

# THE UNION OF MUSIC AND TEXT IN WHITMAN'S *DRUM-TAPS* AND HIGGINSON'S *ARMY LIFE IN A BLACK REGIMENT*

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## I

ALTHOUGH THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON and Walt Whitman both produced invaluable records of their experiences during the Civil War, their relationship was marked by fierce animosity. Higginson often made clear in his essays and diaries that he could not stomach Whitman's poetry: "I encountered Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' for the first time on my first voyage in an Azorian barque," Higginson wrote in 1905, "and it inspires to this day a slight sense of nausea, which it might, after all, have inspired equally on land."<sup>1</sup> He objected to the poetry's explicit sexual references (which he considered "nauseous passages") as well as the poet's overt homosexuality: "His love is the blunt, undisguised attraction of sex to sex."<sup>2</sup> Higginson "concluded that Whitman lacked the stylistic control of a poet," and that reading his poems was like "bringing home a sackful of pebbles from the beach and asking you to admire the collected heap as a fine sea view."<sup>3</sup> Most important, the Colonel believed that *Drum-Taps*, Whitman's collection of Civil War poetry, was hypocritical and illegitimate. According to Higginson, Whitman "talks of labor as one who has never really labored; his 'Drum-Taps' proceed from one who has never personally responded to the tap of the drum."<sup>4</sup>

Defending himself against such personal attacks, Whitman appears to have responded less formally but with equal fire. In 1886, Higginson, upholding the belief that Whitman had indeed avoided the true call to arms during the war, vehemently opposed an attempt to provide a pension for the poet.<sup>5</sup> Yet as early as 1882, Whitman had sensed such hostility from Higginson and confirmed it in response to a guess that Higginson was a formidable foe: "Shouldnt at all wonder if your guess about Rev T W Higginson hits the nail—one nail—exactly on the head."<sup>6</sup> In a conversation with Horace Traubel in 1888, Whitman referred to Higginson "with his strict, straight notions of literary propriety" as one of his "enemies, creatures natively antipathetic."<sup>7</sup> Whitman considered Higginson's staunch criticism of his poetry a threat to its radical experiments with form, and he saw Higginson himself as an obstacle to his economic security.<sup>8</sup>

Beneath this veneer of dislike and disgust, however, the Civil War writings of Higginson and Whitman reveal a significant resemblance. In *Drum-Taps* and *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, both authors use music to unite communities against a war of national dissolution. At the same time, *Drum-Taps* and *Army Life* successfully bridge the gap between written and aural modes of representation. Both of these works foreground the interaction between Civil War texts and wartime music. But despite their likenesses, Whitman and Higginson treat a similar subject in contrary ways. While Whitman constructs the texts of *Drum-Taps* as a musical expression of the war, Higginson in his *Army Life* transforms Civil War music into text.

## II

The title *Drum-Taps* indicates that Whitman wants to draw attention to the musical structure of his collection. Just as the words *Drum-Taps* suggest both inspiring drumbeats and the somber bugle call of “taps,” so the poems follow a particular movement from an opening “reveille tattoo” to the solemn music of mourning.<sup>9</sup> In his article on the psychology of Civil War music, James Stone writes that military music serves its audience in two ways: either as a “lubricant,” to rouse soldiers to march and fight, or as a “sedative,” to occupy soldiers’s less active moments and relieve them from thoughts of battle.<sup>10</sup> This division has particular significance for Whitman, because he captures martial music’s abilities both to lubricate and to sedate, that is, to energize and to deaden, in the title of his text as well as individual poems throughout *Drum-Taps*.

Whitman brings music into the text in another sense as well. He takes the role of a singer throughout the volume: for example, “I myself as connector, as chansonnier of a great future,” he claims in “The Centenarian’s Story” (96), and in “City of Ships,” he tells us, “[i]n peace I chanted peace, but now the drum of war is mine, / War, red war is my song . . .” (16-17).<sup>11</sup> Throughout much of *Leaves of Grass*, of course, Whitman characterizes himself as singer and his poems as songs, but this tactic has even greater significance within *Drum-Taps*, for by using it here, Whitman links his project with that of the authors who sang of war in classical poetry (such as Virgil’s famous beginning: “Of arms and a man I sing”). Also, it is important to consider that popular songs during the Civil War often had powerful political significance: the Army of the Potomac, for instance, went so far as to ban “When This Cruel War Is Over” on the grounds that it caused desertion, and “the ‘Marseillaise’ was so identified with the Confederacy that when it was sung by a foreign troupe in New York the performers were thrown into jail as suspected secessionists.”<sup>12</sup> In the Civil War, popular songs could serve as expressions of protest and pride, much as they would a century later during the Vietnam War. Identifying himself as a wartime singer, then,

Whitman unites the epic tradition of the past with the potentially dangerous popular role of his present.

