

# Wagner, Beethoven & Negro Folksongs, and ..baseball

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## Wagner, Beethoven & Negro Folksongs, and ... baseball

*In his book “The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas” (1992), Julio Finn, himself a blues musician wrote: “[White blues performers] can never be bluespeople [...] because the blues is not something they live but something they do – which makes all the difference in the world. What distinguishes the bluesperson from the blues performer is cultural-racial make-up, which can only be inherited by a descendent of an ex-American slave.” Paul Garon, in his book on “Memphis Minnie, Woman with Guitar”, and in “Blues And The Poetic Spirit”, offered “new ways to hear the blues, so that the old songs and their embedded value systems would be meaningful to modern listeners”, hinting at the present inauthentic and impoverished interpretation by white musicians and audience of the blues.*

*The color line has divided in variable degrees the blues community ever since the first rise to popularity of the genre in the beginning of the twentieth century. The question of authenticity and race origin, and hence “ownership”, has been a continuous source of conflict and often ferocious debate.*

*Don't stop reading: I have no intention whatsoever here to stir up this discussion. In what follows, I only want to highlight that the debate goes way back to the early years after the Civil War (1863-1865), when it focused attention on the supposed absence or retention of African elements in the folk music of the African-Americans. On this occasion, I would like to introduce you to a remarkable man, hardly quoted today, but who has made, in 1914, the first effort to make a systematic and in-depth analysis of the African features of “negro folk”. This man is Henry Edward Krehbiel. The credit for the inspiration to write this essay goes mainly to the excellent reader, edited by Alan Dundes (1934-2005), who was professor of anthropology and folklore at the University of California, Berkeley: “Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore (Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture)” (1990). It is a must-read for any one keen on exploring not only black folk music, but black folk lore in general.*

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There is an ancient African proverb that says: “When a man dies, a library burns down.” This bitter reality no doubt summarizes the frustration that must have been felt by the music critic Henry Edward Krehbiel when, at the end of the nineteenth century, he started to analyze the African American folk music. Only very few had so far made an effort to investigate thoroughly, and in an empirical way the rich music legacy of the African American population. The material he had at his disposal was not very abundant, to say the least. In the same way as ideological and political reasons had resulted in the paucity of primary material on the slave songs before the Civil War, so was the scant post bellum documentation on African American song biased and rendered incomplete by similar forces, albeit from different sources. Put in an oversimplified way: before the Civil War, local white population had deployed no interest at all in the cultural expression of the slaved and free black population, other than – starting in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – its use for popular entertainment in the form of minstrelsy, or its manifestation during religious services. In the post-Civil War period, the attention for black song had found a stimulating agent in the aspiration for a socio-economic uplifting of the newly freed slaves. Abolitionists from the North, driven by sincere humanitarian goals, have provided future generations with the first systematic collection of slave songs, and some groups of the African American populace recognized in the Negro spiritual a vehicle for their social

promotion. However, the noble intentions of their initiators notwithstanding, the documentary sources that took shape during Reconstruction remained exceptional, and did in no way justice to the role music played in the culture of black population.

Such was – and to a large extent still is – the situation when Henry Edward Krehbiel published his first observations in the New York Tribune, and which he later, in 1914, put together and enriched in what is the first major empirical study on African-American folk music and melody: “*Afro-American folksongs: a study in racial and national music* .” Nobody who has a genuine interest in the early development of blues and jazz, as they grew out of African-American folk, can ignore the historical importance of this study. Yet, in most studies that followed, Krehbiel’s work often receives no further attention than a quotation in a footnote.

Therefore, allow me, in what follows, to elaborate a bit on the findings and conclusions of this remarkable man who, as the leading music critic of the turn of the century, wrote with the same passion about Wagner and Beethoven as about the spirituals. But, in order to put his writings on black music in a perspective, I need first of all to give an overview of the documentation he had at his disposal.

### FROM OBSERVATIONS BY A SWEDISH FEMINIST TO “THE SLAVE SONGS OF THE UNITED STATES”

Whilst prior to the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century primary material is almost totally lacking, as from 1800 there are some insights to be gained into the sounds echoing from the farms and plantations based on a few autobiographic works by (former) slaves, of whom Frederick Douglass is one of the most famous. In 1845, he wrote: “*“Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness.”* Ten years later, he mused: “*I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meanings of those rude, and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle, so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones, loud, long, and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”*”



Frederika Bremer (1801-1865)

The slaveholders left us very few impressions on how the slaves expressed themselves through their music. Luckily, outsiders both from abroad and from the Northern states could not resist describing more in detail what they witnessed. **Frederika Bremer**, a frail middle-aged Swedish novelist-feminist who arrived in 1849 in America in the hope to catch a glimpse of mankind’s future in a country which was building a “new world”, offered us a hint of what she heard when she writes that the slave songs “*are like flowers and fragrance from the negro life (), like flowers cast upon the waves of the river...there is no bitterness, no gloomy spirit in these songs.*” (Bremer, Benson, Catt, 1924: 143). **Frederick Law Olmsted**, journalist and landscape designer, was commissioned by his employer, the New York Daily Times (now the New York Times) to make a research journey in the South in the period of 1852 to 1857. In his report of a journey through Texas (1857: 34) he delights: “*As we lay quiet one evening in the fog, we heard and listened long to the happy wordless song of the negroes gathered at fire-light work, probably corn-husking, on some neighboring*

