

The Bulletin

of the Society for American Music

FOUNDED IN HONOR
OF OSCAR G. T. SONNECK

Raised Glasses, Raised Voices: The Beer Choir Movement

Joshua Nannestad

*"Put him in the scuppers with a hosepipe on him,
Early in the morning..."¹*

The whole room is singing and has been for an hour. It's not a concert. Performers and audience are one in this participatory musical event. Some swing their almost empty pint glasses. Their volume has increased in inverse relation to the amount of beer left in the glass. It's not an Irish pub, but a small craft brewer. Some sing from memory, but others are reading out of a printed book. Incongruously, a tuba plays the bass line, an electric keyboard on the accordion setting provides the chords, acoustic guitar fills in the harmony and takes some solos. This is Beer Choir.

My aim today is simply to introduce the Society for American Music to this growing avenue of community-based music making. I have led a local chapter for three years now. In my experience, the beer choir movement is well-known among choral folks in the Midwestern U.S., but less so outside of these circles.

I've put a lot of practice into learning how to direct choirs, and nearly as much into drinking beer. I am relatively new to my community, where Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota meet; when I founded the [Siouxland Beer Choir](#), the other choral directors in town were so pleased (they recognized its value, but as hardworking K-12 music educators they had no more hours in the day.) *The Beer Choir Hymnal* gave us a start, and my drinking buddy played the tuba, which enhanced the German beer hall songs significantly. The surprise, for me, was that this activity—which felt like a lark—ended up feeding my research agenda and academic pursuits as well.

[Beer Choir is a national organization](#) based in Minneapolis that coordinates a loose affiliation of local chapters: each chapter receives the hymnal, logos, some light guidance, and is set free to do as much or as little as they wish. Owner Adam Reinwald tells me that there are currently almost 100 local chapters in the United States, but that about 30–40 of them are actively holding regular events.² Beer Choir has never been a nonprofit organization, but the vast majority of the chapters are non-monetized. "We're relatively proud of the grassroots feel of the organization nationwide while maintaining some quality-control from our national office. That ensures that Beer Choir is a consistent and high-quality experience for each chapter."³

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¹ Traditional English shanty from the 19th century.

² Adam Reinwald, email to the author, June 1, 2026.

³ Adam Reinwald, email to the author, Sep. 5, 2026.

Michael Engelhardt, a multifaceted musician, was trying to create an “instant Oktoberfest” when he held the first Beer Choir event in Decatur, Illinois in 2014.⁴ He wrote a Beer Choir Theme Song and gathered eleven other tunes – drinking songs, familiar songs with re-purposed lyrics, some rounds and catches – and they remain today as the first dozen entries in the *Beer Choir Hymnal*. His invited guests sang together at the local bar and grill while drinking beer. He ran with the idea, hosting events in craft breweries and at choral conferences, and the franchising of local chapters began.



Credit: Tom Stock

The very phrase “Beer Choir” catches the ear in a novel way. For many people “choir” implies a church setting. Communal singing in America has grown less common; singing is often viewed as something to be observed passively. Here’s the power of Beer Choir, though: the informality and novelty of the setting, the low stakes, and most of all the social lubricant of beer draws people in and makes them understand that they can in fact sing—that singing is a normal human activity, not one reserved for the elite few. From the very first event, Englehardt noticed that the low-barrier nature of Beer Choir was drawing a wider

population beyond just choir enthusiasts. I can attest to this power: adults who haven’t sung in a long time attend our events on a pretense of “well, I can come along and just listen.” The entire room starts to drink and sing, and eventually those *just listening* folks are taking part.

One of the Siouxland Beer Choir’s early events was held in a taproom 30 miles away from our previous venues. We had been enthusiastically invited, but it was a small crowd. A few people were there by accident, regarding me bemusedly when I handed them a *Beer Choir Hymnal*. Half an hour later, we were singing the German additive song “Schnitzelbank”—like “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” each verse gets longer, and in our performances, louder and faster. When I call for a brave soloist to lead the call and response in German, most everyone in the room studiously avoids eye contact. This time, though, one of those bemused non-singers boldly volunteered to lead the fourth verse. At the break, he confided that his grandmother had a poster of this song. He hadn’t thought about it in a long time. For this man, the pull of deep-seated memory led to the power of joining the group.

My colleagues at Morningside University and I are working on an interdisciplinary humanities project titled [At Home in Siouxland](#). Funded by a Mellon Foundation Higher Learning Program grant, the project examines the many ways that diverse populations have made this corner of Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota home—and part of the story is told through community music-making such as Beer Choir.

There is another way that all the fun and community of Beer Choir can repair an individual’s fear or anxiety about singing—one that my wife and I have learned from our careers in church music: some adults have been damaged by bad teachers in their childhood. They were instructed, in an act of educational malpractice, to simply mouth the words because they “couldn’t sing.” I have witnessed individuals break down with emotion when they realize that, in fact, they *can* sing, that they can take part in this basic human connection. I’ve worked for long hours with adults who aren’t great at matching pitch—often stemming from adolescence—and noted their fervent desire to enjoy this natural human behavior. Beer Choir is a group, so there is safety both in numbers and informality, and it can serve as a first rehabilitative step to helping these humans reclaim their singing voice.

There have been several other notable entries lately in the field of low-barrier community choral music-making. The founder of [Tuneless Choir](#), Nadine Cooper, suffered from the judgment of a teacher who asked her to stop singing

⁴ Michael Engelhardt, conversation with the author, July 6, 2026.

because she was “ruining it for everyone else.”⁵ There are now thirty tuneless choirs in England and a couple in Canada for those “lacking the ability, practice, or confidence to sing in tune.”⁶ [Australia’s Pub Choir](#), led by Astrid Jorgensen, is more specifically a performance than a sing-along; she arranges a specific tune, and then teaches it to the assembled pub crowd, leading to a recorded performance in three-part harmony. Brooklyn’s [Choir! Choir! Choir!](#) operates similarly, issuing an open call for singers to learn and refine a single pop song. They have grown in popularity such that they sometimes perform with the original songwriter, such as in 2016 with [Colin Hay](#).

More pointedly, the Twin Cities of Minnesota is the cradle of the [Justice Choir](#) movement, with a stated goal of “a grassroots movement to engage in the empathetic, collaborative, and collective power of singing together to create change.”⁷ Composers from around the world have contributed to the Justice Choir Songbook, a collection of music that employs echo singing, call and response, and other formats suitable for marches and rallies. Minnesota is a place rich in traditional choral singing, and taking their voices from the concert halls to the streets has created powerful moments at high-profile protests there in the past decade.

Does singing in the face of an armed government agent make a difference? Can a bunch of musical silliness in the pub build community? Will academia respect the role of a community song leader as important? I suspect there is a lot more to be studied in this intersection of music and sociology. Using Thomas Turino’s *Four Fields of Music Making*,⁸ Ethan Hein underlines the American tendency toward the Presentational mode, with its clear divide between performer and audience, and away from Participatory mode. We are different than most countries in this regard, Hein argues: “Most humans in world history have regarded social music as a basic emotional vitamin, and our lack of it shows in our collective unhappiness.”⁹

I became a conductor and music teacher because I loved *Carmina Burana* and the Verdi *Requiem*. I wanted to be Leonard Bernstein and Robert Shaw and Michael Tilson Thomas. Along the way, though, I grew to admire musicians who occupied a harder-to-define leading role: Alice Parker, Nick Page, and Bobby McFerrin. Each demonstrated concern for matters other than the carefully rehearsed measure. Parker composed and arranged hundreds of tunes, wrote about and taught of her love of the shape of a melody and the singable folk tune. She held community sings, as Page did, encouraging a multigenerational crowd of humans to sing and harmonize even if they aren’t sure how to start. McFerrin, alongside his multi-genre virtuosity, reminded us—professional and amateur musicians alike—that we should play, occasionally we should make it up, and that music is fun.

The shtick that I have developed in leading these community sings serves this purpose – putting nerves at ease and giving each musician permission to try and fail. “We’re singing this one in German. Don’t speak German? Have another beer, it’ll help!” The *Beer Choir Hymnal* contains traditional drinking songs, particularly German and Irish ones, with some rounds thrown in. My chapter has not faced any complaints about cultural appropriation; our “instant Oktoberfest” history means that our songs are nearly all intended for group singing and free cultural exchange. Garth Brooks’s “Friends in Low Places” and the polka tune “In Heaven, There Is No Beer” are two additions that have proven to be natural fits.