The opening poems of *Drum-Taps* feature rousing music suggestive of Whitman's eagerness for war. "First O Songs for a Prelude," the poem which begins the collection, draws upon musical imagery to show how the war influences the inhabitants of Whitman's Manhattan. The poem evokes the island's anticipation of war in specifically musical terms: "How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead, / How you led to the war, (that shall serve for our prelude, songs of soldiers,) / How Manhattan drum-taps led" (8-10). As the "songs of soldiers" and the "drum and fife" are a prelude to the war, so the poem itself is a musical prelude to the rest of *Drum-Taps*.

Manhattan's rhythmic sounds are echoed in words which make extensive use of tense vowels and explosive stops: "Lightly strike on stretch'd tympanum pride and joy in my city," the poem begins (2). Whitman's manipulation of sound allows this opening phrase to strike like drum-taps on eardrums.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the electric jolt of the war hits the city like a drumbeat: "unawares the lady of this teeming and turbulent city, . . . suddenly, / At dead of night at news from the south, / Incens'd struck with clinch'd hand the pavement" (12-16). By transforming the name of his home into a percussive sound—"Mannahatta a-march—and it's O to sing it well!"—Whitman shows how the new music alters his own language (48). Although the war comes unexpectedly and disrupts city life, it brings to Manhattan a new rhythm and musical expression of its own.<sup>14</sup>

As Whitman suggests, the movement from peace to war necessitates an equally radical shift in music and sound. This change involves the surrendering of speech to the sounds of war. In "First O Songs," Whitman indicates that the new bustle of "arming" leaves no room for the spoken word:

The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses his mother,  
(Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak to detain him,)  
The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding, clearing the way,  
The unpent enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for their favorites,  
The artillery, the silent cannons bright as gold, drawn along, rumble lightly over the  
stones,  
(Silent cannons, soon to cease your silence,  
Soon unlimber'd to begin the red business;)  
All the mutter of preparation, all the determin'd arming . . . (37-43)

Manhattan's noisy war music, its "tumultuous escort," "wild cheers," and its cannons' rolling "rumble," relegate to mere parentheses the desires of the mother who holds back her words to her son. Whitman shows the powerlessness of speech again in "Beat! Beat! Drums!": "Mind not the old man beseeching the young man, / Let not the child's voice

be heard, nor the mother's entreaties . . ." (18-19). Human voices are replaced by the cannon's song: "Heard your determin'd voice launch'd forth again and again, / Year that suddenly sang by the mouths of the round-lipp'd cannon" ("Eighteen Sixty-One," 14-15). Voices of individuals no longer have an audience in a society dominated by the music of war.

Whitman vividly conveys the raw, explosive power of war music in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" The repetition of the syncopated line "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!" produces a rhythm of rising urgency over the poem's three stanzas (1, 8, 15). Whitman exhorts the music of bugles and drums to move swiftly, much like a brushfire through a small town: "[t]hrough the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force" (2). The concentrated, surging sonic force overpowers the church, school, home, and farm, tearing apart civilization in its path.<sup>15</sup> Yet Whitman urges it on, begging it literally to wake the dead: "Make no parley—stop for no expostulation, . . . Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting their hearses, / So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow" (16, 20-21). It is difficult to say which is more disturbing here, the destructive power of music, or Whitman's enthusiasm for it. In any event, his attitude mirrors the mood at the beginning of the war, when, as Kenneth Olson writes, "[b]ands fanned the flames of patriotism and followed the recruit into service. Music resonated from everywhere and all were anxious to go."<sup>16</sup> The opening poems of *Drum-Taps* reflect this excitement: Whitman is as carried away by the initial music of war as the recruits themselves.

At the mid-point of the volume, however, Whitman's shift in attitude towards the war is marked by a corresponding shift in musical tone. "Year that Trembl'd and Reel'd beneath Me" reveals the poet's self-doubt as his excitement disintegrates under the weight of the war's casualties: "Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself, / Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled? / And sullen hymns of defeat?" (4-6). Immediately following this poem, in "The Wound-Dresser," the answer is made clear:

(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war,  
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd myself,  
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;) . . . (4-6)

As they did with the mother in "First O Songs," the parentheses suggests that a voice is muted and suppressed. Whitman's role in the war changes here from rallying musician to restrained nurse.