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*plantation. The sound had all the rich and mellow ring of pure physical contentment, and did one good to hear it. Like the nightingale, the performers seemed to love their own song, and to wait for its far off echo."*

Driven by interest in the exotic, and by sincere astonishment, these early impressions offer above all an idea of the emotions of the writer and observer. While they are by all means historically invaluable, these sources are at the same time not much more than fragmentary glimpses into the sounds of the past, biased by the social and political stance of the witness. Let us also not forget that these records stem from observers who had no musical background, and who had no intention at all to register folk expressions. Their annotations on music were only a (marginal) byproduct of other larger observations. Furthermore, it has to be kept in mind that not all slave music was meant for white ears. In short: there exists, with regard to the history and nature of slave sounds, no trustworthy evidence that allows us to draw definitive conclusions (Wilgus, 1959, 1990).

After the Civil War, the (white) fascination with black music grew in different forms and is credit to a better, yet incomplete view, on folk music among the African American population. First of all, the popularity of the minstrelsy was consolidated. Obviously, as a blend of different styles and being soaked with stereotypes based on a romantic view of the "good old plantation life", the black face

minstrelsy can in no way serve as a faithful document of the folk sound. Nevertheless, minstrelsy helped to convince the white population of the supposedly innate musicality of the African Americans, and was in this respect a catalyst for a broader attention to this aspect of their culture.

It is thus no surprise that from the 1860s, the historical fog on the sonic landscape began somewhat to clear. "**Q Let My People Go**" is, to my knowledge, one of the very first spirituals to be published with both words and music. As the cover of the 1861 print states, it was collected from the "contrabands" (fugitives from slavery) at Fort Monroe, a fort in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia that remained in Union hands throughout the war.

Then, on June 2nd 1862 – at that time, the Civil War continued its devastating and bloody course on the mainland – a young, handsome lady named **Lucy McKim** left New York, bound for the Sea Islands. She accompanied her father, James Miller McKim, a well-known abolitionist, as a secretary in his information mission on behalf of the Philadelphia Port Royal Relief Committee. Though she would only remain in the Union enclave for about three weeks, "*the impressions made on her by the songs of the freedmen were to have lasting effects on the American music*" (Epstein, 2003: 31). It is noteworthy that when she started her journey to the Sea Islands she had a

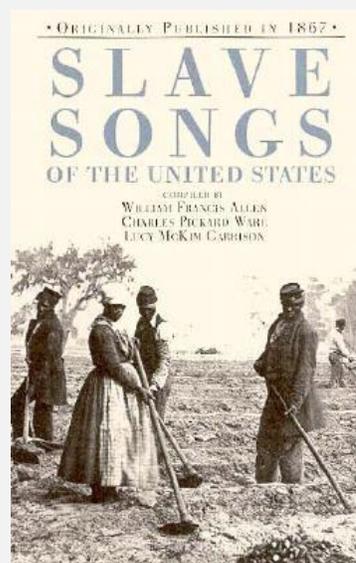
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decent musical background (see also: Bosman, 2011).

Today, Lucy McKim is especially known as one of the three editors of the “**Slave Songs of the United States**”, a collection of African American music published in 1867, which is commonly acknowledged not only as the most influential early collection of spirituals, but also as a milestone in African American music and modern folk history. Next to McKim, it was put together by two Northern abolitionists, William Francis Allen and Charles Pickard Ware. Lucy McKim’s contribution to the work is relatively minor, being credited with only 3 variant versions of a song. “The Slave Songs” is, however, not the first published collection of African-American music. McKim’s main historical importance lays in two slave songs she had published already five years earlier (Epstein, 2003). **These publications, included in a letter she wrote on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1862 to Dwight’s Journal of Music, are reputedly the first attempts to preserve slave’s musical expression in a serious matter, staying as closely as possible to the sound in its natural surroundings.** For the first time ever, somebody with a musical background had tried to transcribe the words of a slave song as they were heard, paying due attention to the rhythm and the sense of the text, and trying to stay as close as possible to the original “dialect”. Lucy McKim also wrote the musical arrangements for the songs consisting of solo voice with

“unpretentious piano accompaniments”. Such precise performance directions were never seen before.



The minstrelsy, on the one hand, and the early folkloric efforts by Allen, Ware and McKim to reproduce the ‘true’ sound of the African American, on the other hand, were symptoms of a society profoundly divided over the way to organize the relationship between white and black. Whilst one part of the public applauded the minstrelsy which heralded nostalgia to the good old life on the plantation, and which depicted the African American as a lazy, simple-minded ducky, the other part manifested, from a humanitarian stance, its deep appreciation for the unique contribution the Africans (had) made to the American culture.