Then there are the songs that aren’t really about drinking but have been given new, irreverent lyrics: “Dough, the stuff that buys my beer; Ray, the guy who brings me beer.” In Siouxsland, we also like to program any song with a wide recognition. “Country Roads” is one of those, as evidenced by its performance at Oktoberfest in Munich and World Cup matches throughout this last summer. An important step toward demystifying singing lies in tunes like this that many of us can sing without lyric sheets in front of us. “Sweet Caroline,” “Let It Be,” and “Bohemian Rhapsody” have been very popular. We take requests and invite spontaneous leadership from the group. “Oh Danny Boy” and “The Parting Glass” are part of our closing ceremonies each time.

The Siouxsland Beer Choir has now held a dozen public events over the past three years. We are a small community, with 270 followers on social media and a normal attendance of fifty singers at a time. The shtick has grown into a mock formality, with toasts, officers who have titles that change every time, a growing cadre of instrumentalists in the *Beer*

⁵ “Our Story”, [tunelesschoir.com](https://www.tunelesschoir.com), accessed July 7, 2026, <https://www.tunelesschoir.com/story/>.

⁶ [Tunelesschoir.com](https://www.tunelesschoir.com)

⁷ “About”, [justicechoir.org](https://www.justicechoir.org), accessed July 7, 2026, <https://www.justicechoir.org/#about>

⁸ Thomas Turino, “Four Fields of Music Making and Sustainable Living”, *Worlds of Music* 51, no. 1 (2009): 95-117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41699865>

⁹ “Participatory music vs. presentational music”, The Ethan Hein Blog, accessed July 8, 2026, <https://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2014/participatory-music-vs-presentational-music/>.

Choir Philharmonic Orchestra, and a shared history. I will always tell of the time that “Country Roads” was in full voice and an unsuspecting patron opened the door; he regarded us with wide-eyed horror and fled the scene. He did come back later to sit at the bar, and rumor has it he sang along near the end. A real occurrence from our very first event has magnified exponentially in our shared memory: while singing “Also Drank Varathursta” (sic) complete with high soprano C at the end, a chunk of the suspended ceiling broke off, fell on our table, and splashed our beers.

Ultimately, Beer Choir is a fiercely egalitarian musical event that dispenses with pretension and builds community. After all, singing is a natural human activity.

SAM Spotlight: An Interview with Deane Root

Editor’s Note: In this installment of the SAM Spotlight, Deane Root shares his early experiences in American music studies, SAM’s role in supporting the field, and future aspirations for the Society. He is interviewed by Eric Whitmer, a percussionist, carillonist, and doctoral candidate in musicology researching the development of the American orchestra in the 20th and 21st centuries as a privately funded technology of social development and influence. If you have recommendations for future interview subjects or collaborations, please be in touch with the editorial team.

Whitmer: I always like to ask music scholars this question: do you remember the last thing that you listened to that caught your attention?

Root: My wife and I were having dinner last night with a couple at their home, close to where they are replacing a bridge. We had walked out on their deck, and while you couldn't see any of the construction, I was hearing this repeated noise. They were all talking and I was saying—what's that sound? And I thought, what they're doing right now is they are scraping down a surface to make it smooth. I told everyone, I think they're almost finished with this project, and I opened the newspaper this morning and they announced that they finished the project.

Whitmer: We can file this under unexpected benefits of being a music scholar!

Root: Right! With music, you're using your whole brain with decoding signal, aural signal, and what those sounds mean to you. You learn these things as a musician, and if you are lucky, you can do that.

Whitmer: Do you feel like you always have that sensitivity for aurality, or perhaps when was the first time you experienced that?

Root: I remember as a kid, I spent my summers on a farm in Kansas. One of my jobs was to pump the water every morning, because there was no running water. I'd have to pump using this big old hand pump that was taller than I was. And I learned to tell when the water was coming up the pipe through its sound. That way it didn't slosh over the side and I wouldn't waste it. I think at an early age I started to use my ears as part of a tool for understanding the world and being able to work with the world. I remember that from when I was about five years old.

Whitmer: That is quite young! I don't know that I remember hearing anything at five years old. I'm very impressed.

Root: Well, it's a strong memory. And I learned how to make these sounds so I could explain to people a very distinctive sound in my brain.

Whitmer: I hear in your answers that you are clearly linking sound to these memories and experiences. Do you feel like this influences your scholarship?

Root: I think that's been part of my approach from the very beginning. When I decided to go into American music studies, I was a graduate student. I remember having an epiphany at the University of Illinois after hearing the sounds on campus during the summers of discontent when we were occupied by National Guard troops. It was the sounds of that experience that were so different from the normal academic campus sounds. And what's most important to me is that music is a way

of understanding what your culture is, what your history is, and why you're here. How you relate to all of that, since sound is a portal to those things. And so, my approach to history, to musicology, has always been the social structures or the social milieu of the sound itself and how those sounds create messages that shape people's identities, their experiences, their lived life.

Whitmer: Is that what you feel called back to about the study of music?

Root: For me, it's not just the social history of sound. It's helping the living people now understand who they are, where they've come from, and how they relate to other living beings through that sound. It's the most social of studies, if you will. So, the way I understand my own history and my own family and my own growing up is through the ways in which sound was affecting people at the time.

Whitmer: Thinking across your career, you've contributed so much to the intellectual project of American music, how do you think about your relationship to the larger project of American music historiography?

Root: Well, there's an interesting question, when I started—and I've recently written about this—there was no such thing as American music historiography. When I was looking for a dissertation topic, for example, I read through everything that the University of Illinois had in the library, and it was so frustrating that there was nothing that I thought had any substance whatsoever about how this genre formed. How did it ever get started in the first place? It was more than just some entrepreneur putting on a show. So, I set out in my dissertation to show how a whole genre of musical theater had gotten started. What were the forces? What became the standard process that the entrepreneurs relied on or that the performers themselves created in order to generate so much musical theater? And why was it so important to a general public, let alone the elite public, which had the money one would have thought to support this stuff? They told us that you have to pick a topic that nobody's done before. And if you're lucky, they would say, you'll be able to open up a niche subject for people to follow you, to build on. Well, I chose American popular stage music, which meant that I was maybe the first dissertation, certainly the first published one, that I had been able to find for popular music, for musical theater.

Whitmer: Speaking of the larger process of scholarly knowledge, I'm curious on how you might reflect on your relationship to SAM over the course of your career.

Root: Well, we could talk about that for days!

Whitmer: Absolutely! Although, if you could do it in fifty words or less, that'd be great for the *Bulletin*.

Root: *(laughs)* I think that I felt very lonely in graduate school. I don't mean just socially or personally, but intellectually lonely because most of the people there were interested in studying the classics from Europe. And I wasn't so much, I didn't know the culture. I didn't have it in my bones, as it were, and I wanted to understand what I wanted to understand: the history of my own culture. What the Society gave me was a peer group—although they were mostly older than I was—a group of people who were interested if I talked about band music. I had asked about bands in my undergraduate studies, but nobody wanted to talk about it! So, I found a group of people who were. Finding like-minded people who were interested, shared some of the values that I shared, and would give me a space to participate. Also, I felt I could let my hair down there, as it were. SAM gave me a chance to present my ideas and get interested feedback, not just criticism. They were all interested and caring and supportive. You could give a paper and have everybody sing a song in the middle of it together, or get up and do a little dance together in the middle of your session. I love the idea of combining the bodily experience of music and sound with the intellectual experience, you understand so much more. You remembered a lot more about it. And you could do that at SAM, because we made it happen.

Whitmer: Is that what you would like to see from SAM in the future? Or, perhaps, what do you hope future scholars will be able to get out of SAM?

Root: Well, I hope that SAM will continue to exist, and that people will continue to remake it for the times. That way, it can serve intellectually, socially, and sensorially. To stimulate all sorts of ways of responding to music and the American experiences, which does make me think about the soon-to-start development campaign. One of the things that the last

strategic planning process told us was that the Society needs more functionality at a central level at its core, so we can deliver on the promise that all of the funds created in the 2010s had offered. We're doing a lot, but it's not there yet. We want to make sure that SAM doesn't just survive but thrives over the next fifty years. That way the Society can continue to serve however the whole field of American studies and music evolves.

Whitmer: Great pitch, you can count me in!

Root: Well, there you are! It's been a thrill ride over the past fifty years, and I think about this question: what does somebody in your situation want to see happen over the coming years? I made a list when I was at your stage, and I got to tick those things off one-by-one. What are the things that you want to see or somebody at your stage wants to see happen in the next fifty years, a couple of generations? You should make a list, prioritize it, get other people to work with you on it. That's what we did. I had about 10 things on the list, and I think we've accomplished them all by now.