It is fascinating that the poet's duties here closely parallel the tasks of Civil War bandsmen. The musicians on both sides were trained to transport and care for the wounded, and were taught basic first aid skills.<sup>17</sup> Bandsmen frequently had to abandon their instruments to bear stretch-

ers to hospitals and assist surgeons with amputations: at the Battle of the Wilderness, Stewart's Band of the 4th Brigade, 2nd Division, 6th Army corps served as surgeon's assistants, helping to dress wounds and nurse patients; drummer-boys of the 8th Maine were ordered to work with surgeons performing amputations in the field hospital; and the 148th Pennsylvania Infantry Co. D band devised an elaborate system for nursing the wounded and also was responsible for burying amputated limbs.<sup>18</sup> As the bandsmen left their instruments behind to deal with the horrible reality of the war, so Whitman shifts his tone to confront the conflict's disastrous results. The loss of inspiring music is perhaps best expressed in a comment made by the band director Frank Flinn at the siege of Port Hudson: "The ambulance corps is made up largely of the musicians; but music, we never hear it now, not even the drum and fife. It is too stern a time for that."<sup>19</sup>

In "Dirge for Two Veterans," Whitman turns away from the inspiring sounds of the earlier poems to a slow death march. Instruments which previously sounded the call to battle now make somber music as a father and son are carried to their double grave.<sup>20</sup> The poem's division into short stanzas conveys the dirge-like rhythm:

I see a sad procession,  
And I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles,  
All the channels of the city streets they're flooding,  
As with voices and with tears.

I hear the great drums pounding,  
And the small drums steady whirring,  
And every blow of the great convulsive drums,  
Strikes me through and through. (9-16)

The stanza scheme of two long lines flanked by single shorter lines suggests the central placement of the two coffins in the procession, and also the formal, deliberate steps of the march. The "blows" of music "strike" him in a way which wounds but also heals; for although he is struck "through and through," Whitman nevertheless finds their power attractive: "O strong dead-march you please me!" (29). The music acts as a sedative which, with moonlight and Whitman's emotional response, brings tranquility to what would otherwise be an emotionless, empty funeral: "And the bugles and the drums give you music, / And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans, / My heart gives you love" (34-36). Like the musical dirge itself, the poem is a moving and beautiful evocation of loss and sorrow.

Whitman passes from these solemn sounds to those of "The Artilleryman's Vision," where the only music to be heard is the chaotic noise on a nightmarish battlefield.<sup>21</sup> In the veteran's apocalyptic vision, shellfire replaces the march and dirge: "I hear the irregular snap! snap!

/ I hear the sounds of the different missiles, the short *t-h-t! t-h-t!* of the rifle-balls, / . . . I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass" (6-8). Amidst "[t]he crashing and smoking," "the cry of a regiment," and "eager calls and orders of officers," the songs sung are not choruses of popular tunes, but rounds of ammunition: "the patter of small arms, the warning *s-s-t* of the rifles" (11, 14, 18, 24). The poem's final line is a travesty of the national anthem, the song which more than any other symbolizes union: "And bombs bursting in air, and at night the varicolor'd rockets." Ironically, the "bursting" which once heralded American nationalism now announces discord. In "The Artilleryman's Vision," Whitman implies that the Civil War breaks melody, just as it does the nation, into fragments.

In this way, *Drum-Taps* moves from its rousing opening call to a mournful march and beyond, to the dissonant music of the battlefield itself. As we have seen, Whitman uses the medium of his text to express the war, with its range of moods from glorious to chaotic, as a musical phenomenon. As to why he chooses music as a central metaphor, it is helpful to consider Stone's claim that "[m]usic during wartime gives an air of normality to what is essentially an abnormal social condition."<sup>22</sup> If we apply this idea to Whitman's text, we can see that *Drum-Taps*' musicality makes more palatable the unfamiliar anticipation and pain of war. The text's use of music enables the images of a city marshaling itself for combat, for example, or a double funeral of father and son, to resonate for both nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers. By giving his Civil War poetry a musical dimension, Whitman thus endows *Drum-Taps* with auditory immediacy and permanence.

