

Brian Christopher Thompson. 2015. *Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842–1891*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. xxviii, 522 pp. ISBN 978-0-7735-4555-7

David Gramit

Volume 35, numéro 1, 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038951ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038951ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Gramit, D. (2015). Compte rendu de [Brian Christopher Thompson. 2015. *Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842–1891*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. xxviii, 522 pp. ISBN 978-0-7735-4555-7]. *Intersections*, 35(1), 168–172. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038951ar>

RÉFÉRENCES

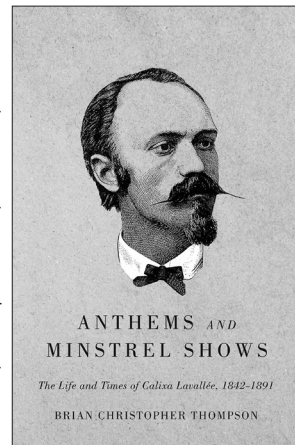
- Fydrich, Gudrun. 1990. «Fantasien für Klavier nach 1800». Thèse de doctorat, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main
- Hayashida, Mami. 2007. «From Sonata and Fantasy to Sonata-Fantasy: Charting a Musical Evolution». Dissertation de D. M. A., University of Kentucky.
- Leung, Jackson Yi-Shun. 1990. «A selective study of sonata-fantasies in the first half of the nineteenth century». Dissertation de D. M. A., University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music.
- Parker, Jesse. 1974. «The Clavier Fantasy From Mozart to Liszt: A Study in Style and Content.». Thèse de doctorat, Stanford University.

BIOGRAPHIE

Mikaël Francoeur est titulaire d'une maîtrise en musique (interprétation) de l'Université Laval, où il a obtenu le prix de piano classique Gérard-Boivin en 2012. Durant la même année, il enregistrait l'Étude pour la main gauche seule, op. 36 de Félix Blumenfeld pour le *Disque des étudiants* de l'Université Laval. Il étudie présentement au doctorat en musicologie volet recherche-crédation, sous la direction de Sophie Stévanec, à l'Université Laval, où ses recherches portent sur le compositeur québécois Léo Roy (1887–1974) et sur la marginalisation de son œuvre.

Brian Christopher Thompson. 2015. *Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842–1891*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. xxviii, 522 pp. ISBN 978-0-7735-4555-7.

Brian C. Thompson's new study of Calixa Lavallée begins not with the musician's birth, nor even with a conventionally retrospective starting point like posthumous eulogies or reminiscences of acquaintances, but rather with an event taking place more than four decades after his subject's death. In June 1933, Lavallée's remains were returned from Boston to Montreal, where, after a solemn procession, ceremony, and a night of lying in state, they were reinterred at the Côte-des-Neiges cemetery (xvii–xix). Although the biography that follows is more conventionally structured, beginning with consideration of Lavallée's ancestors and proceeding chronologically through his short but remarkably eventful life (he was born in 1842 and died forty-nine years later), this starting point justifies not only Thompson's perspective, for he is deeply concerned with Lavallée's relation to patriotism and nation-building, but also implicitly justifies the existence of so extensive a study on a figure who would probably otherwise have found a place—whether justifiably or not—only among the century's many competent but forgotten musicians.



From this latter perspective, Lavallée's composition of "O Canada" and his subsequent familiarity, at least in name, are a fortunate coincidence, for without them, we would in all likelihood not have had so rich and detailed a study not only of one musician's life, but of the social, cultural, and musical worlds of the late nineteenth century, in both Canada and the United States. And that richness and detail are this book's real contribution, for the basic outlines of Calixa Lavallée's life have been known at least since the 1936 publication of a study by Eugène Lapierre, one of the leading figures in the 1933 repatriation (Lapierre 1936). Indeed, the person of Lavallée still proves remarkably resistant to characterization, but the abundant traces of his diverse activities that Thompson provides allow a far richer understanding of the dynamics of musical activity during a fascinating period.