Whitmer: Well, I would be foolish to not mention my gratitude for the work you and your collaborators were able to accomplish, so that my generation of scholars can push the ball forward.

Root: Never underestimate your own power to change the world. I wasn't out to change the world; I was out to help other people find the meaning in American music studies, and it worked! Working together, working with like-minded people, finding people who have these ideas and aren't afraid to talk about them. What's great about SAM is that it allows all sorts of ways of interacting with folks. Just enjoy it! It isn't just showing up, but participating, even in dancing! I loved dancing. It's putting yourself there and working with other people on reaching for their dreams as well. It is very fulfilling to do when you can help other people reach their aspirations. That's a big reward.

Whitmer: So, what I'm hearing is that there's going to be a lot of dancing at future SAMs!

Root: I hope! Whatever style you want.

From the President

Denise Von Glahn

It's an understatement to say that the six months since our Richmond conference have been unusually eventful for SAM. Less than a week after we parted, we learned that our Executive Director, Dr. Megan MacDonald, would be leaving her position with us. A month later, our Associate Conference Manager, Dr. Megan Murph, explained that she needed to devote time to her university obligations and publishing, and six weeks after that, Dr. Paula Bishop, our Technology Coordinator, shared that she wanted to retire, which she had done from her university position earlier. The team that had made Richmond, earlier conferences, and so much else run smoothly was dispersing.

What could have been a devastating blow to the momentum we'd built over the past few years instead became an opportunity to reassess, regroup, and recommit ourselves to our Society and its mission. Thanks to our strong foundation, in part laid by the previous team, and the extraordinary work of the current Board, which took on added responsibilities and approached the situation as an unexpected opportunity, we came through invigorated and newly determined.

With the Board's approval, I appointed Dr. Dana Gorzelany-Mostak, who had been serving as our Secretary, to the Interim Executive Director position; and Dr. Samantha (Sami) Lampe, who had been instrumental in helping to organize SAM's Sounding the Nation at 250 project, as our Associate Conference Manager. They dove into their roles with a kind of focused, contagious energy, expertise, and enthusiasm that exceeded all expectations. Our motto became "We've Got



This.” As we imagine our future technology needs, we will consider whether and how to design a new position to meet them. Over a two-month period, President-Elect Trudi Wright worked with a committee of SAM members to organize and execute a search for our new, permanent Executive Director. Together with Eric Hung, Jeff Magee, Colleen Renihan, and Kendall Winter, Trudi went through over 700 applications, narrowed the field to just over 100, and then interviewed three highly qualified finalists. It is clear that there is extraordinary interest in SAM and talent beyond our imagining. At the end of the process, Dr. Gorzelany-Mostak rose to the top of the pool, and I appointed her to be SAM’s fourth Executive Director.

Beyond restaffing our office, the past six months have also given us the chance to focus on what members had identified as their three top priorities for SAM in the 2024 Survey, the 2025 Conference Plenary Session, and in individual Zoom conversations conducted last summer. To that end, we believe that **communication** with the SAM office, especially response time, has improved significantly. We are expecting it to get even better as more permanent procedures are put in place. We have hired HyperArts to assist with our **website redesign**, which should be operational this fall. It will be easier for members to pay their dues, register for conferences, and donate to our awards, fellowships, and upcoming capital campaign. The new website will also contain regularly updated information on SAM events, and links to resources for our members and the larger community. By the time you read this *Bulletin*, we will have hosted four President’s Forums, which are our first response to members’ desires for **greater engagement between conferences**. Going forward, the Membership Committee, chaired by Emma Jensen, will work with the Executive Director and President to organize our forums. We are also planning additional online events that will allow SAM to engage with the larger community. Board member Will Robin will take the lead on these “SAM After” events, live conversations with SAM scholars about major moments in contemporary American music. Events may include SAM After the Super Bowl, or SAM After the Grammys. As Will describes them, these will be lighthearted (though educational) discussions rather than pre-prepared conference papers. The goal is to bring together the SAM community for a fun, informative hang as well as introduce students and the broader public to how musicological perspectives can inform their enjoyment of big cultural moments. More information about the details of these events will be forthcoming. Look for it in our monthly RoundUps.

Under the leadership of Deane Root and a baker’s dozen of SAM members, including Sally Bick, Susan Cook, Elizabeth Craft, David Garcia, Jonathan Gómez, Tammy Kernodle, John Koegel, Jeff Magee, Laurie Matheson, Allison Robbins, Doug Shadle, Stephanie Stallings, and Judy Tsou, the Development Committee has been working on our upcoming Capital Campaign. Our thanks to Elizabeth Uchimura, head of our Publicity Committee, who worked with David Garcia to organize videotaping sessions at the conference and elsewhere that will be used as part of the campaign. This is an all-SAM effort, which is essential to the future health of our community.

On a final note, I want to mention an opportunity I had this past April to attend a memorial service for Chuck Garrett that was hosted by his parents, Roland and Elayne Garrett, at the family home. Since Chuck’s death in July 2024, I’d corresponded with them about their son’s impact on SAM and how he touched so many members’ lives. When they asked me to deliver some remarks about Chuck and SAM at this large family gathering I shuddered at the thought of speaking in such an emotionally charged moment. Lesser occasions have caused me to choke up. But with Chuck’s wife, brother, parents, and extended family filling the living room, and Chuck’s close friends and fellow SAM members, Andrew Berish, Daniel Goldmark, Carol Oja, and Stephanie Vander Wel smiling up at me, I found I could do what I thought I couldn’t.

As our Society undertakes its second fifty years and launches a capital campaign to secure our future, I think about the small, eclectic group of founding members—librarians, museum professionals, band directors, performers, and academics—who undertook what looked like an impossible task. They would buck the disciplinary tide, insist on American music culture as an important, legitimate pursuit, and start a society whose focus was just that. And they did it. And here we are. I’ve come to believe that when SAM is involved, there’s no limit on what can be done.

Remembering Deborah Smith Pollard

Birgitta Johnson

Deborah Smith Pollard passed away on April 12, 2026. She was a member of the Society for American Music for almost twenty years. Deborah was born on January 15, 1952, in Detroit, Michigan, the eldest child of Rev. Elmer W. Smith and Rosa Lee Smith. Both of her parents were formally trained musicians. Her father (a baritone and choral conductor) was

the pastor and a minister of music at Elyton Baptist Church and her mother (pianist and educator) served in the church for fifty years. Detroit was a musical nexus for a variety of music traditions and an important center for gospel music, and so Deborah's love and reverence for the music and preaching traditions of the Black Church was nurtured in fertile ground. She participated in church and community gospel choirs in her youth but was drawn to the oratorical aspects of gospel music in worship as well as in the world beyond church walls. The rhetorical gifts of Black preachers, gospel singers, and gospel program hosts captured her attention and by the time she got to Michigan State University to major in Television and Radio in the early 1980s, she was already producing and hosting her own gospel radio show, "On the Gospel Side," for four stations on the AM and FM dials. After earning her BA in Television and Radio, she continued to produce for radio as well as television shows on WDIV-TV (Detroit's NBC affiliate) and WXYZ-TV. She won a regional Emmy Award for a special she produced for WDIV titled "Rejoice: A God Sounds Christmas Special" in 1986.



The 1980s is also when Deborah's impact on the gospel programming and performance in Detroit went national. Attracting gospel artists and fans from around the country to what would become one of the longest running and largest gospel concert festivals in the U.S., Deborah produced and hosted the first McDonald's GospelFest and later the Motor City PraiseFest until both events were combined in 1999. She served as its executive producer until 2005. During this time and into the 2000s, she was also a columnist for several periodicals including *The Michigan Chronicle*, *Totally Gospel Magazine*, *Spirit-Filled Magazine*, and *The Christian News Herald*. She published articles on gospel greats and contemporary gospel innovators in newspaper and trade magazines such as *The Detroit Free Press*, *Gospel Today Magazine*, and *Score Magazine*.