*It is most telling, however, that the publications of the slave songs were far from a success; on the contrary. The*

*public reaction was at the least ambiguous, going from defining it as 'curious' music to completely 'worthless' music. Most music journals even ignored it. One magazine left nothing to the imagination with regard to its opinion on it: "(Slave Songs of the United States is) hardly worthwhile to try to perpetuate this trash, vulgarity and profanity by putting it in print" (Epstein, 2003: 339).*

Nevertheless, Lucy McKim had kicked the ball. In August 1863, **H.G. Spaulding** had some songs printed in the "Continental Monthly", accompanied with an account on how they were sung and their influence on the singers. In 1870, **Thomas Wentworth Higginson**, who during the Civil War, served as colonel of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally authorized African-American regiment, included in his "Army Life in a Black Regiment" the texts of a body of songs, annotated with a most passionate reading on their context and structure. He poetically narrates: "*Writing down in the darkness, as I best could, perhaps with my hand in the safe covert of my pocket, the words of the song, I have afterwards carried it to my tent, like some captured bird or insect, and after examination, put it by.*" The performances and publication of songbooks by the newly formed "jubilee companies", which built largely on the repertory of the religious camp meetings, constitute a further historically important legacy and source of documentation. The Fisk University – originally known as the "Fisk Free

Colored School" – founded in January 1866 to educate newly freed slaves, would become the birthplace of the most famous of these companies: The Fisk Jubilee Singers. Their performances met with an amazing national and international success, entertaining even European Kings and Queens. Their example was followed by numerous others, of which the Hampton Institute Singers, and the Original Tennesseans were among the most popular which toured across the country during the 1870's, bringing a "tasteful rendition of primarily sanctified material" (Wilkinson, 1998). Polk Miller, son of a slaveholder, and a druggist – who is, by the way of anecdote, at the basis of the "Sergeant's Pet Care Products, Inc.", one of America's oldest and most respected manufacturers and marketers of pet supplies – would at the end of the 1800's also make a career as leader of the black Old South Quartette. Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette were featured on some of Thomas Edison's earlier phonograph recordings.

### THE SACRED VERSUS THE SECULAR

The early documentation on black folk music reveals a **disproportionate attention for performances in a religious context**, at the expense of "secular" songs performed during work, rowing, corn husking, cotton picking, frolicking etc. This imbalance has long supported the wrong assumption that the slave singing dominantly consisted of a religious repertory. It is rather

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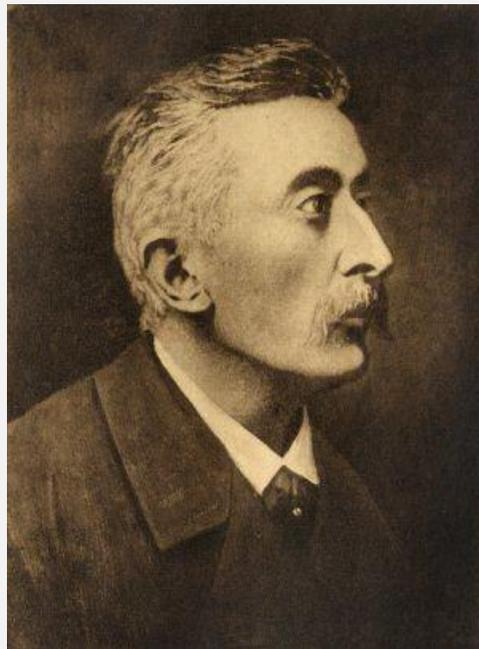
ironic by the way that, when this “secular” repertory was still “free” from religious influences there was little attention for it. For slaveholders, the music of the slaves was just another aspect of the slaves’ expression in need of control. For the abolitionists, music making was not compatible with their view of an oppressed slave who was not expected to sing in the dehumanized state he was in.

It is not the place here to discuss why in the post bellum decades the attention was primarily focused on the spirituals. It suffices to keep in mind that in the culture of the black population the distinction, in the European-Christian perspective, between the secular and sacred realm of life is not relevant. In an African cultural perspective, both merge(d) into a spiritual perspective, albeit expressed in what Europeans define as an earthy vocabulary. Secular songs served as the basis for (later) spirituals, just as “sacred” songs could and were easily adapted to be performed in a “secular” context of work and pleasure.

Anyhow, the documentary legacy, skewed by this false dichotomy, bears a strong emphasis on the religious song. Nevertheless, some attention has been paid to secular music. In 1882, **David C. Barrow** published in the “Century Magazine” a description of corn-shucking songs in Georgia. Four years later, **George W. Cable** wrote, in the same magazine, about the black dancing at the Congo Place, and about the

Creole slave songs in New Orleans (D.K. Wilgus, 1990: 69).

