Central to Krehbiel’s sense of high calling as a newsman was his sense of responsibility as a public educator.

The contents of *How to Listen to Music* include key relations, sonata form, the instruments of the orchestra, and the types of opera. It is not a book of aesthetic philosophy. But certain aesthetic priorities are assumed. In particular, an ethically endowed criterion of beauty infiltrates Krehbiel’s musical understanding. Distinguishing absolute music from program music, he writes that its content, “like that of every noble artistic composition, be it of tones or forms or colors or thoughts expressed in words, is that high ideal of goodness, truthfulness, and beauty for which all lofty imaginations strive.” As for program music:

> … in determining the artistic value of the work, the question goes not to the ingenuity of the programme or the clearness with which its suggestions have been carried out, but to the beauty of the music itself irrespective of the verbal commentary accompanying it. This rule must be maintained in order to prevent a degradation of the object of musical expression. The vile, the ugly, the painful are not fit subjects for music; music renounced, contravenes, negatives itself when it attempts their delineation.  

Krehbiel believed that the special intensities of American life demanded special compensatory guidance:

> We are engaged in conquering a continent; employed in a mad scramble for material things; we give feverish hours to win the comfort of our bodies that we take only seconds to enjoy; the moments which we steal from our labors we give grudgingly to relaxation, and that this relaxation may come quickly we ask that the agents which produce it shall appeal violently to the faculties which are most easily reached. Under these circumstances whence are to come the intellectual poise, the refined, taste, the quick and sure power of analysis which must preceded a correct estimate of the value of a composition or its performance?  

Krehbiel’s eagerness to educate new listeners was egalitarian, democratic, American. At the same time, Krehbiel the German-American packed his pedagogy with intellectual asides. His etymological acumen compels an utterly characteristic detour when introducing “chamber music,” tracing Musica da Camera, Musique de Chambre, and Kamermusik to a common Greek root, xxxx, signifying an arch, a vaulted room, or a covered wagon. “In the time of the Frankish kings the word was applied to the room in the royal palace in which the monarch’s private property was kept, and in which he looked after his private affairs. When royalty took up the cultivation of music it was as a private, not as a court, function.”  

But what chiefly shades Krehbiel’s teachings with an Old Worldly gravitas is his mistrust of the very vox populi he labors of edify. Post-Krehbiel, “music appreciation” would cheerfully assure newcomers to art that no specialized knowledge was needed. Olin Downes, who became chief music critic at the *New York Times* in 1924, vigorously exhorted listeners to “be your own music critic” – and the more converts, the better. Krehbiel did not smile or exhort. His primer was not intended for “careless seekers of
diversion.” Though ideally the musician, the critic, and the public “labor harmoniously,” in reality the critic is locked in “irrepressible conflict” with the concert artist who reads the newspaper “with heart-burns,” and with the lay listener who remains “indifferent,” if not “ignorant.” This reality is not a predicament, merely a condition. The critic’s role is to stand his ground, keen of knowledge, lofty of purpose. He is “the Ishamelite whose hand is raised against everybody and against whom everybody’s hand is raised.” He is “placed between two millstones, where he is vigorously rasped on both sides, and whence, being angular and hard of outer shell, he frequently requites the treatment received with complete and energetic reciprocity.”

Another perspective on Krehbiel’s elitist democratic severity – his German-American duality as professor and newspaperman, scholar, and remedial educator – is furnished by the only comparably popular classical-music primer of the period: What is Good Music? -- Suggestions to Persons Desiring to Cultivate a taste in Musical Art (1898) by W. J. Henderson (to whom Krehbiel’s How to Listen is dedicated). Henderson’s agenda is the same, but his tone is not: “The person who desires to cultivate a discriminating taste in music may acquire the fundamental knowledge in a few short months. After that, one needs only to live much in an atmosphere of good music until the acquired principles become unconsciously the moving factors underlying all attention to the art.” Whereas Krehbiel surveys “the majority of the hearers in our concert-rooms” and groans: “They are there to adventure a journey into a realm whose beauties do not disclose themselves to the senses alone, but whose perception requires a cooperation of all the finer faculties; yet of this they seem to know nothing, and even of that sense to which the first appeal is made it may be said with profound truth that “hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” They must come to him, must scale the high citadel of culture.

German-American, too, was the labor of love of Krehbiel’s late career – the first English-language edition of The Life of Beethoven by the American music historian Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817-1897), a monumental biography still read and consulted (albeit as revised by Elliott Forbes in 1964). Thayer completed the first three of the projected four volumes. Krehbiel’s 1925 edition (for which he received no compensation; notwithstanding his eminence, Krehbiel was never a wealthy man) numbered 1,137 pages.

The retrospective direction of this effort, following Krehbiel’s earlier immersion in more recent German and American developments, is significant: the older he got, the more he grew estranged from the present day. He was alienated by the course of music after Wagner; by Mahler, Strauss, and Debussy (not to mention Schoenberg and Stravinsky). The institutional culture of music equally offended him: even in dignified journals, he complained 1919, “the gossip of the foyer and the dressing rooms” stood “in high esteem”; “photo-engraving, illustrated supplements, and press agents” – with whom Krehbiel, as was well-known, refused to deal -- had corrupted the taste of audiences and readers.