Deborah had the gifts of a skilled orator as well as the heart of an educator. She returned to higher ed to earn her M.A.T. in English with a cognate in African American Literature from Wayne State University, while still running her gospel radio shows, consulting for arts agencies, and hosting community events. She returned to Michigan State and completed her Ph.D. in English in 1994. "Dr. Deb" would be her new name to many in the gospel radio community to honor her dedication to gospel music and its history. Her dissertation, "Gospel Announcer/Black Gospel Music Tradition," represented a new wave of scholarship in gospel music that was expanding beyond isolated histories of songwriters and singers, and tapping into the networks of creatives, organizations, churches, and businesses that made up the "gospel field," as musicologist Mark Burford would label it decades later. Forever a champion for gospel music in Detroit, Deborah also strove to represent the full range of gospel music's influence, programming traditional gospel artists as well as making room for newer and blended sounds of contemporary gospel music, holy hip-hop, urban gospel, and praise and worship, when many gospel announcers or radio stations chose more conservative routes. As much as she loved platforming the many sounds of gospel music, her passion was the lyrical basis for the genre. As a radio broadcaster, she would insert historical notes about the music into her shows pairing African American history with Bible quotes and words of inspiration in each show at a time when corporate radio was steadily downsizing or even eliminating gospel radio hosts and DJs. For over four decades, Deborah was a popular and respected gospel announcer on leading urban stations up until the time of her passing. She noted that she was inspired by her mother and other female gospel radio announcers who helped paved the way for her in a male-dominated field. Her shows "Strong Inspirations" (WJLB FM 98, 1994–2013) and "Rhythm and Praise with Deborah Smith Pollard," renamed "Sunday Morning Inspiration" when she gained a co-host in Glenda Curry (MIX 92.3 FM WMXD, a Clear Channel Station, 2013–2025), held down the 6:00 and 7:00 a.m. slots on Sundays for thirty years. Generations of listeners grew up to Dr. Deb's voice on the radio.

Her voice also rang out in academia. In 1995, Deborah joined the faculty at the University of Michigan-Dearborn where she served as a Professor of English and Humanities for three decades. During that time, she earned tenure, served as the Director of African/African American Studies, and created several new courses for the curriculum in addition to teaching courses in 19th and 20th century literature, drama, and fiction. Her new curriculum for AFAM Studies and English included courses about Black women in literature, film, and music; Black men in America; introduction to African American literature; and a historically popular course she would teach even in retirement as Professor Emerita, "Introduction to Gospel Music." This course featured fieldwork trips to Detroit area congregations and class visits by gospel luminaries such as the Clark Sisters, Richard Smallwood, Donald Lawrence, Edna Tatum, Marvin Winans, and many

more. Deborah was what we now refer to as a public-facing scholar through her involvement not only in the university community but the Detroit metropolitan area, TV/radio broadcasting community, and among music preservation specialists. She was awarded both the Susan B. Anthony Award and the Distinguished Service Award by UM-Dearborn well before she retired. Fellow gospel announcer and oral historian Sande Rose recalls, “Dr. Deborah Smith-Pollard was a founding board member of the Detroit Gospel Music Legacy Foundation, joining us in the conviction that Detroit’s rich gospel heritage deserved to be preserved with both scholarly accuracy and heartfelt care. Her vision, credibility, and unwavering commitment helped put a face on this important work, leading to the [collection and documentation of more than five-hundred pieces of priceless gospel memorabilia](#). Though her voice, scholarship, and lifelong devotion to Detroit gospel music will be deeply missed, she has left us a blueprint that will continue to guide this work.” The collection Rose is referring to is housed in the Archives of African American Music and Culture at Indiana University, Bloomington. It includes rare and hard-to-find gospel music magazines, Pollard’s gospel music television specials, over fifty interviews with gospel artists and industry figures, air-checks of her radio programs, and radio programs hosted by other announcers.

As a scholar, Deborah documented the contemporary era of gospel music and the culture around Black Church social spaces. Her groundbreaking 2008 book, *When Church Becomes Your Party: Contemporary Gospel Music*, not only represented the first book to specifically focus on contemporary gospel, it included ethnographic based research on the rise of praise and worship in Black Protestant churches in the 21st century, the boom of gospel stage plays, the influence of female gospel announcers, sartorial choices in Black church spaces, and the controversial rise of holy hip-hop. Gospel historian Robert Marovich remembers, “I first encountered the work of Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard...through her book.... This wise and refreshing survey of the contemporary gospel music community came out at a time when music scholars were still pondering the past. I then met Deborah in person at the Gospel Music Workshop of America convention and we became fast friends...She was someone to whom you could speak with candor about the music industry.... She had a passion for and knowledge of gospel, both old and new, and was always someone you could turn to with questions. Serious, brilliant, hardworking, compassionate—that was Dr. Deb.” Ethnomusicologist and author of *Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* Alisha Lola Jones also notes, “There is absolutely no way I could have written my dissertation or book without the foundational work of Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard. With the cultural acumen of a seasoned radio announcer, she gave me a way to account for taboo topics within Black religious soundscapes with both seriousness and cultural fluency. She was a griot, carrying the culture in a language we recognized, teaching the rest of us how to listen.”

Though she regularly worked with the Stellar Awards Gospel Music Academy and the College Language Association, held board positions for groups like the Gospel Heritage Foundation, and coordinated projects for the National Endowment for the Arts, Deborah found her academic musical home in the Society for American Music in 2009. She was invited to the Denver conference by the chair of SAM’s Gospel and Sacred Music Interest Group (and future SAM President), Tammy Kernodle, to discuss her award-winning book. A longtime friend, Kernodle recalls that, “She joined SAM soon afterwards and became an active and committed member, supporting the work of many scholars.” Tammy and Deborah would be key to increasing the participation of Black scholars in SAM through various informal outreach activities. Tammy would call on Deborah again in 2018 to co-chair the Gospel and Sacred Music Interest Group along with Birgitta Johnson. As co-chair, Deborah was instrumental in efforts to increase membership to be among the largest and most active interest groups in SAM today. Events such as lightning talks with local artists and scholars at SAM conferences in New Orleans (2019), Detroit (2024), and Richmond (2025) gave SAM attendees opportunities to engage with artists experimenting with spirituals and whale singing off the coast of Brazil, gospel music oral historians, the intersections of Islam and jazz, and Sacred Harp legends. Deborah also helped the interest group reach its members outside of the conference season by hosting online book talks/listening parties as well as the group’s first graduate student virtual showcase during the pandemic lockdown period. Her impact on emerging scholars and graduate students cannot be understated.

Scholar and oral historian Ambre Dromgoole remembers Deborah’s recent impact: “Deborah Smith Pollard was an encouraging presence at the scene of several formative moments in my career. She was in the audience for my first professional presentation at the 2017 Society for American Music conference in Montreal. She also participated in my first post-Ph.D. presentation at Yale in 2023.... She tilled the ground I walk on, never apologetic about the labor progenation requires. No better or more consistent model exists for how to navigate this world with grace and integrity.”

With presentations and programs all over the U.S., Deborah also shared her research internationally with presentations at the inaugural meetings of the Christian Congregational Music Conference in Oxford, England, speaking tours in Johannesburg, South Africa, and a four-city tour in Japan. Robert Darden, music journalist and founder of the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project adds, “The impact of Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard goes far beyond the awards, influential books and research, and unyielding support of gospel music. She was continually invited to the Pruitt Memorial Symposia on Black Sacred Music at Baylor University and other conferences because she simply radiated joy, enthusiasm, acceptance, [and] caring. Deborah’s presence made us all better, made us want to *do* better. Her influence as a scholar and genuinely good person lives on in the work and lives of *whoever* she touched, both inside academia and out.” In many of her travels abroad and around “The D,” Deborah was often accompanied by her husband of twenty-eight years, Basil Pollard. He was just as softspoken as his dynamic wife, willing to be supportive behind the scenes, and making sure Deborah got from point A to point B/C/D around the snowy streets of Detroit.

In November of 2025, Deborah was awarded a Distinguished Service Award by the Ecumenical Theological Seminary for her four decades of playing gospel on R&B stations and creating a gospel music course at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Still cautious about social media, Deborah posted about this recognition on Instagram, her love of words and “The Word” coalescing in this honor. At the time of her passing, Deborah was working on a multi-decade monograph on the most important contemporary gospel song in the world, “Oh, Happy Day” written by Edwin Hawkins. Just as that song changed the global trajectory for gospel music, the life and legacy of Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard have impacted generations of artists, scholars, broadcasters, ministers, and educators.

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Editor’s Note: The Board of the Society for American Music was also sorry to learn of the recent passing of two accomplished SAM members: Kendra Preston Leonard and Tim Smolko. Memorials will be published in the Winter 2027 issue of the Bulletin.