### III

Like *Drum-Taps*, Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment* represents a unique and lasting record of the Civil War. Published in 1869, Higginson's book is both a detailed account of his military activities during the conflict and a pivotal document in the history of black American music. Higginson's instinctive curiosity and eye for detail enable him to record what Northerners in his day had only heard about: the dramatic and mysterious spiritual life of his black soldiers. This life is captured most thoroughly in the chapter entitled "Negro Spirituals," which, along with other incidents recounted throughout the book, provides a fascinating picture of the musical atmosphere in his camp. By transcribing his soldiers' music, however, Higginson achieves the opposite of Whitman in *Drum-Taps*. While the poet transforms his text into a musical collection, the Colonel records the sounds he hears in ways which emphasize their textuality.

The key to understanding the text's musicological significance lies in its publication history. Although included in the first edition of *Army Life*, "Negro Spirituals" appeared originally as an article in June 1867

(the text is identical in both versions).<sup>23</sup> Higginson's work represented a watershed in literature, music, and sociology, as the first substantial published collection of black spiritual songs. Its influence upon the first book-length anthology of this music, *Slave Songs of the United States* (also 1867), can be gathered from this passage from the editors' introduction:

To Col. T. W. Higginson, above all others, they [the editors] are indebted for friendly encouragement and for direct and indirect contributions to their original stock of songs. From first to last he has manifested the kindest interest in their undertakings. . . . It is but little to say that without his cooperation this *Lyra Africana* would have lacked greatly of its present completeness and worth.<sup>24</sup>

As the editors themselves admit, were it not for Higginson's interest and assistance, the monumental *Slave Songs* would have been a far less thorough and influential work. In a period where, as Higginson biographer Howard Meyer notes, "no one knew what folk music was," the Colonel undertook a radical venture by even noticing black spiritual songs, let alone transcribing them.<sup>25</sup>

In his first encounter with the soldiers' "shout," the religious call-and-response ritual which takes its name from the Wolof word *saut*, meaning "to dance before the tabernacle," Higginson searches for words to describe accurately what he sees.<sup>26</sup> His entry for December 3, 1862, reads:

This hut is now crammed with men, singing at the top of their voices, in one of their quaint, monotonous, endless, negro-Methodist chants, with obscure syllables recurring constantly, and slight variations interwoven, all accompanied with a regular drumming of the feet and clapping of the hands, like castanets. (41)<sup>27</sup>

What makes this passage so curious is that it allows us to watch Higginson as he struggles to classify something he cannot yet comprehend. The "shout" seems to him a locus of ambiguity which he must try to pin down. It is at once "quaint" and "regular," but also "endless" and "obscure." Confronted with an undocumented and unanalyzed experience, Higginson reveals his desire to clarify the "shout," that is, to read it as he would a text.

In the "Negro Spirituals" chapter, he fulfills this wish. However, in his commentary before and between the songs, he constantly draws attention to the problems that result from considering the spirituals as texts. For Higginson, the transformation of song to text is a movement away from ambiguity towards refinement and clarity. Such a practice involves explanations and qualifications of words, actions, and topics which may be unclear. Thus, rather than analyzing lyrics of the songs themselves, it is more revealing to look at the comments Higginson makes about them, where we can see most clearly his confusion and his at-

tempts at clarification.

He claims in the chapter's opening passage to be inspired by those who transcribed Scottish ballads "from the lips of aged crones," and he delights in his access to "a kindred world of unwritten songs" (187). His word choice is particularly eye-opening here. Since many of the spirituals he hears have, of course, already been composed and circulating for some time, Higginson means "unwritten" in its strictest sense. He implies that a song is "unwritten" if it is not physically represented on paper. For Higginson, writing a work *down* appears to be the most crucial part of the musical composition process, and, as the chapter shows, it is this aspect in which he excels.

His favorite metaphor throughout the chapter intensifies his classifying approach by turning the spirituals into types of plants. "I could now gather on their own soil these strange plants, which I had before seen in museums alone," he tells us (187). Like a scientist trying to trap a butterfly, he cautiously seeks out his prey and closes in for the kill: he recounts how he "silently approached some glimmering fire. . . . Writing down in the darkness, as best I could,—perhaps with my hand in the safe covert of my pocket,—the words of the song, I have afterwards carried it to my tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by" (188). For Higginson, the organic musical experience of a spiritual becomes a "specimen" which must be pinned down and analyzed (188). While Whitman's music might leap off the page and wreck everything in its path, as in "Beat! Beat! Drums!", Higginson's actions ensnare and tame the music he hears, such that its presence is limited to text.

