



Music ‘popped’ up during the civil war era

By Brian Shifflet

Have you ever wondered how “pop” music in America rose to its current heights? Amazingly, some of the origins are rooted in the American music of the 19th century.

The 19th century saw the rise of nationalism within western music, and in response, America longed for its own musical style that was not connected to the classical music tradition in Europe.

This desire, along with the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the middle class, led to a new and unique style that quickly became the first form of truly American popular music, called Parlor Music.

The Industrial Revolution’s effects on music were twofold.

First, the rising income of the middle class allowed more people to afford quality musical instruments. Second, as manufacturing increased, the prices of such instruments also dropped.

The outcome: Music in the home became much more affordable, and therefore more commonplace. Of particular importance was the piano, which until then had been restricted to more wealthy homes. The music publishing industry was also revolutionized at this time, and by the time of the Civil War, music could be printed more quickly and cheaply than ever before.

While the pianos of the parlor were smaller than those in concert halls, they were still larger items that fit most often in the parlor of the 19th century home. Playing the piano and singing — as well as the concertina, banjo, fiddle and other instruments — became common forms of parlor entertainment, whether with guests or just as an evening activity for families.

While some of the parlor music earlier in the 19th century was the classics of Europe, by the 1840s — and particularly by the Civil War era — parlor music had become its own uniquely American genre. Many American composers and some English composers began writing music for the parlor, and a few composers rose to the top.

Of particular importance throughout the latter half of the 19th century was the work of Stephen Foster. Born in Pennsylvania in 1826, Foster wrote his first popular song at about the age of 20 while living in Cincinnati. These first works included “Oh! Susanna.” His music had a large range, including the posthumously published “Beautiful Dreamer” and songs in support of the Union during the Civil War.

While much parlor music was written for piano and voice, dance music was also quite popular. Of particular importance to the Civil War era: the galop and the polka. While parlor music was trying to create its own uniquely American style, dance styles were still being imported from Europe.

Parlor music reached its height of popularity from the 1860s through the early part of the 20th century. During the Civil War, some of the parlor music gained a political tone. Even the great Stephen Foster got into the action, composing several political tunes.

Another quite popular performance group of the time, The Hutchinson Family Singers, were praised and criticized for their songs, which often contained lyrics delivering harsh criticism of slavery and southern succession. While quite popular, the Hutchinson Family Singers and Stephen Foster are just the tip of the iceberg in regard to famous singers or composers of parlor music. Parlor music eventually waned in popularity, giving way to newer styles such as ragtime in the early 20th century.

But the legacy still lives on. It’s interesting to think there’s a great connection between, say, Lady Gaga and Stephen Foster. Without the rise of American popular song through parlor music, today’s pop music might be very different — or even non-existent.

Port Clinton resident Brian Shifflet works for Lake Erie Shores & Islands. He is a member of the Firelands Symphony Orchestra and Firelands String Quartet and is a music teacher who offers private strings lessons.