Journal of the Society for American Music

Volume 20, Number 2 (May 2026)

Articles

Shirley Horn's *Here's to Life* and the Problem of the "Stand-up Singer"

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Punk Artifacts in a Digital World: Washington, DC, Post-Hardcore, Dischord House, and Filesharing Archives

Sean Louis Peters

The Violin as Archive: Genealogies of Sound and Memory in Holocaust Film

Kathryn Agnes Huether

Listening "deep down things": The Dark Ecology of Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Mass for the Endangered*

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Reviews

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Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Inside Chinese Theater: Community and Artistry in Nineteenth-Century California and Beyond*

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Rami Toubia Stucky

Joseph Keola Donaghy, *Mele on the Mauna: Perpetuating Genealogies of Hawaiian Musical Activism on Maunakea*

Kevin Fellezs

Media

Cantorales in the Americas & Beyond (CAB). Cantus Database, <https://cantusdatabase.org/Cantorales>.

Billy Traylor

Diccionario de la Zarzuela,

<https://diccionariodelazarzuela.es/dz>.

Janet L. Sturman

The *Journal of the Society for American Music* is an international, peer-reviewed journal dealing with all aspects of American music and music in the Americas. *JSAM* is dedicated to supporting scholarship that transcends disciplinary boundaries, cutting across historical musicology, music theory, ethnomusicology, cultural theory, identity studies, and American studies. *JSAM* encourages international dialogue across disciplines. The journal welcomes papers covering cultural hierarchy; social, political, economic, gender, and sexuality issues; race and ethnicity; the impact and role of the media; sacred, secular, and popular contexts and traditions; geographical and historical patterns; composers, performers, and audiences; historiography and reception history; problems of research, analysis, criticism, and aesthetics. [Further information about the submission process can be found here](#). Questions can be addressed to the editor at jsameditor@gmail.com.

Book Reviews

[The Karl Muck Scandal: Classical Music and Xenophobia in World War I America](#). Melissa D. Burrage. University of Rochester Press, 2025. 445 pp. ISBN: 9781648251283. Paperback.

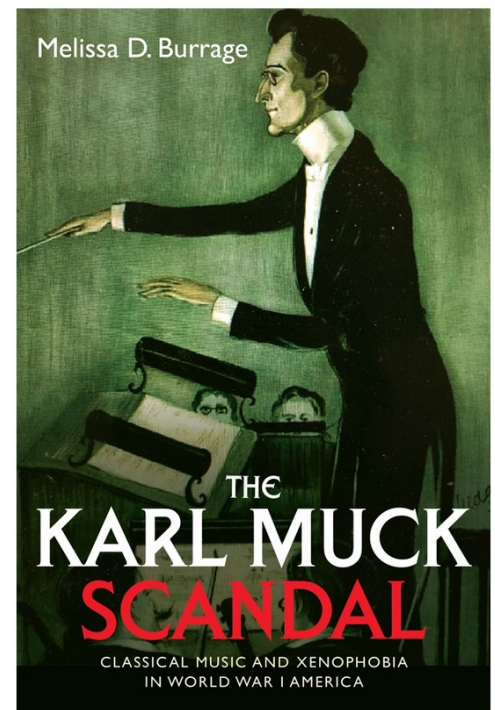
Justin T. Gregg, Columbia University

The recent paperback reprinting of Melissa D. Burrage's *The Karl Muck Scandal: Classical Music and Xenophobia in World War I America* certainly feels timely. Originally published in 2019, Burrage's monograph uses the tale of Karl Muck's ill-fated career as the director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra to examine changing sentiments toward immigrants during a period of rising nationalism and jingoism in the United States. Beginning with Muck's successful years as the ensemble's venerated director, Burrage traces the ways that his loyalties were called into question in parallel with rising anti-German sentiment in America during the war, ultimately leading to his internment and deportation in 1918 and 1919, respectively. The contemporary reader would be hard-pressed not to find continuing resonances in a story that involves the arrest of an immigrant on spurious charges as an alleged risk to national security, the use of mass media to smear the reputation of such a figure and his associates, complaints by American workers that jobs were being taken by foreigners, and even the threat by an ascendant political leader to demolish a concert hall and build a new one to his own specifications (though in this instance in Germany). A dramatic saga involving the director of a major orchestra adds yet further parallels to our modern world, altogether resulting in a book that should leave readers pondering big questions about American identity—and the place of symphonic music therein—both past and present.

Burrage makes clear from the opening pages that her book should not be read as a traditional biography of Muck. Instead, she hopes for Muck's story to illuminate a number of larger social and political themes related to the First World War, among which are "cultural change during the war, ... the social response to America's national security apparatus, ... the effect of wartime pressure on democracy and society, ... and how one's privacy can be exploited as a tool of compliance" (2). For her, the tale of Karl Muck becomes representative of "how America has treated (and continues to treat) its immigrants and minority populations, with sometimes unjust and inhumane punishments" (6). She acknowledges, however, that Muck—a man "in the highest social echelons"—is not among those "on the margins of society" who are more commonly the victims in such narratives, but she asserts that Muck's story should still serve to broaden our understanding of anti-immigrant injustices (249).

Beyond Muck himself, the city of Boston further represents "a microcosm of the broader tensions in America at this time," aligning with Burrage's overall intention to use smaller entities as "prisms" (another of her terms) through which larger questions may be examined (90, 2). With all of this in mind, the book is better categorized under the broader topic of U.S. history rather than musicology in particular, though it should certainly be of value to members of both fields with interests in this time and place. Indeed, the intended audience for this book seems intentionally broad: while scholarly readers will appreciate the thorough endnotes, Burrage's text assumes little music-historical background, as evidenced by explanatory digressions such as an early segment introducing the reader to Richard Wagner and his operas (14).

To address her framing questions, Burrage divides the book into eight chapters along with an introduction and coda. While each of the body chapters conveys an internally consistent narrative, the overall organization of the book may cause a bit of temporal disorientation for the reader, since some chapters are differentiated chronologically and others thematically. The first and last chapters cover the years before and after the war, respectively, allowing the reader to situate Muck's story in a broader historical context, as I discuss further below. Each of the remaining chapters, however, engages with overlapping periods between 1915 and 1919, and some of the chapter-to-chapter transitions involve movement backwards in time, in a manner perhaps more reminiscent of a novel than an academic history (for example, Chapter 3 takes place in 1918, while Chapter 4 is listed as spanning 1915–1918).



The aim of Burrage's opening chapter, as she puts it, is "studying Karl Muck in Boston and reconstructing the world that he lived in" prior to the outbreak of the war (10). In this extensive chapter—the longest in the book—Burrage paints a detailed picture of early-twentieth-century Boston, drawing on a wealth of archival sources and images to bring this setting to life; her own love for New England is clear throughout the book, and this chapter alone should be of interest to anyone studying Boston during this period. Her portrait of the city here is grounded in elements related to its receptivity toward German immigration and culture—from art museums to beer brewing—and is not always directly tied to Muck, though much of this contextual material does become relevant in later sections. In terms of Muck, the opening establishes him as a sought-after conductor and member of Boston's high society in the early decades of the twentieth century, whom Burrage ultimately compares to "a prized German artifact on the public stage that eager audiences came to see" (66).

The tides begin to turn for Muck in Chapters 2 and 3, in which Burrage examines the abrupt change in sentiment toward German immigrants in tandem with America's entry into the war. Still somewhat loosely connected to Muck as an individual, these chapters provide further historical context, though the difficulties Burrage faces in balancing her small- and large-scale narratives are exemplified in the following sentence, which comes across as a bit forced: "Imperial contests on the world stage and high-risk actions taken by leading decision-makers led to a series of events that would have dire consequences for millions of people worldwide, as well as for Karl Muck, more specifically" (71). Regardless, Burrage's historical analyses throughout the book are generally grounded in an extensive collection of source materials, through which the reader hears directly from many of the figures involved in the story—including Muck himself—in newspapers, letters, diary entries, and governmental documents.

The true "scandal" referenced in the book's title is the subject of Chapters 4–7, in which Muck shifts from an incidental victim of wartime animosity to a primary target of anti-German persecution. Among the central figures in this narrative is Mrs. William Jay (*née* Lucie Oelrichs), a board member of the New York Philharmonic who worked tirelessly toward the goal of establishing New York City as America's center for high culture—a role which had been held by Boston in the preceding decades. Jay felt it especially crucial for the Philharmonic to dethrone the Boston Symphony Orchestra as the nation's leading orchestra, and, as Burrage puts it, "capitalized on conditions created by the war to weaken the NYP's biggest opponent" (134). Given that Jay's muckraking later led directly to the arrest and expulsion of Karl Muck, Burrage does well in dealing with the nuanced cause for Jay's animosity toward the conductor, writing that "anti-German hysteria was utilized to achieve [the] competitive goals" of Jay and her New York-based associates, rather than simply being an expression of nationalism in itself (6). At the same time, Burrage resorts to some speculation in this discussion, writing that "it is possible" that Jay was involved in the publication of an infamous newspaper article alleging that Muck refused to perform the national anthem at a 1917 concert in Rhode Island—a complex episode investigated at length in Chapter 4—though Burrage acknowledges that "no primary source material exists" to definitively link Jay to it (151).