Another aspect of his transcription process deserves close attention. Concerning the spelling of the lyrics, he apologizes for its inconsistency: "it is because I could get no nearer," he explains (188). This phrase possesses a great deal of meaning; not only can Higginson get no nearer to spelling out a dialect, but he also can get no nearer, in everyday camp life, to his troops. His status as outsider recurs throughout *Army Life*: at one point, he attempts to enter his camp and a border guard prevents him. "I could not pass in," he tells us, suggesting his ability to pass *through* the gate, as well as pass *for* an insider (68). The same subconscious anxiety returns in Higginson's revelation that he "could get no nearer." As his comment here reveals, recording the spirituals clearly demonstrates the limitations of language, but at the same time, it also shows us Higginson's closest interaction with his soldiers. Because, in his words, he *is* as near as he can get here, his transcriptions represent his most successful attempt to "pass in."<sup>28</sup>

One of his principal concerns in the chapter is how to create texts for a medium that is inherently fluid and combinative. He frequently observes the unfixed characteristics of the spirituals. For instance, he tells us that "one of their best choruses, without any fixed words, was

'De bell done ringing'"; that the spiritual "Ride in, Kind Savior" is a "conglomerate" of Northern and Southern lyrics; that "In the Morning" contains "one of those odd transformations of proper names"; and finally, he lists "three wholly distinct versions" of "The Ship of Zion" (191, 203-204). Higginson thus seems particularly interested in the challenge of constructing texts from songs which are constantly undergoing transformations, that is, of codifying what is naturally variable.

As part of his desire to clarify what seems ambiguous in the spirituals, Higginson attempts rudimentary textual analysis in which he tries to decipher lyrics or explain origins of words. "I fancied that the original reading might have been 'soul' instead of 'soldier',—with some other syllable inserted to fill out the metre," he says about the words to "Hail Mary," and of "Bound To Go," he writes, "Sometimes it was 'tink 'em' (think them) 'fare ye well.' The *ye* was so detached that I thought at first it was 'very' or 'vary well' " (191, 189). However, Higginson twice voices his frustration at not clarifying the lyrics enough, and he uses the same phrase in both instances: "I could get no explanation of the 'mighty Myo,' " he admits after "My Army Cross Over," and concerning "One More River," he writes, "I could get no explanation of this last riddle" (191, 194). For Higginson, whose stringent beliefs in discipline and organization underlie his entire transcription project, ambiguity represents a predominant source of anxiety.

This anxiety becomes most evident towards the end of the chapter, when the Colonel inserts a curious digression. He notes that he heard two songs which do not fall into the spiritual genre, one of which is the "endless repetition . . . of the mysterious line,—'Rain fall and wet Becky Lawton.'" Here he comments:

But who Becky Lawton was, and why she should or should not be wet, and whether the dryness was a reward or penalty, none could say. I got the impression that, in either case, the event was posthumous, and that there was some tradition of grass not growing over the grave of a sinner; but even this was vague, and all else vaguer. (211)

In this passage, Higginson provides a tongue-in-cheek look at his own processes of textual analysis. Although throughout most of "Negro Spirituals," he presents and explains entire *songs*, here he tries to analyze just one highly ambiguous *line*. After suggesting what seems like an intriguing interpretation, he concludes ambivalently: "but even this was vague, and all else vaguer." This phrase sounds like the conclusion of a campfire ghost story, rather than an analysis in an otherwise straightforward article. With his commentary on "Becky Lawton," Higginson self-knowingly mocks his own determination to demystify the songs.

At the same time, Higginson is also aware of the limitations of his transcription process. In one sense, it enables him to bring to a wide audience lyrics that he finds sincerely moving, including "I Know Moon-

Rise,” which he calls a “flower of poetry” (199). Yet his close attention to the texts of the songs means that the music is relegated to the sidelines, a fact which he addresses with a resigned awareness of the limitations of language. About “Go in the Wilderness,” he writes, “There was a kind of spring and *lilt* to it, quite indescribable by words”; and for the third version of “The Ship of Zion,” he tells us, “This abbreviated chorus is given with unspeakable unction” (202, 206).<sup>29</sup> The sonic skill that Whitman displays in *Drum-Taps* seems less important to Higginson, whose primary ability here is relaying not so much sounds as text.

A scene early in *Army Life* addresses this issue specifically. Higginson relates an anecdote after presenting the lyrics to the spiritual “Can’t Stay Behind”:

I have heard this very song dimly droning on near midnight, and, tracing it into the recesses of a cook-house, have found an old fellow coiled away among the pots and provisions, chanting away with his “Can’t stay behind, sinner,” till I made him leave his song behind. (45)

With a seemingly insignificant story, Higginson provides a subtle commentary on his own scholarly project. In one sense, he orders the man to “leave his song behind” in order to keep the camp quiet in the middle of the night. But the old man also, whether or not he knows it, “leave[s] his song behind” *with Higginson himself*, to be transcribed and eventually published. And finally, the Colonel will “leave behind” the song as well, with us, his readers. Winking at us here, Higginson displays his awareness that one of the unique and valuable aspects of his book lies in the spiritual texts it leaves behind to its audience.