It is safe to say that when other songs than spirituals started attraction attention from ethnographers, the development of the black music performed in secular surroundings was already very well advanced. The belated attention for secular music will forever handicap our potential for understanding the early black music. J.R.B. Wright (2006) locates one of the earliest indications of what he calls “folk blues” in a painting by **Frank Buchser** who in 1867 painted the “Guitar Player”, a solitary black man playing a flat-top acoustic guitar. Was this the prototype of the African-American blues player? (1)



Lafacadio Hearn

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The Greek born, but international writer best known for his books on Japan, **Lafacadio Hearn**, settled in America in 1869, and would during his residence of nearly a decade in New Orleans offer us some additional impressions of an early folk blues tradition. In his vast number of writings in numerous national publications he helped to establish the reputation of New Orleans as a city with a very specific culture. In one of his fictional stories, “Levee Life”, he has one of his characters, a roustabout, sing verses which can be considered as pre-echoes of later blues work (J.R.B. Wright, 2006: 14). Hearn was in close contact too with Henry Edward Krehbiel to whom he provided some first-hand material from his conversations with African Americans living in New Orleans. In 1884, Hearn conceived the idea of a book on black music co-written with Krehbiel. The book, unfortunately, never saw the light. Like Krehbiel, Hearn was firmly convinced of the African roots of the black music. His theories on this matter, however, need to be seen against the contemporaneous ideas which sought physiological explanations for the African-American characteristics. For instance, the longer vibrations, which he thought to be peculiar in black folk music, were in his opinion probably rooted in the differently formed vocal chords of the African-Americans,...



Frank Buchser, The Guitar Player, 1867

### **NEGRO SONGS ARE VERY MUCH OVERRATED**

The foundation, in 1888, of the American Folklore Society was a sign of the growing scholarly interest in the study and promotion of traditional culture. The African-American tradition, however, did in no way receive the attention comparable to the efforts invested in for instance the survey of the native (Indian) folk lore. The numbers speak for themselves: between 1890 and 1930 some 14.000 cylinder recordings were made by ethnographers of Native American sounds, but only very few registered African American songs. It is telling that the use of the phonograph for ethnographic purposes pioneered in 1890 with the recording of Indian songs (M. Hamilton, 2007).

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In his 1893 publication “Primitive Music: an inquiry into the origin and development of music, songs, instruments, dances and pantomimes of savage races”, **Richard Wallaschek**, a widely known European music critic and famous for his contributions to comparative musicology, reserves a mere two pages of more than 300 to the “Negro” music in America. His opinion is unequivocal (60):

*“I think I may say that, speaking generally, these negro-songs are very much overrated, and that as a rule they are mere imitations of European compositions which the negroes have picked up and served up again with slight variations. Moreover, it is a remarkable fact that one author has frequently copied his praise of negro-songs from another, and determined from it the great capabilities of the blacks, when a closer examination would have revealed the fact that they were not musical songs at all, but merely simple poems.”*

On the “Slave Songs of America” published by Allen, Ware and McKim, his view is equally clear (61):

*“I cannot think that these and the rest of the songs deserve the praise given by the editors, for they are unmistakably ” arranged “—not to say ignorantly borrowed—from the national songs of all nations, from military signals, well-known marches, German student-songs, etc.”*

In short, Wallaschek saw no necessity whatsoever to study the African-American songs because they were either indirectly inspired by the whites, or sometimes just plain copies of white folk music.

The neglect by Wallaschek of the African-American song contrasted sharply with the fascination felt by **Charles Peabody** when he was excavating in May and June of 1901 and 1902 Native American burial grounds of the Choctaw people in Coahoma County, Northern Mississippi. Though archeology was his concern, the songs he heard performing by his hired African-American workers grabbed him. They captivated him so much that his transcription of the songs and his ‘Notes on Negro music’ (1903) were published before his archaeological findings (1904). In his words, the chants were “*Quite impossible to copy, weird in interval and strange in rhythm; peculiarly beautiful*”. Some authors argue that Peabody’s publication can be considered as the first publication of the blues (J.R.B. Wright, 2006).

Some five years later, in his early twenties, a young student of classics at the University of Mississippi by the name of **Howard Odum** took up his cylinder recorder when he embarked in his survey of the folk songs and traditions of southern blacks living in nearby communities. His findings resulted in two doctoral dissertations, the first published in 1909 titled: “*Religious Folk Songs of the Southern Negroes.*” For him, the soul of a people

is expressed in its folk lore, and it was of utmost importance that objective data be gathered to investigate it. The spirituals sung by the popular “jubilee companies” could not, in his opinion, be considered as a true and fare reflection of the characteristic music of the African-American people. The phonograph could deliver an impartial testimony of what the blacks themselves were singing, which was clearly different from what choirs and sheet music publishers brought. Consistent with the revolutionary approach of the anthropologist Franz Boas, who was by the way also one of the teachers of Zora Neale Hurston, Odum felt it an absolute requirement to record exactly, with high technological means and following scientific criteria, the words and sounds of the people under study. If we are to believe Hamilton (2007), Howard Odum was the first to register African American voices on cylinder, but no traces of the cylinders have later been found.