The latter portion of Burrage's narrative centers on Muck's affair with the soprano Rosamond Young, the discovery of which ultimately led to his decision to submit to internment as an enemy alien rather than undergo a public trial for sex crimes in Boston. As is the case throughout the book, Burrage contextualizes this aspect with a great deal of historical documentation—this time on attitudes toward sexuality in wartime Boston—concluding that that city "was clearly not the place to be involved in a sex scandal" and that in the end, "sex was the ultimate weapon used to punish and bring Karl Muck into compliance" (277). She moves at times into discussions of constitutional law, arguing that both Muck and Young were victims of civil rights violations only permissible under wartime powers, in alignment with her overarching aim to discuss larger political issues through the lens of this story (226). Another central figure in this story is Henry Lee Higginson, the founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who viewed the institution as a moral exemplar that would lose its authority if Muck's scandal came to light (264).

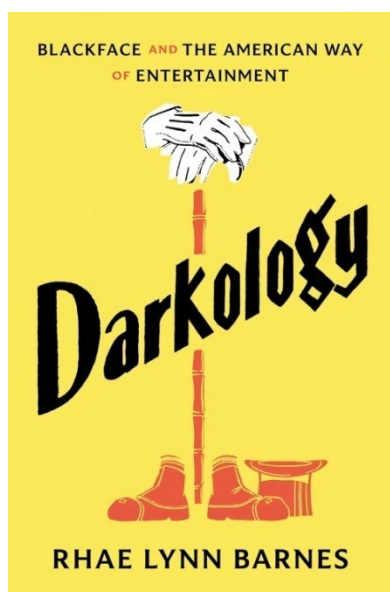
Among the greatest challenges in writing about a figure like Karl Muck is the question of how to deal with the protagonist's own moral failings. While he may come across as a sympathetic figure for much of the book's central portion, Burrage's last chapter is dedicated to Muck's two decades in Germany following his deportation from the United States, during which almost any hope for the reader's sympathy is lost. After his return to Germany, Muck developed a personal relationship with Adolf Hitler and openly expressed an antisemitism that Burrage argues he had held privately throughout his life; she concludes that "both Muck's racism and his loyalty to Hitler seem genuine" (300). While this may tempt the reader to wonder why to care about Muck's story at all, Burrage makes clear from start to finish that "this book focuses primarily on his American (Boston) experience, arguing that he and other German nationals and German

Americans were victims in the United States during World War I” (6–7). If one engages closely with this portion of Muck’s story, as Burrage asks us to do, then one will certainly be left with much to think about as questions of immigration, belonging, and identity are once again top of mind in the United States.

Darkology: Blackface and the American Way of Entertainment. Rhae Lynn Barnes. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2026. 528 pp. ISBN: 978-1-63149-634-9. Hardback.

Emma Webb, Florida State University

Rhae Lynn Barnes’s *Darkology: Blackface and the American Way of Entertainment* presents the untold history of amateur blackface minstrelsy in the United States. Challenging blackface minstrelsy’s common timeline (1828–1900), *Darkology* argues that blackface minstrelsy flourished through the Civil Rights era in amateur forms and local spaces. Barnes’s examination of archival sources, material culture, critical bibliography, and oral history is an impressively broad project that stretches over one hundred years and across the continental U.S. and beyond. Though a lengthy and often difficult read due to its uncomfortable content, Barnes unearths forgotten stories and sources from dark archival corners and everyday American attics. The impressive, overwhelming, even haunting fruits of her study successfully prove, as Barnes writes, that “amateur minstrelsy was a festering underbelly that financed a system of inequality, segregation, and discrimination while culturally enshrining them as America’s cruel social norms” (423).



Darkology’s enormity is a testament to the pervasive history that Barnes uncovers. The book is divided into eight sections, each delineated by an image epigraph, and each section contains between three and seven chapters. Each section fosters its own unique, rich discussion on the complexities of blackface minstrelsy, yet Barnes’s accessible prose and limited academic vocabulary engages a wide audience. Musical readers, moreover, will find much to glean from *Darkology* as a crucial contribution to American music history, told through Barnes’s frequent poetic, musical references. Readers of Matthew Morrison’s *Blacksound* will find that *Darkology* complements Morrison’s history, expanding his narrative into more recent decades.

Part One, “The Jolly Corks,” pinpoints a fraternal order known as the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks (BPOE) as the initial force behind amateur minstrelsy. Barnes describes how these “titans of blackface” erected Elk lodges across the country as “a sanctuary for white male supremacy” (37, 39). Barnes’s second chapter paints a grim picture of the promiscuity and violence implicated in pre-Reconstruction minstrelsy—a dark reputation which the BPOE transformed into American patriotism. Chapter 3 looks at the BPOE’s early days masked in secrecy, probing the “queer subtext” in their intimate, all-male spaces (62). Chapters 4 and 5 establish two elements of amateur blackface minstrelsy that echo throughout *Darkology*: the minstrel show as a benefit concert to raise money for local causes, and the BPOE’s (and blackface minstrelsy’s) political power.

Part Two is titled “Booked.” Its three chapters focus on materials of blackface minstrelsy that fueled and profited from amateur practices. Barnes’s material history examines individual books, playbills, scripts, and photographs as “road maps of material clues” that arise from pencil markings, postage stamps, wear, crude binding, and more (83). In doing so, she demonstrates how individual performers adapted materials to fit local contexts and individual preferences. The materials Barnes uncovers move beyond songsters and joke books to include paper dolls, wigs, and paint, many of which are displayed in two extensive photo gallery inserts. The section culminates in Chapter 8, “Blackface Capitalism,” where Barnes draws connections between ads and coupons for local businesses, amateur fundraising shows, and local businesses, to argue that local communities used blackface minstrelsy to bolster white businesses and perpetuate segregation.

Part Three, “Uncle Sam and the Business of Blackface,” examines blackface minstrelsy amid the hardships of the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter 9 reads blackface minstrelsy’s “Happy Days” as an uncanny form of coping during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl migration. Chapter 10 examines the projects within Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress

Administration that invested in blackface minstrelsy by reviewing shows, boosting publishers, and integrating Stephen Foster into school curriculums. Chapters 11 and 12 focus on the high degree of blackface minstrel shows in the segregated American military during World War II, intertwining the racist performance practice with nostalgic ideas of war and American patriotism. Barnes crucially emphasizes that the American military fought against Nazi Germany's white supremacy while its own Black soldiers were denied equal rights at home, due in part to blackface minstrelsy. This section furthermore establishes one of *Darkology's* central themes: "blackface minstrelsy was used as an expression and process of patriotism and Americanization" (421).

"Dixie in the Desert," Part Four, describes blackface minstrelsy's role in WWII internment camps that held thousands of Japanese Americans captive following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Complicating minstrelsy's black-white binary, Barnes contends that minstrelsy became a tool of both Americanization and coping, offering a sense of escape and community for incarcerated Japanese Americans. The section draws on the individual experiences of incarcerated Japanese Americans as well as striking contrafacta of minstrel songs that highlight their experiences. Chapter 14, "Minstrels in Japan," contextualizes the discussion, recounting how blackface minstrelsy was once highly popular in Japan itself after arriving in 1850 with Commodore Perry. Regardless, Barnes writes, Stephen Foster's classics retained a strong American association such that they were banned in Japan during the war and prescribed in U.S. internment camps by the Wartime Civil Control Administration as a method of Americanization.

Part Five, "Polio Minstrels," simultaneously examines the recurring theme of disability and medicine in blackface minstrelsy and the hidden history surrounding Franklin D. Roosevelt's last days. Graham Jackson—Black entertainer, musician, and friend to FDR—is a central figure. By revealing Roosevelt's relationship with blackface minstrelsy, his friendship with Jackson, the centrality of blackface minstrelsy to the community at Warm Springs (a polio rehabilitation and research center), and Jackson's tearful goodbye performance upon Roosevelt's death, Barnes reveals the complexities of navigating the music industry as a Black musician. Furthermore, by utilizing Jackson's long-forgotten oral history recording, Barnes reworks the historiography of Roosevelt's death, pointing to the ways that history is preserved, forgotten, and even deliberately erased.