Higginson’s desire for order not only motivates him to copy down the spirituals, it also influences his attitude towards the rest of the camp’s musical life, specifically, the drummer-boys. In his colorful description of the “route step,” he comments upon the unruliness of the drummers: “Grave little boys, blacker than ink, shook hands with our laughing and utterly unmanageable drummers. . .” (135). Ironically, throughout *Army Life*, the very figures who are responsible for giving music its rhythm and order behave disorderly. In “The Baby of the Regiment,” Higginson makes clear his intolerance of their shenanigans: “Her especial favorites were the drummer-boys, who were not my favorites by any means, for they were a roguish set of scamps, and gave me more trouble than all the grown men in the regiment. . .” (179). As he clarifies and makes presentable the spirituals, so he would like to, but frustratingly, cannot, refine the drummer-boys’ roles.<sup>30</sup>

Higginson’s accomplishment in the field of black American music seems even more impressive when we consider the cultural perceptions he was challenging by publishing the article and the book. During the Civil War, a vast number of minstrel songs, sung in blackface and writ-

ten by whites, were popular in the North as well as the South. These included "De Darkies' Rallying Song," "Oh, Massa's Gwine to Washington," "Sambo's Right to be Kilt," "Take Me Home," and Stephen Foster's "A Soldier in de Colored Brigade," with the words, "Now some folks tink de darkey for dis fighting wasn't made; / We'll show dem what's de matter in de Colored Brigade."<sup>31</sup> In this context, and given that virtually no music or songs by blacks had yet been published, Higginson's article can be seen as tremendously subversive. He used his authority to facilitate the transmission of texts for a group that would have to wait years to publish music and songs of their own composition.

Music historians observe that the initial scholarly interest in black spirituals (spearheaded by Higginson and his colleagues) coincided with the Civil War. They repeatedly suggest that spirituals received attention because Northern whites came into contact with large numbers of Southern blacks for the first time in this period, and also because nineteenth-century European nationalism exerted its influence upon Americans who were searching for a uniquely American music.<sup>32</sup> However, an equally valid explanation can be found in the psychological significance of the spiritual itself. Musicologist Eileen Southern identifies five recurring themes of the spiritual songs: faith, optimism, patience, weariness, and fighting.<sup>33</sup> While all of these themes have particular relevance to slavery, they are also concepts which readily apply to those who, in a nation plagued by war, are worn down by rising death tolls, poverty, and blockades, yet hopeful and patient for a better future. Spirituals enabled black communities to endure enslavement and survive; since the songs provided such strength and reassurance for blacks, it is no wonder white Americans were attracted to them during a time of national crisis.

Perhaps more than any other type of folk music, black spirituals are capable of uniting groups against the challenges of instability and discord. One critic writes about the songs, "[t]hey are a premier corpus of documents commenting on the nature of chaos and they constitute the first major antidote for avoiding, and countering, chaos."<sup>34</sup> These characteristics surely would resonate with Americans witnessing the chaotic atmosphere of civil war. In particular, these qualities help considerably to explain Higginson's attraction to the songs. Facing the unprecedented disarray and devastation of the conflict at hand, yet so firmly believing in discipline, restraint, and regimen, it makes sense that Higginson finds a haven in the strength and stability of the spirituals. They represent a psychological stronghold against the national disintegration occurring around him.

#### IV

As we have seen, the Civil War writings *Drum-Taps* and *Army Life* contain a prominent and unprecedented intermingling of music and text. In his excellent book on representation and the Civil War, Timo-

thy Sweet suggests that the war puts the nation's "adhesive function" into question, and that Whitman "invokes adhesiveness, in the form of the love of comrades, as the only healing power that might hold together . . . his poetics and the Union."<sup>35</sup> While Sweet makes a valid claim, I would add to his argument that Whitman, as well as Higginson, also imply adhesiveness in the ways they bring war music and war writing together. They not only indicate that rhythm and melodies are ubiquitous during the period of the conflict. More important, both authors suggest that attention to music is essential for the country to recuperate from, and come to terms with, its own experience of civil discord.

