Bigamy Scandal Sinks Sacred Music Group! A Case Study of the Rise and Fall of the Church Music Association, 1869-1874

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Bigamy Scandal Sinks Sacred Music Group! A Case-Study of the Rise and Fall of the Church Music Association, 1869-1874

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Beethoven: 
*Missa Solemnis* 
(“Benedictus”)

American premiere:  
May 2, 1872 – Steinway Hall
The infrastructure for “classical” concert music in 19th-century USA took time to emerge...

NY Philharmonic – 1842, musicians’ cooperative

PT Barnum’s Jenny Lind tour – 1851, media hype

Civil War “Sanitary Fairs” – charitable benefit events in major cities; philanthropy

Boston Symphony – 1880, ownership & micromanagement by millionaire music-lover H Higginson

Metropolitan Opera – 1883, private boxes for the conspicuously nouveau riche (no strings attached!)

Chicago Symphony – 1891, wealthy guarantors
George Templeton Strong (1820-1875)

Wealthy Wall Street attorney

Connoisseur of great music

Vestryman at Trinity Episcopal

Host of large musical soirees in the music hall of his “Palazzo”

Meticulous diarist and observer, from a young age, of Manhattan life, culture, politics, and music
Musicologist Vera Brodsky Lawrence’s well-commented edition (published from 1988-1995) did not reach volume 4 & CMA.

Publication of the Diaries

(An earlier 1952 abridgement by urban historians Nevins and Thomas included only some musical entries about CMA)
James Pech (1830-?), “Mus. Doc. Oxon.”

English organist, choral director, composer of songs & small piano pieces, essayist

By accounts, a remarkably knowledgeable and gifted conductor, active throughout Manhattan

Also remarkable for his writing of copious analytical program notes

Still in London late in 1860; by 1865, in Montreal; by 1866, in New York, hired by Trinity Church
Church Music Association

- Established in 1869; prospectus mailed in June
- GT Strong, president (finance & operations); Dr. James Pech, musical director and conductor
- Membership in volunteer chorus by audition only; performances to include paid “ringers” and a full-size hired orchestra
- Performances (three, in Steinway Hall) are for subscribers only! 80 subscribers purchase 20 tickets each, to share with personal guests
- Rules for proper concert behavior will be enforced!
• Rehearsals begin in late fall, 1869 at Trinity Church for CMA’s debut in January, featuring Mozart’s Twelfth Mass and the 1st act of Weber’s Oberon

• The concerts are acclaimed successful among the music lovers attending (perhaps more as high-society events than as aesthetic experiences?) and the CMA fiscal model proves to be sustainable through three seasons...
from the diary entry for November 30, 1871 (vol 4, p 371):

“Trouble ahead. Rev. Cooke tells me of charges against Dr. Pech, to be investigated by letters of inquiry. He is accused of assuming an academic title that does not belong to him—and of marrying in America though already married in England. I trust these charges may prove unfounded; his professional rivals and competitors hate him bitterly because he has succeeded where they have failed... But I have forebodings. There has been from the first a certain mystery about this gentleman.”
**Missa Solemnis rehearsals begin...**

- “...these movements begin to glimmer out into form and comeliness...”

- “...anxious council over the asperities and arduosities... agreed to introduce four experimental ‘saxophones’ at next rehearsal to steady the aberrant voice parts...”

- “...extraordinary work, keeps my attention riveted...collars me with its first chord and holds me tight...no words can define the peculiar something...”

- “...our programmes are still in the printer’s hands. It is Pech’s fault for writing a programme as big as a bible...”

- “...first orchestral rehearsal was satisfactory... White declared it the most marvelous music...critics say that it is not so much a church service as something transcendental”
Performance: Thursday evening, May 2, 1872

The New York Tribune said:

“When the orchestra is imperfectly trained and the chorus weak, ragged, and uncertain, there is no music more disappointing. Whether to praise the Church Music Association for their zeal, or to blame their rashness in attempting a task for which they were so obviously unfitted, we find it difficult to decide.”

But Strong wrote:

“Chorus and soli were admirable, considering! Audience large, interested, silent—Applause after every choral movement—People were excited by the fiery and magical orchestration—It is the greatest of musical works…”
Details from the front of Peck’s 36-page concert program... note the emphasis on silence and etiquette!

32 of the pages were filled with detailed musical commentary in tiny print, complete with notated musical examples. There were no advertisements.
The problem with Pech...

- Overspent Year Three’s budget by 35%
- Did not really earn an Oxford doctorate
- Did indeed abandon a wife and children in England, then remarried in North America

From the diary, May 14:
“Pech called last evening... gave me his unfortunate story with seeming frankness and in full detail. In 1849 he ran away with [an older] woman... and married her clandestinely, he then being 19. She proved vicious, false, cantankerous, and incorrigible... after seven years of torment he abandoned her. ...he must change his base and leave New York...”
Pech refuses to step down from the CMA and is forced out. The public wonders why. The church insiders probably know.

An... unspectacular... conductor is obtained for Year Four.

Singers begin to defect. Some subscribers do not renew. The CMA is crippled without Pech.
Strong, in the intimacy of his diary, comes to see Pech as a scamp, swindler, thief, and humbug; admits to being blinded by Pech’s obvious musical gifts.

For his part, James Pech tries to sue the CMA for non-payment of salary—which he had clearly declined; back-room wrangling takes an entire year.

At the outset of Year Five, the CMA is rapidly abandoned by its backers and Strong, demoralized, resigns its presidency.
CMA, the experiment by a musical purist...

• Raised standards of performance and audience behavior

• Offered an untried model for concert subsidy

• Introduced important classical repertoire to American audiences

But...

Was personality-driven and vulnerable to withdrawal of largesse by the fashionable.
“The management was exclusive... the whole interests...depended upon the caprice of a few gentlemen...interested in [this] style of music. It is not strange that its career was brief... Such prestige as comes from social patronage the Church Music Association... had in plenty, and it undoubtedly had the most exclusive and remarkable audiences ever gathered in New York.”

—Henry Krehbiel, *Notes on the Cultivation of Choral Music and The Oratorio Society of New York* (1884)

Maybe so...

But don’t forget that Strong was a true aesthete, and the CMA was an arts incubator!
Resources Consulted


*Times [New York].* Various dates from 1869-1875.

*Tribune [New York].* Various dates 1869-1875.


Précis.

Regular, series concerts of major choral-orchestral repertoire in 19th-century America were risky ventures, and promoters struggled to develop sustainable entrepreneurial models. Prominent Wall Street lawyer and diarist George Templeton Strong, a music connoisseur, devised an ingenious business plan for his part-volunteer, part-professional Church Music Association in 1869, one that relied on advance sale of private subscriptions to the affluent, who then shared their large allotments of tickets with personal guests.

But after three successful seasons in Steinway Hall, culminating in the American premiere of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, the group lost its “star,” brilliant choral conductor James Pech, when he was found to be a bigamist who had deserted his first family in England. The subsequent demise of the demoralized organization illustrates the precariousness and vulnerability of concert infrastructure at this time.