Part Six, titled "'A Thing Apart,'" narrates early opposition to blackface minstrelsy, a battle fought on paper by the NAACP and in day-to-day life by individual "foot soldiers," many of them Black migrant mothers (279). Chapters 22, 23, and 27 discuss this history, including the hailstorm of mail written to the NAACP seeking advice on how to combat blackface minstrelsy. Barnes also describes the NAACP's efforts to develop a legal argument against the practice—efforts that were not always successful. Barnes then turns to the stories of these letter writers, "migrant mothers," in chapters 24, 25, 26, and 28. Barnes especially focuses on one such Black migrant mother, Betty Reid Soskin, who bravely spoke out against a blackface minstrel show at the elementary school integrated by her son. Barnes's writing is simultaneously a moving tribute to Betty Reid's life as well as a reminder of the complete normality of blackface minstrelsy in white suburban communities.

Part Seven, "Sugarcoating Slavery," challenges the notion that mid-twentieth-century anti-Black racism and blackface were relegated to the South. Barnes begins, in Chapter 29, with the history of Cakewalk, reaching back to the Middle Passage to describe the centrality of forced dance, dancing for treats, dance as satire, and the appropriation of enslaved people, all of which led to the University of Vermont's beloved annual blackface tradition known as Kake Walk. Chapter 30 takes a deeper dive into Kake Walk, the event itself, the dancers, and the surrounding culture. Chapters 31, 32, and 33 address both the struggle to bring an end to Kake Walk and the ensuing fallout in 1970. Barnes's interviews with Linda Patterson and Charlie Titus, two Black college students whose peaceful protests helped shut down the event, reveal the chilling realities of a deeply racist practice and an institution's tepid response. Barnes reveals ultimately how Kake Walk, in the name of tradition, harbored a deep-seated racism masked by Northern paternalist arguments.

The final section, "A Ford, Not a Lincoln," centers Gerald R. Ford and his appearance at the 1974 Lowell Showboat, an annual minstrel show and fundraiser that partnered with racially exclusive fraternities and supported white businesses and politicians. Despite its location in Michigan, showboating perpetuated nostalgia for the Old South, offering, as Barnes writes, "a sanctuary for those resistant to the winds of change" (383). She thus argues that blackface minstrelsy was a political tool for winning over the conservative voters that rallied in opposition to racial equality and sexual liberation. Beyond Ford, Barnes's thirty-sixth chapter recounts how blackface minstrelsy impacted many American presidents from Lincoln to Obama, reinserting blackface in the history of American politics and culture.

Darkology is inevitably a painful, uncomfortable read. Yet as Barnes admonishes, to look away is to betray “our fellow Americans” (423). Despite its ugly realities, *Darkology* shines as a work of care through Barnes’s commitment to the truth and for the way she honors the unsung heroes, “ordinary individuals who dared to challenge [blackface minstrelsy]” (423).

Music is often at the center of *Darkology*’s broad examination of blackface materials and performances. Barnes’s emphasis on amateur musicking uncovers music histories that have escaped traditional narratives, consequently offering a crucial epistemology for understanding a specifically American musical identity. Examining both individual experiences and widespread, systematic implementation, Barnes demonstrates how blackface minstrelsy and its music are embedded in the wider American musical landscape.

While *Darkology* is undoubtedly an enormous contribution to scholarship on blackface, race studies, and American music and history, perhaps its most vital contribution is as an everyday lens through which to view our American landscape. Minstrelsy’s remnants, Barnes writes, “hide in plain sight” (421). This book gives us the tools to recognize blackface minstrelsy’s marks in our communities from statues and street signs to sanitized Stephen Foster songs.

Barnes writes, “While blackface performances have ceased, their legacies resonate far beyond the small towns that loved them, impacting the communities and the political figures they elevated. These blackface legacies continue to resonate, urging us to critically examine the seemingly harmless traditions that conceal a more troubling past” (407). Whatever the current culture war, *Darkology* reminds readers that blackface minstrelsy is an ever-lurking shadow, an agent of past and present realities. It questions the source of American identity, power, and memory, and compels us to learn from the past.

Media Review

[Big Crass Monster](#). Whistling Hens: Jennifer Piazza-Pick, soprano, and Natalie Groom, clarinet. 2025. 58 minutes. CD, mp3, and streaming.

Madison Drace

At a College Music Society regional conference in March 2023, my lecture-recital was followed by a lecture-recital from the soprano-clarinet duo Whistling Hens. The duo, soprano Jennifer Piazza-Pick and clarinetist Natalie Groom, presented and performed a commissioned theatrical piece. The following day, they performed two additional commissioned works, also composed by women. Even before I learned more about their overall work, I recognized then that their performances emphasized not only collaboration between voice and instrument, but also collaborations between women in music. Two years later, the Whistling Hens released their second album, *Big Crass Monster*, which includes a piece performed at that 2023 conference.

Since 2018, Whistling Hens has commissioned dozens of chamber works composed by women and performed them at conferences, through residences, and at festivals.¹⁰ *Big Crass Monster*—a phrase from a harsh review of Beethoven quoted on the opening track—features world premiere recordings of compositions by Jennifer Stevenson, Melissa Dunphy, Jenni Brandon, and Cherise D. Leiter, all of whom compose for Western art music ensembles. This sophomore release aims to “amplify forgotten voices, misunderstood legacies, and reclamation through music.”¹¹ Each work demands that both performers adapt to various musical styles, moods, and genres. Piazza-Pick and Groom switch seamlessly between operatic and popular styles without losing their individual sounds.

The sound production is clean and clear. Piazza-Pick and Groom’s sounds are balanced, one never overpowering the other. Gasps and snaps can be heard on



¹⁰“Whistling Hens: Music by Women Composers,” Whistling Hens, accessed August 15, 2026, <http://whistlinghens.org>.

¹¹“Big Crass Monster,” Bandcamp, accessed August 11, 2026, <https://whistlinghens.bandcamp.com/album/big-crass-monster>.

various tracks, dramatizing and diversifying their album's acoustic soundscape. In our era of aural perfection, any performance flaws are welcome. The intermittent imperfections present a human element slowly being lost to pitch correction and, more ominously, AI-generated music. In addition to conventional streaming services such as Spotify, listeners can also stream and purchase the album on Bandcamp, which, unlike other streaming platforms, pays artists an average of 82 percent of the revenue.¹²

The first song group, Stevenson's *Musical Invective*, sets to music negative reviews of familiar composers' works. Although Beethoven, Debussy, Webern, Lili Boulanger, and Gershwin are now highly regarded and subject to modern criticisms, these songs remind us that these composers were once subject to contemporary critiques, too. Stevenson treats the scathing reviews humorously by emulating each figure's respective compositional style. For example, "Webern" is composed using the twelve-tone technique. Whistling Hens then injects theatricality, including exaggerated slides in "Gershwin" and cheeky whistles in "L. Boulanger." The listener can hear Piazza-Pick and Groom's enjoyment in poking light fun at the canon—perhaps another reminder to not always take "serious" music so seriously.

The second set of songs, Dunphy's *Chants*, draws upon writings by artist and occultist Rosaleen Norton. The opening song, "A Chant," evokes the ethereal sounds of an incantation; it begins with three low, intense ascending and descending half-steps on the clarinet, followed by a wordless vocal line. "Swoon-Number," meanwhile, is more spooky than scary with its swung rhythms and back-beat snaps. In "Crystalline Sparkles," the clarinet embodies magic as it dances around the legato vocal line. Although Norton's beliefs were and remain countercultural—lines such as "In the lust of the goat" may ruffle some feathers—Piazza-Pick and Groom's performance treats Norton with care, accentuating the beauty and levity in her dark world.

Brandon's *Multitudinous Stars and Spring Waters*, with the original oboe part arranged for clarinet by Groom, borrows from secret writings by Chinese women across thirteen centuries. Despite the centuries that divide the authors from one another and from the performers, these forces converge for a moment in time through the performance, allowing the words to finally be expressed and heard. Piazza-Pick and Groom's performance is more like conversation, where one performer plays at a time, as if to truly listen to what the other communicates. At other points, they "sing" in unison, briefly synchronizing with one poet's voice, before beginning their exchange anew. This piece, however, would benefit the most from a live experience. Piazza-Pick and Groom's physicalities would add more contrast to the subtler mood shifts between each section.