Whitman, then, clearly invested *Drum-Taps* with powerful forms of martial music. However, Whitman's attempt to express the war musically did not end with the *Drum-Taps* poetry itself. His project is perpetuated by modern composers, such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Kurt Weill, and Howard Hanson, who have drawn upon poems from *Drum-Taps* as sources for their own choral works.<sup>36</sup> Most recently, John Adams gives Whitman's "The Wound-Dresser" a contemporary musical setting in his 1989 piece of the same title, in which he uses the 1865 poem to make a moving commentary on the AIDS crisis of our own time. The poem, says Adams, "is a statement about human compassion that is acted out on a daily basis, quietly and unobtrusively and unselfishly and unflinchingly."<sup>37</sup> Adams's work demonstrates how, in modern America, Whitman's collection continues to have musical significance and resonance.

The musical aspects of *Army Life* also have enduring relevance—perhaps even more than those of *Drum-Taps*—but primarily in a textual sense rather than an aural one. Demonstrating the historical significance of Higginson's work, Eileen Southern reprints all of "Negro Spirituals" and selections from "Camp Diary" in her recent *Readings in Black American Music*.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in the introduction to his comprehensive spiritual collection from 1993 entitled *Lyrics of the Afro-American Spiritual*, Erskine Peters writes: "The first substantial group of Afro-American spiritual lyrics was published in June of 1867 in *The Atlantic Monthly* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson . . . He sought in his article to introduce lyrics (without music) by discussing their musical and poetic nature, their themes, origin, performance context, frequency, and utility."<sup>39</sup> As Higginson desired to solidify the fluid songs in texts, so his work is remembered and honored as a formative text in critical writings about spirituals. And in his text, as we have seen, Higginson reveals as much about himself as he does the songs he discusses.

Although Whitman and Higginson diverge in their musical and textual goals, then, they share the sense that music has a profound significance both for themselves and for the war. A passage from one of Higginson's letters captures a response that finds a powerful resonance in Whitman. On May 30, 1863, after observing the funeral of Lieuten-

ant Gaston in Beaufort, South Carolina, Higginson writes:

As I sat in the empty church the doves cooed into the window and the mocking-bird trilled, and then the cavalry bugles rang through with their shriller sound; and then I walked out again among the luxurious Southern growths, and thought there could not be in a strange land a sweeter resting place for a discarded body.<sup>40</sup>

This scene echoes the bittersweet musical mood Whitman captures in his "Dirge for Two Veterans." The "shriller sound" of the bugles, like that of the bugles and drums of Whitman's poem, stands out against the setting's quiet natural peace. As the discordant sentiments of sorrow and beauty coincide and complement one another in this image, so here the poet and the Colonel share a corresponding reaction, and thus reach a momentary reconciliation along musical lines.

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## NOTES

1 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Part of a Man's Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1905), 164.

2 Higginson, *Contemporaries* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1899), 80.

3 Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 354; *Contemporaries*, 78.

4 Edelstein, 353; *Contemporaries*, 83. Higginson admitted to finding a small number of Whitman's poems appealing, such as "O Captain! My Captain!", which he considered "one of the few among his compositions which will live." See Higginson, *The New World and the New Book* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1892), 67.

5 Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 24.

6 Edwin Miller, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 3:282-283.

7 Conversation with Horace Traubel, September 24, 1888, quoted in Scott Giantvalley, "'Strict, Straight Notions of Literary Propriety': Thomas Wentworth Higginson's Gradual Unbending to Walt Whitman," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (1987), 17.

8 Scott Giantvalley has recently argued that Higginson reconsidered his opinions in his later years and changed his mind about Whitman's poetry. Giantvalley's evidence, however, is questionable. He bases his argument on the third revised version of Higginson's Whitman chapter from *Contemporaries*, which appears in the 1903 *A Reader's History of American Literature*. But Higginson co-authored this version with Henry Walcott Boynton, who may have made the changes himself. Although Higginson's active dislike of Whitman may have simmered, I do not think it reversed itself to the extent that Giantvalley claims; as late as 1905, Higginson still identified Whitman's poetry with feelings of "nausea," as discussed above. See Giantvalley, 18-22.

9 I am indebted here to Kaplan's argument for the way the title reflects the shift in poetic mood (299).

10 James Stone, "War Music and War Psychology during the Civil War," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 36 (1941), 554. Similarly, Harry Hall states that "music, as a military adjuvant, might well be regarded as the oil which makes the wheels of war machines run smoother." Harry H. Hall, *A Johnny Reb Band from Salem* (New York: Da Capo Press: 1980), 1.

11 All references to *Drum-Taps* are taken from Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Scully Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965).