Julien Tiersot

### **THE NEGRO IS HERE TO STAY**

Around 1910, working at the Hampton Institute, Virginia, a college established in 1868 to educate former slaves, the 1875 born **Natalie Curtis**, one of a small group of women doing ethnological work in Northern America, broadened her research to include the transcription and collection of African American music. Up till then, she had concentrated, as most, on the study of the traditional music of Native American tribes. In the same academic fervor as Howard Odum, she relied on the “little Edison phonograph that had accompanied [her] to many Indian Reservations” to record what she heard from the African-Americans in Virginia. From her thorough and careful analysis of songs, she cannot but conclude that “Negro folk-song is

indeed an offshoot from African root”, a fact that “*nobody who has heard Africans sing or beat the drum can deny.*” (1918, 4). Though she realizes that the ethnographers and ethnomusicologists “*come late to the harvesting, and that a generation and more have lived since the originators of the slave-songs passed from the plantations*”, she is happy to observe that free “*negroes still work in the fields of the Southland, singing the old songs, and the racial quality of Negro singing has not died*” (1918: 10). In an (over)optimistic note she concludes her transcriptions with the observation that “*the white race [is] at last awakening to the fact that the Negro in our midst stands at the gates of human culture with full hands, laden with gifts. (...) The war has driven home to us this truth: we no longer tolerate the presence of the black race, and with anxiety at that – we need the Negro, and he is here to stay.*” (id.)

A radically different conclusion was reached by **Julien Tiersot** in his 1911 “*La Musique chez les Peuples indigènes de l’Amérique du Nord*”, in which he dedicated part of his survey on folk music in Canada and the United States to the music of the Creoles of Louisiana. For him, there were clearly no African survivals in the slave songs. He made his point as clear as Wallaschek had a decade before, when he wrote:

*“It is indubitable, as all who have made a special study of the question agree, that it is in these superheated religious*

*assemblies that the most genuine songs in the negro repertory had their origin. They use them on all occasions. Like all peoples of low culture, the negroes accompany their manual labors with song. Noteworthy are the “corn songs,” which are sung in the harvest season to stimulate the gathering of the grain. The efficiency of these songs is so well recognized that the owners of the plantations pay extra wages to singers capable of leading the chorus of laborers. These songs, however, have no distinctive character; they are religious hymns. The same holds true of the songs sung by negroes for their diversion, when at rest in their cabins, in the family circle or for the dance. Such a use need not surprise us when we have seen their religious meetings degenerate into disheveled dances under the influence of the same songs. It is the hymn which must sanctify the dance. Carefully do they guard it against any admixture of the profane element. A superstitious dread in this regard is **another convincing proof of how completely they have forgotten their African origin.** They would believe themselves damned were they to repeat the songs of paganism; to do this would, in their eyes, be to commit original and unpardonable sin”.*

### **I HAVE TO DO THE WORK OF A PIONEER**

This was the situation, in 1914, when Henry Edward Krehbiel wrote his study “in racial and national music” of Afro-American Folksongs (2). He was well aware of the historic importance of his

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work when he lauded himself in the book's preface that he "*had to do the work of a pioneer, and as such will be satisfied if he shall succeed in making a clearing in which successors abler than he shall work hereafter.*" (ix) He had, indeed, very little to work on. The existing material was, as described above, relatively scarce, confusing and open to different, even radically opposing interpretations. It was moreover tainted with major shortcomings with regard to reliability. The collection and transcription of the material had been done by white, not hindered by any knowledge of the African cultural background of the "folk" which "lore" and music they surveyed. The question of authenticity of the material was (and is) substantial. What was the discrepancy between the transcriptions and the reality? A definite answer was/is impossible. Not only the potential of the observer to understand and frame the sounds he heard was limited; it was furthermore highly unlikely that he had heard it all. In her "Mules and Men" (1935), Zora Neale Hurston worded it in a slightly mockery, but very poignant way when she described the "tactics" of the African American when he was approached by the folklore student: "*The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hands, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.*" (pp 18-19).

It would take us too far to bring up additional deficiencies manifested by the material and which stemmed from the patronizing and patriarchal attitudes which (often unconsciously) steered the early observer's attention and interpretations. Inconspicuously, white racist stereotypes had crept in the transcriptions of the early African-American folk music.

Krehbiel's work did not transcend the dominant stereotypes, but nevertheless his writings form a landmark and would influence, during decades, other scholars. But, first, who was this man?



### LAW, BASEBALL, WAGNER AND NEGRO SONGS

Most of his friends in the New York cultural circles of which he was part at the turn of the century called him 'Pop' (J. Horowitz, 2009). He was patriarchal, but embodied also kindness and courtesy. He was an imposing, elegantly dressed figure, and he was nothing less than a genius. Born in Ann Arbor in

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1854, Henry Edward received a general education from his father, a German clergyman of the Methodist Episcopal Church. As a child, he grew up speaking fluently English and German, and later added a reading knowledge of Latin, French, Italian and even Russian. The family settled, in 1864, in Cincinnati, where Henry Edward studied law, but eventually he started as a writer and critic for the *Cincinnati Gazette*, having in his portfolio the reporting on baseball games (!), for which he invented a new method of scoring. At the age of 26, he joined the staff of the *New York Tribune*, and wrote contributions for many other journals. It is in New York that he would become a respected and esteemed member of the cultural societies which raved about European classical music, and especially about the Wagner music. Wagnerism was a dominant trend in the 1880's and 1890's, not only in European countries, but also in a city as New York, which since 1855 had the third largest German population of any city in the world, outranked only by Berlin and Vienna.