As a scholar and author, Thompson is a remarkably well informed and assured guide. *Anthems and Minstrel Shows* is based on immense and lovingly documented amount of research in archives and contemporary literature.¹

Because Lavallée's career encompassed Canada, virtually the whole of the eastern, midwestern, and southern United States, and a period of study in France, this is no mean accomplishment. To have read so widely and to be able to document the musical cultures in which Lavallée participated to the extent that Thompson does is a remarkable intellectual feat, carried off with a deceptive ease and even marked occasionally by wry humour, as when he remarks, after detailing the origins and delayed first performance of "O Canada," that "if the actual premiere ... was more modest than originally planned, it does seem fitting that it took place in a hockey rink" (226). Editorial interjections, however, are relatively rare. As a rule, Thompson prefers to let carefully laid out events and contemporary documents make his points. As a result, occasionally I found myself wondering about the possibility of more explicit interpretation, sometimes in the light of existing work in related areas. For instance, how might Lavallée's encounter with a culture deeply committed to the social *utility* of the arts, as Jann Pasler has powerfully argued was true of France in the later nineteenth century, have shaped his goals and aspirations for musical life in North America (Pasler 2009)? How do the numerous concert programs that he describes (with Lavallée as both participant and audience member) complement or further develop the outline of changing musical taste that William Weber has documented for selected European and American metropolises (Weber 2008)? And even, at a more detailed level, how might awareness of a tradition of hooliganism associated with band competitions in Britain, as recorded by Dave Russell, contribute to our understanding of

¹ It should also be noted that he also provides a catalogue of Lavallée's compositions (Appendix One, 321–51) and an (unfortunately unpaginated) selection of otherwise difficult-to-find works (Appendix Two). Impressive as Thompson's work is, unfortunately it has not been brought before the public as effectively as might be hoped. The book is attractively produced, but it includes more copy-editing lapses and typographical errors than one would expect from a major Canadian academic press. Among the more substantive are: an erroneous reference to figure 1.8 rather than 1.9 (113); reversed captions for figures 4.8 and 4.9 (155); a puzzling inconsistency between a cited review and the musical example (figure 4.14) that illustrates it (170–71: the review refers to a B natural that is not present in the example); and figure 7.6 (280), where the key indication for stanza 9 is incomplete.

an ill-fated event that Lavallée adjudicated in Montreal in 1878 (Russell 1987, 182–84)? Given the scope of what Thompson has accomplished, however, these questions mark not shortcomings, but invitations to further exploration. And in a way, Thompson's reticence to interpret matches that of his central subject: in the end we know of Lavallée's impact through the sheer volume of the events in which he participated—whether as a band member, minstrel show musician, concert artist, teacher, or administrator—and from the testimony of those he influenced, rather than through his own words, for there are remarkably few revealing personal documents.

The absence of both interpretation and documents is perhaps most keenly felt with respect to Lavallée's personal life. In an age that nominally valued domestic stability, Lavallée seems to have treated his wife (Joséphine Gentilly, whom he married in 1867) with an attitude that borders at best on benign neglect and at worst on contempt. As Thompson notes, with some understatement, "marriage did not seem to slow or change Lavallée in any noticeable way," and he "would often be an absent parent" (94). Even allowing for the difficulties inherent in establishing oneself as a musician in often difficult circumstances, the composer/performer/teacher's habit of leaving his family, sometimes for years at a time, remains difficult to comprehend without either largely non-existent documentation or a psychoanalytic bent to which the author does not pretend.

As Thompson suggests during one attempt to deal with the puzzle of his private life, Lavallée's social habits seem to have been shaped by the habits of his early career. Observing that there is no evidence that Joséphine joined Calixa for an extended period when the latter moved to Quebec City in 1878, he notes that "Lavallée had been married for eleven years but bachelorhood suited him, judging by the frequency with which he was able to regain it. After so many years on the road, he was used to being in the company of other men" (194). This observation recalls Thompson's earlier account of the first American episode of Lavallée's career: as has long been known, after his early training in Saint-Hyacinthe and Montreal, the young musician had left Canada for the United States in 1859, to pursue employment in minstrel shows, an occupation he continued (interrupted by enlistment as a band member during the Civil War) until the early 1870s. It is one of the virtues of Thompson's study to treat this period not as requiring embarrassed apology (whether on the grounds of failed national preference or poor musical taste from the perspective of high art) but rather as both a deeply formative influence and as participation in one of the most vital (and profitable) North American musical phenomena of the mid-nineteenth century. But while the life of a minstrel musician may have suited Lavallée's restless character, it seems to have accorded less well with his equally prominent ambition, which seems increasingly to have led him away from the popular toward musical and social respectability, both of which were increasingly associated with serious music, whether found in the church or the concert hall. In this light, even if his domestic life failed to follow the civilized bourgeois model, his career undoubtedly did so: he travelled to France to study, performed increasingly serious programs, found employment as a

church music director, and advocated for music education and its institutional foundations in both Quebec and Boston. By the end of his life he had become a leader of the Music Teachers National Association and a strong advocate of the performance of works by American composers. Thompson follows his subject into that serious world and gives little more consideration to the popular, but his even-handed treatment of what could easily have been portrayed a conscience awakened to national and artistic virtue after a wastrel past is a valuable corrective to a too easy narrative of progressive development.