12 Stone, 555; Catherine Moseley, "Irrepressible Conflict: Differences between Northern and Southern Songs of the Civil War," *Journal of Popular Culture* 25 (1991), 50.

13 The poetry of *Drum-Taps* is rich with sound symbolism, as "First O Songs" makes clear. There are a number of recent studies on sound symbolism which attempt to put forth a systematic method for the ways particular poets employ verbal sounds. These include Marie Borroff, "Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost," *PMLA* 107 (1992): 131-144, and Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

14 Robert Leigh Davis claims that in *Drum-Taps* Whitman champions the "possibility of intermingled states" over the "binary deadlock" of the Civil War; Davis provides a compelling discussion of how Whitman's use of the "tympanum" (eardrum) denies closure, since the eardrum is perpetually open, and therefore allows the poet to "enact the defeat . . . of social and linguistic fixidity [*sic*]." See Robert Leigh Davis, "Whitman's Tympanum: A Reading of *Drum-Taps*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 6 (1992), 163-164, 166-167.

15 Some critics consider "Beat! Beat! Drums!" "fundamentally anti-democratic" and even imperialist. These arguments appear in two political analyses of *Drum-Taps*: Katherine Kinney, "Whitman's 'Word of the Modern' and the First Modern War," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 7 (1989), 4, and M. Wynn Thomas, "Whitman and the American Identity Before and During the Civil War," *Journal of American Studies* 15 (1981), 86.

16 Kenneth Olson, *Music and Musket* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 67.

17 Robert Garofalo and Mark Elrod, *A Pictorial History of Civil War Era Musical Instruments and Military Bands* (Charleston, WV: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1985), 69.

18 These incidents and similar ones are recounted in Francis A. Lord and Arthur Wise, *Bands and Drummer Boys of the Civil War* (New York: Thomas Youseloff, 1966), 50, 80-81, 111, 206-208.

19 Quoted in Olson, 184.

20 Robert Faner, *Walt Whitman & Opera* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), 108.

21 Kinney makes the musical connection here as well: "the sounds of the guns call like the beat of the drums in the earlier poems" (7).

22 Stone, 553.

23 Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1867), 685-694.

24 William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), quoted in Eileen Southern, ed. and comp., *Readings in Black American Music* 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 161-162. *Slave Songs* contains the words and music of 136 songs.

25 Howard N. Meyer, *Colonel of the Black Regiment: The Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 231. Music history textbooks often include discussions of Higginson's article and its importance: see, for example, Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 173, and Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 136.

26 For more on the origins of the "shout," see John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (Tivoli, NY: Original Music, 1972), 162-169.

27 All references to Higginson's *Army Life* are taken from his *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

28 However, even here, he does not fully integrate with his men. It is interesting to note that spirituals often have represented for blacks an autonomous space in which to construct and protect a group identity. This may explain why Higginson can get "no nearer": he will only go so far until he feels he is intruding upon a highly personal and powerful space. For more on spirituals and identity formations, see Erskine Peters, ed., *Lyrics of the Afro-American Spiritual* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), xv.

29 As Hamm notes, Higginson "was not a musician and was incapable of writing down the music of these spirituals" (136).

30 Higginson gives a clever racial and religious twist to the famous Christmas carol when, in his diary entry for "Christmas Day," he has a "little drummer-boy" tell him the spiritual that the slaves sang when Lincoln was elected (55). Instead of the little drummer-boy giving the music of his drum to the newborn Jesus, we have a black drummer giving the music of a spiritual to Higginson.

31 For details on minstrel songs during the war, see Willard A. and Porter W. Heaps, *The Swinging Sixties* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 268-294. A more detailed, recent analysis can be found in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

32 See, for example, Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 174-175, and Meyer, 231.

33 Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 195.

34 Peters, xv.

35 Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 42.

36 Many major American composers, including Roger Sessions, William Schuman, George Crumb, and Charles Ives have used other poems from *Leaves of Grass* as the basis for their compositions. Justin Kaplan notes that "[f]ew American poets have been as consciously and deeply indebted to music as Whitman. No other American poet, in turn, has had his work set to music by so many different hands and to such good effect" (from the jacket notes "Whitman and Music," *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, New World Records, 296, 1977).

37 John Adams, quoted in jacket notes by Sarah Cahill, *The Wound Dresser and Fearful Symmetries*, Elektra Nonesuch, 79218-2, 1989.

38 Southern, *Readings*, 175-202.

39 Peters, xvi-xvii.

40 Higginson, *Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson 1846-1906*, ed. Mary Thatcher Higginson (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1921), 206.