Coming from law studies and from baseball journalism, the polymath Krehbiel taught himself music, and he did this in an astonishing and assiduous way. In 1897, he published a book entitled: *How to listen to music; hints and suggestions to untaught lovers of the art*. Not only did he edit collections of songs and arias, he became the American editor of the second edition of "Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians". He translated opera

librettos from German and French, and lectured regularly and gave private lessons. Furthermore, he completed the first English language edition of the first scholarly biography of Ludwig van Beethoven, written by Alexander Wheelock Thayer. This biography is still, after many updates, considered as a standard work of reference on Beethoven. Krehbiel wrote in total a dozen books. All this, he combined with remarkable pedagogical skills, and with an enthusiasm that caused feelings of indignation when his ideals were not respected, but "filled his eyes with tears when he saw them respected". His vast learning made him the "dean" of the New York City critics (J. Horowitz, 2009).

Why did he also turn to African American folk music? Being the son of a German immigrant it is likely that he was, as many still are, searching to define as to what it meant to be an American citizen. Krehbiel realized that the African American legacy was an intrinsic part of the recent "American" culture. Moreover, he adhered to the theory that great music has "national" roots. Culture and ethnic background are closely linked. In this, he was in the same line as other cultural prominent figures like his friend Dvorak who, in 1893, as Director of the National Conservatory in New York, contended that in the "the Negro melodies of America", he discovered all "that is needed for a great and noble school of music." (3) Krehbiel's folk music surveys were not limited to African American music, but extended to music

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by Jews, Slavs, Magyars, Scandinavians and Russians. However, as far as American folk music was concerned, his statement was nothing less than bold and daring: for him, the African American folk music was the only American folk music.

Let us thus now have a closer look at his 1914 publication “Afro-American folksongs: a study in racial and national music.”

### CIVILIZATION ATROPHIES FOLK MUSIC

I have rarely read a book dealing with black music in which the author’s enthusiasm and inspiration jumped out from every page in sentences that, even if they today often may sound a bit bombastic, testify of the immense eloquence and pedagogical qualities of its writer. Krehbiel’s love for the subject matter shines throughout, up to a point where one might be tempted to accuse him of over-romanticizing his views. He was furthermore strongly ambitious in the scientific definition of his goals, remaining however at the same time fully aware of the tentative nature of his writings and survey, and acknowledging the need for further elaboration. “Afro-American Folksongs” was written, as he marks in the preface: “with the purpose of bringing a species of folksong into the field of scientific observation and presenting it as fit material for artistic treatment.”

Although, he continues, folk music receives more and more attention, “the songs created by the negroes while they were slaves () have cried out in vain for scientific study.” Indeed, up till Krehbiel’s publication, the available documentation was – as we mentioned above – no more than an impressionistic representation of how black folk music (may have) sounded; rough sketches based upon subjective interpretations by observers who moreover had concentrated on the lyrical aspects. So far, little attention had been paid to the *notation and structure* of the music. Surely, the ideas put forth by Krehbiel were not revolutionary, and were in an embryonic form already present in the testimonies of earlier observers; it is nevertheless to the credit of Krehbiel to have put on paper a *systematic* and *extensive* analysis of the folk songs, zooming in on the music and *how* it sounded. For him, “folksongs are the echoes of the heart-beats” of a people (p. 3), in them “are preserved feelings, beliefs and habits of vast antiquity. Not only in the words, which have almost monopolized folksong study (), but also in music, and perhaps more truthfully in the music than in the words.” The manner in which a song is performed, the pitch, the dynamic intensity and timbre of the voice tell more about a folk than the lyrics. It is in the voice and its variations that lays the expressiveness of the music which “a folk creates for itself.”

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1893 World's Fair Columbian Exposition, "Dahomey Village"

Over 155 pages, Krehbiel meticulously dissects the features of this music, which in his appreciation is characterized foremost by its rhythmical propulsion embedded in the syncopation (what he calls the “snap” or “catch”), and by the frequent use of the five-tone or pentatonic scale. In an innovative, empirical and comparative way, in contradistinction to what he labels the “rhetorical and sentimental” surveys of the past, he wants to establish facts which set apart the African American folk music. To this end, he examined more than 520 “negro” songs spread over 6 collections (one being the famous “Slave Songs of the United States”), complemented by first hand material provided to him by Lacafadio Hearn, the Greek born writer whom we have presented above. He also drew from his personal observations in the Dahoman village set up at the World's Columbian Exhibition, Chicago 1893, where he “listened repeatedly during several days

to (their) singing.” The Africans, exhibited as “native warriors” at the World's fair – in the wake of an international, colonial, white racist appetite for the bizarre and exotic – made a huge impression on him: “the players showed the most remarkable rhythmical sense and skill that ever came under [his] notice”. “Berlioz”, he continues, “in his supremest effort with his army of drummers produced nothing to compare in artistic interest with the harmonious drumming of these savages.” (p. 64/65).