* * *

Art as uplift is an idea with venerable Germanic roots. Luther influentially espoused the wholesome effects of music, and so of course did Bach. If Mozart and
Beethoven were by comparison less conventionally religious, they nonetheless imbued
the humanist ideals of German philosophers, and so did Americans of the late Gilded
Age. Henderson’s *What is Good Music?* even cites Immanuel Kant:

[Kant] holds that “the Beautiful is that which, through the harmony of its form
with the faculty of human knowledge, awakens a disinterested, universal, and
necessary satisfaction.” By disinterestedness in relation to beauty, Kant means
freedom from gratification of sensual appetite or preconceived conceptions. The
Beautiful gives pleasure, not because it satisfies any physical appetite or
corresponds to any extant idea, but because in and through itself it imprints its
own Ideal upon the soul, which, by its faculty of knowledge, is capable of
receiving it.

Matthew Arnold’s criterion of “high seriousness” also impacted significantly on late
nineteenth century American culture bearers; his *Culture and Anarchy* was widely read,
and Arnold himself prominently toured the United States as a lecturer in the 1880s. The
*New York Post*’s Henry Finck, in whose writings the discourse of Krehbiel and
Henderson was typically simplified, simply wrote: “Music can impart only good
impulses.”

The intellectual template which Finck diluted, and which Krehbiel and Henderson
embodied, is remembered as the “genteel tradition.” The term was coined by George
Santayana in 1911 to describe and disparage the intellectual world of the late Gilded Age,
“grandmotherly in that sedate, spectacled wonder with which it gazed at this terrible
world and said how beautiful and how interesting it all was..” And William Dean
Howells’ dictum of 1886 – that American writers “concern themselves with the more
smiling aspects of life, which are the more American” – remains a defining genteel
placard even though Howells was more describing than prescribing. The ostensible voice
of gentility is sweetly deluded, pretentiously noble, prudish, and pure.

In the history of American classical music, the Boston critic John Sullivan
Dwight, whose *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (1852-1881) was the most important such
periodical of its day, is a key progenitor of gentility. He insisted on the ennobling
properties of great symphonies – chiefly meaning Beethoven’s, which he considered
“religious”: “elevating, purifying, love and faith-inspiring.” “I hazard the assertion, “
Dwight wrote,

that music is all sacred, that music in its essence, in its purity, when it flows from
the genuine fount of art in the composers’s soul, when it is the inspiration of his
genius, and not a manufactured imitation, when it comes unforced, unbidden from
the heart, is a divine minister of the wants of the soul. . . . To me music stands for
the highest outward symbol of what is most deep and holy, and most remotely to
be realized in the soul of man.

Dwight’s Bible was Germanic and ended with Mendelssohn and Schumann. He disliked
opera. He called Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home,” the best-known American music
of its time, a “melodic itch.” Theodore Thomas, whose itinerant Thomas Orchestra
spread the gospel for symphonic music coast to coast during the 1870s, preached: “A
symphony orchestra shows the culture of a community, not opera.” He called “master works” a “character-building force” and “uplifting influence.” He espoused Beethoven above all other masters, mistrusted Tristan, and denounced popular music as having “more or less the devil in it.” A fundamentalist, he deferred to the score as holy writ. Mahler, in New York, transgressed this bedrock of American musical values unawares.32

Dwight was a onetime Unitarian minister. Thomas called concerts “sermons in tones.” And Henry Krehbiel, a preacher’s son, spoke from the pulpit in his New York Tribune reviews. And yet – like Seidl and Dvorak, like American Wagnerism – Krehbiel interprets the genteel tradition of Dwight and Thomas in its last and ripest phase. He is as worldly and impassioned as Dwight is dessicated. He makes Thomas – a timebeater alongside Seidl, who displaced him in New York – seem parochial. He also charts the limits of fin-de-siecle genteel energies. Richard Strauss’s Salome, as controversially seen at the Met in January 1907 (and not again until 1934!) and Gustav Mahler, whose embattled New York career (1907-1911) Krehbiel debunked, marked the border of the acceptable. The opposition they engendered illustrated that the project of German musical idealism, as transplanted to the United States, was ribbed – and therefore heightened and prolonged – by a lingering Puritanism.

What is more: in Krehbiel’s case, Salome and Mahler signify a turning against the Germanic, shading the later identity of this archetypal German-American. By 1900, Berlin and Vienna, pressed forward by social and political currents inherent to Europe, had blown open a new musical page -- prominently brandishing Mahler’s symphonies and Strauss’s operas -- unknown in America. When in his instantly notorious Mahler obituary (May 21, 1911) Krehbiel criticized “fatuous” foreigners who ignored American achievement, when in his Salome review1 he called German men “theoretically licentious and practically uxurious” for “joyously” acclamining Strauss’s hedonism, he was documenting and further disclosing an act of separation mirroring a twentieth century sea change in German-American identity.