Perhaps this volume's most significant corrective, however, is a subtler one. As both Thompson's prologue, beginning with the repatriation of Lavallée's remains as a patriotic event, and his epilogue (310ff.), chronicling the development of his posthumous reputation, make clear, no matter how much fascination we find in his life, Calixa Lavallée is and will remain best known as the composer of "O Canada," a song inseparably (if hardly straightforwardly) linked to national identities, both Quebecois and Canadian. Indeed, the 1933 repatriation can be understood as a belated attempt to align a life and an accomplishment that seem stubbornly at odds with one another—the composer of "O Canada" *ought* not to have spent much of his career in the United States, nor have served as a passionate advocate for American composers. But both the person and the nationalisms that Thompson details are more varied and fluid than such a caricature would suggest. To be sure, the setting he develops for Lavallée's birth, in the lands of the recently rebellious *patriotes* of 1837–38, as well as Lavallée's later musical and institutional efforts in Montreal and Quebec bespeak a deep commitment to the nation of Quebec. But there is no reason beyond an anachronistically narrow concept of nationalism to see this as inconsistent with work in the United States—after all, a potential ally against British colonial oppression—nor with efforts to establish American composers as visible and audible over against the hegemony of European art music. Indeed, even the possibility that Lavallée hoped for the annexation of Quebec by the United States, and his self-proclamation of American identity (320) can be comprehended as consistent with his Quebecois nationalism if we can recall the power of both the idea of nationhood and the experiment that became the United States as popular and liberatory nineteenth-century ideals, however subsequent histories may have undermined their appeal. It is the accomplishment of Brian Thompson's work that through patient scholarship and skillful prose he has evoked the political and the musical world in which it was possible to think such thoughts and act on them with the mercurial conviction of Calixa Lavallée.

DAVID GRAMIT

REFERENCES

- Lapierre, Eugène. 1936. *Calixa Lavallée, musicien national du Canada*. Montreal: Editions Albert Lévesque. [Revised editions were published in 1950 and 1966.]

- Pasler, Jann. 2009. *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Russell, Dave. 1987. *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914: A Social History*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Weber, William. 2008. *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BIOGRAPHY

David Gramit teaches musicology at the University of Alberta. His current research focuses on settler colonialism and music in early Edmonton, and together with Mary Ingraham, he is also involved in developing both print and online collections of sources for the history of music in Canada.

Michela Niccolai. 2012. *Giacomo Puccini et Albert Carré: ‘Madama Butterfly’ a Paris*. Turnhout: Brepols. 332 pp. ISBN: 978-2-503-54761-9.

One way of tracking the life of an opera is through the legacy of its genesis and performance history (see, for example, Baker 2013 and Syer 2014). Such a paper trail could include financial records, drawings of sets and costumes, testimony of witnesses, and, of course, librettos and musical scores. In the nineteenth century, composers and publishers began to record the details of performances—placement of scenery and props, movement on stage, and certain aspects of lighting, all often coordinated with the libretto—in production books. This type of record keeping is a manifestation of a number of factors, including a growing interest in posterity, and questions of ownership, transmission, and reproduction. Production books could preserve the past, secure rights, and promote different kinds of truths; they offered detail beyond the relatively sparse instructions that might appear in scores and librettos. Production books could also transmit an imagined single, “correct” or “authoritative” version of the staging of a work, making it possible, as James Hepokoski has pointed out in the case of Verdi, “to see the same *La forza del destino* ... that Verdi himself saw—or visualized—at [its] premiere” (see Hepokoski in Latham and Parker 2001: 11, and Hepokoski et al: 2001: 11–48, a roundtable on staging). The immediate and less obviously self-serving goal of such documents was to facilitate later performances, locally and internationally, to insure their “fidelity” to the composer’s and director’s intentions and also curb the impulses of future stage directors, who might be tempted to stray from an “official” text. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, staging practices reveal a distinct rebellion against the notion of a