Furthermore, he states, the black folk music is typified by unusual melodic intervals and complicated rhythmic figures. He also draws the reader's attention to the persistent association between the folk music and the folk dance. The “poetical forms and rhythms are”, in his view, “the effects as well as the causes of the regulated movements and posing of the dance.” (p. 112). The rhythms of folksongs may be said “to be primarily the product of folk dances.” (p.6) This was a keen observation, that has in later studies found a consistent confirmation, as did his astute finding that black folk music shows a predominance of satire songs. He links the satirical element to the practices of the “professional minstrels” in African tribes whose status he compares to the mountebanks, “actors and secular musicians” in ancient Europe. “The weapon which these griots use against those whom they wish to injure is satire” (p. 143), and they do so with an impressive level of improvisation.

There can absolutely be no doubt, in his conclusion, that the music performed by the slaves, and later the freedman, is folk music, which reflects the emotions and the physical and spiritual sufferings of its creators. Moreover, this folk music has unambiguous African roots. They are not the result of an imitation of white folk music, but are a definite original, authentic product, owned by the “Negroes”, of which the idioms find their origin on the African continent. But after all, he concludes, the songs are clearly American. Firstly, because they are the result of the influence upon the slaves by their American environment; secondly because they are “products of a people who have long been an integral part of the population”, and finally, “because they speak an idiom which, no matter what its origin, Americans have instinctively liked from the beginning and have never liked more than now.” (p. 153). His thesis was unequivocal!

### **THE RED MAN IS MARKEDLY UNMUSICAL**

Measured by today’s insights in the study of folk, it is easy to criticize Krehbiel’s survey. The scientific criteria and methods developed since his publications allow putting serious question marks to what he presented as an “objective” presentation of facts. While, for instance, he contended to interpret his findings from a comparative perspective, we can now readily challenge this for his shortcomings in the nature and variety of the comparative material he employed. He assumes a too

homogenous cultural background of all slaves to allow to draw definite conclusions. Not to mention, an analysis of the music brought along from the European continent is absent. Furthermore, while he had a definite empiricist approach compared to the contemporaneous standards, Krehbiel grounded his conclusions mainly on second hand material, without systematically collecting facts through own field work – other than what he witnessed at the 1893 Chicago World fair.

Both flaws induce him to statements which are one-sided and extreme. Not only does he consider the “negro” music as authentic, native American folk, with roots in Africa, he also defines it as the only American folk. He excludes both Indian and white music as American folk. From his experience, he is convinced that the “red man is markedly unmusical” (p. 73), what “appears to be amply proved by the paucity of melody in the songs of the Indians, their adherence to a stereotyped intervallic formula, () and their lack of agreement in pitch when singing.” As for white music, it is worth quoting his reasoning in full:

*“Nowhere save on the plantations of the South could the emotional life which is essential to the development of true folksong be developed; nowhere else was there the necessary meeting of the spiritual cause and the simple agent and vehicle. The white inhabitants of the continent have never been in the state of cultural ingenuousness which*

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*prompts spontaneous emotional utterance in music. ( ) It did not lie in the nature of the mill life of New England or the segregated cultural life of the Western pioneers to inspire folksongs; those occupations lacked the romantic and emotional elements which existed in the slave life of the plantations in the South and which invited celebration in song – grave and gay. Nor were the people of the North possessed of the ingenuous, native musical capacity of the Southern blacks.” (p. 22/23).*

Also, Krehbiel’s emphasis on the spirituals follows from the same deficiencies in his approach. As the editors of the “Slave Songs of the United States” noted already in 1867, the African American repertory seemed to be dominated by music performed in a sacred context. Krehbiel makes the mistake of building further upon a documentation that was skewed and biased for a multitude of reasons. Had he performed own field work, exploring also work and leisure environments, he would have noticed that the predominance of spirituals did not match the full “black” repertory. Instead, he attempts to explain why the legacy of black folk is mainly composed of “speritichils”, and not of “reel tunes”, “fiddle songs”, “corn songs” and “devil songs”, “for which the slaves generally expressed a deep abhorrence” (p. 16). The reason is psychological, he argues: “slavery was the sorrow of the Southern blacks; religion was their comfort and refuge.” (p. 29). The songs of the plantation

were the spontaneous outbursts of intense religious fervor, fostering race pride, and furnishing an “outlet for the anguish of smitten hearts.” Not to forget too that religion is, for Krehbiel, a “wonderful conservator”.



Henry Edward Krehbiel

His stance on the disproportionate presence of religious songs is not different from the ruling interpretations, clearly worded by Julien Tiersot in his “La musique chez les Peuples indigènes de l’Amérique du Nord”: “(corn songs) have no distinctive character; they are religious hymns. The same holds true of the songs sung by the negroes for their diversion, when at rest in their cabins. ( ) Carefully do they guard it against any admixture of the profane element! ( ) They would believe themselves damned were they to repeat the songs of paganism; to do this would, in their eyes, be to commit original and unpardonable sin.”