In the larger scheme of things German-American, New York’s German-language Stadttheater, home to opera and operetta, tragedy and farce, had by the turn of the century been superseded by Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House. The Singvereine of Kleindeutschland, too, had been effaced by uptown venues integrating Germans with neighboring cultural constituencies. The bearded Leopold Damrosch, Polish-born and Berlin-educated, was succeeded at the helm of his New York Symphony by his clean-shaven son, Walter -- who proceeded to marry the daughter of a leading Republican Party politician and to conduct in the living rooms of Vanderbilts. Compared to his New York predecessors Theodor Eisfeld and Carl Bergmann, Theodore Thomas, though born in Essen, was an American: like Walter Damrosch, he arrived in the United States as a child; like Walter, he married into an important American family. Seidl arrived in New York a German and died a New Yorker supported by the city’s civic and political leaders, writers and businessmen, Germans and Anglo-Americans. But the linchpin of this transformation, postdating Thomas and Seidl, was the Great War against Germany

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1 To read in its entirety Krehbiel’s 4,000-word Salome review, see www.xxxxxxx. This masterpiece of critical opprobrium calibrates the nature and magnitude of Strauss’s challenge to reigning notions of art with exhaustive patience; the paragraphs average over 400 words, the sentences more than 30. In less leisurely times to come, no writer would attempt such density of utterance (unless in experimental fiction). It registers the freight train mass of Henry Edward Krehbiel at full throttle.
and Austro-Hungary: amplified by organized sallies of hysterical anti-German propaganda, it compelled and inspired German-Americans to become Americans only. German works and artists were widely discarded by American orchestras and opera houses. In New York, the Philharmonic abandoned Strauss and other living German composers. At the Met, German-language performances were banned, and neither Beethoven nor Wagner were given.

The German enemy incited no more patriotic American response than that of Henry Krehbiel. He called the Kaiser’s war effort “the most monstrous crime of a millennium.” Though the ban on Wagner seemed philistine to him -- “the beautiful and good in art,” he wrote, had “neither geographical nor political boundaries“ -- he supported Giulio Gatti-Casazza’s dismissal of six German singers, including the popular Johanna Gadski. When the Met returned to Wagner in February 1920, it was with a new Parsifal translation by Henry Krehbiel appointing English the language of redemption. Long a proponent of opera in English, Krehbiel had nevertheless expressed ambivalence about losing “some of the bone and sinew of the drama” were Wagner given in translation. Now, in the shadow of punishing treaty terms imposed at Versailles, “Sei heil, entsundigt und entsuhnt!” became “Be whole, forgiven and absolved!”

But Krehbiel the postwar American was at the same time increasingly stranded in postwar America. His insistence on immutable, inviolable aesthetic criteria distanced him even from his generational colleagues – not only the renegade Huneker, who could appreciate the luminous sonic properties of Schoenberg’s atonal Pierrot Lunaire (though finding it “ugly”) as early as 1912, but his old Boston nemesis Philip Hall, who the same year made a cause of Debussy’s Pelleas et Melisande. Through its final 1924 edition, Krehbiel’s How to Listen to Music recognized nothing beyond “Classical” and “Romantic” works. Krehbiel was unable to admire Stravinsky past The Firebird. Upon auditioning Schoenberg’s Five Pieces for Orchestra in 1921, he declared the composer “an acousmatic, who accepts what he thinks are aesthetic evangels without the power, willingness or desire to inquire into their rationality, his hallucination being that whatever enter his mental ear is significant, or true.” Longing for the past, he penned an essay – “The Curse of Affectation and Modernism in Music” – bemused by the noise of traffic and machines, and by Einstein’s view that there was “no such thing as a straight line in the universe.”

It was a fitting swan song: one month later, on March 20, 1923, he was dead at the age of 69. Aldrich, Finck, and Henderson were among the pallbearers at his funeral.

In John Sullivan Dwight and Theodore Thomas, genteel adherence to the beautiful dictated mistrust of high emotion. For Krehbiel and Henderson, beauty and emotion readily co-existed; what they mutually mistrusted in Richard Strauss was lack of feeling. Whatever they might have said, preserving honored precepts of beauty, they chiefly experienced uplift not in their minds but in their hearts.

* * *

By the time of his death, Henry Krehbiel was twice an anachronism. If no longer a German-American, Krehbiel the self-made, self-taught newsman retained a barnacled scholarly mien out of touch with the streamlined aesthetic fashions of a new century. As a genteel culture-bearer, he retained, unflinching, his iron criterion of uplift. No such
aesthetic anchor would stabilize art in times to come. The modernists would be quick to ridicule their forebears, and the music-lovers Hitler and Stalin would forever discredit the view that art could only be benign.

But if great music was demonstrably no guarantee of goodness, its humanizing properties were in late nineteenth century America demonstrably evident. That Albert Niemann bearing his wound as *Tristan* caused some to swoon, that Salome’s apostrophe to a severed head offended sensibilities does not condemn genteel audiences as dogmatic or inane. More obviously, these examples – and many others – illustrate the high degree to which art in the public arena once seemed to matter. For a charmed moment, musical New York embraced a Wagner ideal purged of racist cant, and espoused an ecumenical vision of America purposefully transcending bias. It was a moment beautiful, true, and good.