The album closes with the song set *Dear Old Year*. The text—journal entries of the composer's great-great-great grandmother—presents a domestic farm life foreign to most modern listeners. Through their instruments, Piazza-Pick and Groom bring to life an ordinary, albeit complicated, life, animating mundane tasks such as potato picking. The first and last songs, "Dear Flavel" and "Dear Old Year," pair Americana simplicity and folk-like melodies with the author's nostalgia. The even-numbered movements are recipes to cure various ailments. While the duo could have mocked these outdated treatments, they instead playfully dramatize the process from the position of the author, much like Lee Hoiby's one-act opera, *Bon Appétit!*.

Whistling Hens' overall mission amplifies the voices and chamber works of living women. Large symphony orchestra programs have improved over the past decade by incorporating the occasional Price or Beach symphony, but U.S. orchestral institutions continue to predominantly program pieces composed by men.¹³ Whistling Hens alone cannot rectify this gender imbalance, but their chamber works peck away at the disparity. Because their ensemble is not beholden to the same expectations as symphonies or opera companies, they have more flexibility in what and who they program. This allows them to focus on the core of their mission, which includes all of the composers with whom they collaborate.

Big Crass Monster exemplifies individuals' efforts to create more diverse performance repertoires: not only in gender but also in performing forces and the subjects that inspire composers. The stories that Piazza-Pick and Groom thoughtfully present are at times comedic, but always genuine and thoroughly human; these hens' whistles give voice to numerous histories just as much as they collaboratively present new performance possibilities.

¹²"Bandcamp for Artists," accessed August 5, 2026, <https://bandcamp.com/artists>.

¹³Sarah Baer with Liane Curtis, "2025–2026 Concert Season: By the Numbers—Women's Philharmonic Advocacy," Women's Philharmonic Advocacy, April 14, 2025, <https://wophil.org/2025-2026-concert-season-by-the-numbers>.

Reintroducing the Forum for Early Career Professionals

Kendall H. Winter and Emmalouise St. Amand, Forum Co-Chairs

Following our remarks at the SAM 2026 Business Meeting concerning the state of the FECF, we have some exciting updates to share with current and potential FECF members and the wider SAM community:

Discourse Site, Guiding Document, and Membership Needs: We invite any SAM member who has completed a terminal degree in the last seven years to connect with our community on our [FECF Discourse site](#). There, you can read the [FECF Guiding Document](#) we adopted at the Richmond conference and complete a [FECF Membership Needs Survey](#), which will help us better respond to the needs of our membership in our programming and advocacy work.

Mentorship Pilot Program: We have collaborated with the Student Forum and Membership Committee to reinstate a mentorship program launching in October! As a pilot program, participation will be limited. To be considered as a mentee for AY 2026–27, please complete this [FECF Mentee Interest Form](#) no later than October 1st.

Writing Group: We continue to work toward fulfilling our charge in the SAM Strategic Plan to develop and launch a writing group for early career professionals. Stay tuned!

Help Us Spotlight You! Finally, we're aiming for FECF to be a more regular presence in future SAM *Bulletins* with a "Spotlight" section where we will post announcements and celebrate our community. If you are an early career professional interested in being featured in this way, please contact your FECF Co-Chairs at sam.early.career.professionals@gmail.com.

Bulletin Board & Member News

Sarah M. Lucas (Texas A&M University-Kingsville) was awarded a scholarship from the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, Switzerland to support research on newly rediscovered archival materials related to her current book project on Béla Bartók in America.

Cody A. Norling (West Virginia University) has been named the Newberry Library's 2026–27 Colleser Fund for Chicago Music Fellow, which will support his current book project on the city's civic operatic cultures of the Interwar Period.

From **John Spilker-Beed**: Announcing a Special Format Session at the 2027 SAM conference in Buffalo, New York: "Blackface in American Life: A Conversation around Rhae Lynn Barnes's *Darkology*."

Everette Scott Smith and I are holding a special-format session in Buffalo, which seizes upon the local significance of Christy's Minstrels and the recent publication of Rhae Lynn Barnes's book *Darkology: Blackface and the American Way of Entertainment*. We invite colleagues to read the book before the conference. Dana Gorzelany-Mostak is working with Norton to see if we can secure a discount for interested participants. The session comprises 60 minutes including 15 minutes for introductory remarks, 15 minutes for small-group discussion on Barnes's methodologies, 15 minutes for small-group discussion on topics and issues, and 15 minutes reporting back to the large group the ideas discussed.

Edwin Christy formed his famous blackface minstrel troupe in Buffalo, New York. In March 2026, cultural historian Rhae Lynn Barnes published *Darkology*, a magisterial study of blackface minstrelsy in U.S. culture from 1828 through the 1980s. Meticulously documented, *Darkology* is firmly rooted in the musicological literature, intersecting with the work of many SAM scholars. Given *Darkology*'s vast scope, this session should engage a wide variety of scholarly interests including the Civil War, turn-of-the-century musical theater, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Music Project, WWII all-soldier minstrel shows, Japanese American concentration camps, not to mention blackface minstrel shows in local fundraising efforts, churches, polio and veterans hospitals, prisons and penitentiaries, state-mandated music education curricula, collegiate Greek life, and U.S. political campaigns. We hope you will join us in Buffalo for this book discussion!

From the **SAM Student Forum**: The Student Forum is happy to announce our very own listserv! Official communication for the SF will now occur through here, allowing us to continue building our student network within SAM. This listserv is a

resource for all student members of SAM. We will use it to share upcoming events and information, and you will also be able to send your own relevant announcements, such as CFPs and more.

To ensure you receive all the latest news, please send an interest note to student.forum@american-music.org by October 1st. We look forward to inaugurating this new initiative with you all!

From the **SAM Membership Committee**: If you're interested in a SAM writing group, the Membership Committee wants to hear from you! [Please fill out this form to indicate writing group interest](#). The purpose of the form is to gather general information on what members want in a potential writing group, and we will reach out to interested parties if they choose to provide their contact information. While our initial deadline to fill out the form was September 15, we welcome all responses as the year progresses. Please contact Emma Jensen with any questions: ejensen@fsu.edu.

Upcoming SAM Events and Deadlines

In recognition of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, SAM is proud to sponsor **Sounding the Nation at 250**, a nationwide series of events celebrating the rich and diverse musical heritage of the Americas. More than 50 members have planned 36 events in 29 states! To see the range of topics, venues, formats, and co-sponsors, visit us at SAM250.org.

October 2: The next [President's Forum](#), "SAM beyond National Borders: In Conversation with International Members," will take place via Zoom October 2, 2026, at 3:00pm(EDT). Current members can [register for SAM Beyond National Borders here](#). This roundtable will feature the following members:

- **Marianne Betz**, Professor of Musicology, Hochschule für Musik und Theater
- **Sally Bick**, Professor of Musicology, University of Windsor
- **Laura Risk**, Associate Professor of Music and Culture, University of Toronto Scarborough
- **Ana Uribe Law**, PhD Candidate, Musicology, Florida State University

The President's Forum, a response to member interest in remaining connected between conferences, will continue with forums every 2-3 months on:

- Societies Beyond SAM: Forging Connections (January 2027)
- SAM Beyond the Conference: Post-Conference Town Hall (April 2027)

Are you interested in serving as a panelist or facilitator for one of these forums? If so, please [email the SAM office](#)!

October 15: SAM [Fellowship and Subvention](#) applications are due.

November 1: [Digital Lecture](#) applications are due.

Call for *Bulletin* Contributions

The *Bulletin* editorial board invites members to contribute feature articles, reviews, and news, as well as ideas for future *Bulletin* segments or series. We welcome essays and opinion pieces on current issues in American music (broadly conceived) and music scholarship; pedagogical essays, lesson plans, and other materials; reports on concerts and conferences of interest to our membership; transcriptions of interviews with prominent persons in American musical life; reviews of recent books and media pertaining to American music; and updates on our members' scholarly, creative, and professional activities.

You can contact members of the editorial board via the SAM website (<https://www.american-music.org/page/SAMBulletin>) or via the email addresses listed at the end of the *Bulletin* issue.

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Editorial Board

Editor: [Samuel Parler](#)

Book Reviews Editor: [Chase Castle](#)

Design, Layout, and Media Editor: [Katie Callam](#)

Items for submission should be submitted via the [Bulletin's information page](#). Photographs or other graphic materials should be accompanied by captions and desired location in the text. Deadlines for submission of materials are 15 December, 15 April, and 15 August.