Finally, whatever the degree of deep respect and admiration Krehbiel demonstrated for the African American people and its music, the author did not transcend ruling white racist stereotypes. For instance, in his appreciation of the dance that accompanied black folk music, he did not divert from what had been expressed by a majority of white observers, including slaveholders, for decennia. “It was in the dance that the bestiality of the African blacks found its frankest expression”, he contended. He immediately added, however, that there had already been a positive evolution in the black population, not yet recognized by the white: *“in this year of pretended refinement, which is the year of our Lord 1913, the dance which is threatening to force grace, decorum and decency out of the ballrooms of America and England is a survival of African savagery, which was already banished from the plantations in the days of slavery.”* (p. 93) He referred to ragtime, and popular dances as the “turkey-trot”, and the tango.

It also can be held against him, that his appreciation of the “Afro-American folksongs” was not totally free from the paternalistic attitude that dominated both the former slaveholders’ caste as the abolitionists. However strong his conviction that the “negro song” was authentic, independent from European influence and thus not some form of imitation of white music as many of his contemporaries believed, his approach was a Eurocentric one, seeing in the music a vehicle, a source of the “greater

art”. The folksongs of the African-Americans are recognized mainly as “artistic material” that has the potential of contributing to an American school of music, a source of inspiration for composers. “They are beautiful songs”, Krehbiel declares, which “can furnish the inspiration for symphonic material to the composer who knows how to employ it.” (p. 154). Hence, ultimately, the value of the African-American folk song is measured against its potential contribution to a renewal of the Western classical music. The ideology of the existence of a global historical and worldwide cultural evolution of which western civilization is the end station is not far off.

### THE DIVIDING FORCE OF CATEGORIZATION

Despite its apparent weaknesses, Krehbiel’s 1914 publication is a historical marker that has set the tone for the scholarly and other discussions that would follow in the following decennia on the origin of the African American folk music. The controversy is today still going on because the amount and quality of the study material – though it has increased and improved, and the research methods have been rendered more objective -, remain such that widely divergent, even conflicting, interpretations are possible. In the debate on the African origins, there are extremists, who argue that the black folk music is totally unoriginal and a mere copy of the music of the colonists, and others who find enough indications to plead for a pure

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Africanist thesis. In between are those scholars who discern points of contact and similarities between slave and white music, and offer evidence of a complex interaction and mutual feedback between the cultures.

The study of folk, not only of music but also of tales, customs, speech and verbal art has developed tools for more advanced comparative research. However, it is needless to say that it is not an exact science, and that the paucity of scholars who know “both sides”, and possess enough knowledge not only of inter-cultural but also intra-cultural variations makes it all the more difficult. I don’t need to mention either that the political and ideological debate is constantly lurking around.

The approach and cultural framework of the student will inevitably impact the nature of his/her conclusions. I find it personally primordial that, as far as the approach is concerned, we define folk music as a dynamic activity that is subject to a myriad of social influences. Describing African American folk music in terms of “survivals” or “retentions” implies a static view, as if the elements of the past are merely eroded by history. Folk music has (had) too often the connotation of tradition, and has been handled as an instrument to define nationality and race. I believe that we can gain much more insight if we focus our attention on the way past cultural components interact with present conditions. So doing, we have

to include the influences regional migrations and mobility have had on folk music, and integrate the dynamics of the “folk” which has always a particular place in society, defined in terms of political and economic power. If we follow this path, we will eventually find that the development of African-American folk song can only be fully appreciated if we define it as an instrument in the self-preservation, in the survival of different ethnic African groups which were made the property of other ethnic groups, and which eventually had to define a culture of their own in their new homeland.

However, above all, I find it indispensable that we stay, at all times, aware of the many prejudices and ideological assumptions that most often unconsciously slip into our analysis. I force an open door when I plead for a critical self-examination of how our Western-European heritage determines the way we value other cultures. A cornerstone of this Eurocentric thought is, as Molefi Kete Asante (1998, 200) has described so poignantly, the bias of *“categorization, which divides people into teachers and pupils, sinners and saved, black and white, superior and inferior, weak and strong. Out of this bias has developed the catastrophic disharmonies that we experience in the world.”*

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## **READING MATERIAL**

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- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/peoplevents/pande06.html>
- <http://www.myblues.eu/blog/?p=1586>

## **NOTES**

(1) Frank Buchser had been commissioned, by the Swiss government, to prepare a monumental painting on the struggle between the North and South – a work that was eventually never realized for financial reasons. However, during his five years in the US, Buchser travelled around collecting impressions of the Civil War. He gathered too about 30 photographs, a medium then in its early development, of this land in devastation.

(2) For a more detailed reading of 19<sup>th</sup> century texts on African Americans and their folklore, the 1967 publication by Bruce Jackson is highly recommended: “Negro and his folklore in nineteenth-century periodicals” – Austin, Published for the American Folklore Society by the University of Texas Press

(3) There is some discussion as to who influenced who. Some argue that Dvorak's statement is derived from Krehbiel's earlier publications.