

Anthems and Minstrel Shows: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842-1891. By Brian Thompson. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. xxviii + 522 pp., illus. ISBN 978-0773545557.

Calixa Lavallée was the outstanding musical figure in nineteenth-century Canada. His preserved compositions include operettas, concert overtures, a few large sacred pieces, and many piano solos and songs. Among lost items are a symphony and a cello concerto. He was a virtuoso pianist, also played violin and cornet professionally and conducted everything from touring stage bands to opera and oratorio. He was both a successful teacher and a spokesperson for music education. His colorful career embraced studies in Paris and periods of activity in Montreal, Quebec City, New Orleans, New York, and Boston – and it was in Boston that he died, in 1891, aged forty-eight. His song “O Canada,” issued originally as “Chant national,” was adopted in 1980, the centenary of its première, as the country's official national anthem. Today every native Canadian learns it at school, and every new Canadian sings it at his or her citizenship induction.

Brian Thompson, author of *Anthems and Minstrel Shows*, calculates that in his thirty-year professional career Lavallée spent two years in Europe and twenty-one in the United States, but only seven in Canada. A champion of Canadian music, he became no less fervent in his support of music by U.S. composers, for example performing in 1884 in Cleveland a historic solo concert of piano music by Paine, Chadwick, Buck, and others. He agreed with Wilfrid Laurier and other francophones that Canada should join the U.S., and composed a song for the Ligue des Patriotes in Fall River, Massachusetts, with the title “Restons Français,” whose lyrics advocate union with France (Thompson reproduces this piece in his appendix of compositional examples).

Franco-Canadian nationalists in the Duplessis era (1933) brought Lavallée's remains from Boston to Montreal and reinterred them amidst spectacular publicity. The composer became viewed as a cultural martyr. One of the prime movers in the reinterment, the teacher and church musician Eugène Lapierre, compiled a biography entitled *Calixa Lavallée, musicien national du Canada* (Montréal, Fides, 1936; repr. 1950, 1966), and later composed a music-theatre work, *Vagabond de la gloire*, with Lavallée as the central character (Montreal, 1947).

Prior to Thompson's publication, Lapierre's biography has been the only substantial source on Lavallée's life and work. It is a heavily biased study; Lapierre was not a scholarly researcher, and he distorts and invents at will in support of his view of the “musicien national.” For example, he



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underplays Lavallée's years of touring in the U.S. with various minstrel troupes, excusing this supposed lapse in musical taste with the notion that Franco-Canadians of the period were as oppressed as Afro-American slaves. He takes the composition and first performance of "O Canada" as his main topic, allotting it twenty-four pages compared to only six for the composer's entire remaining output. In the first scene of *Vagabond de la gloire*, the child Calixa imagines the opening four-note rhythm of the future anthem in the anvil strokes of his blacksmith father and its flowing central bars in the burbling of a nearby waterfall.

Lavallée exemplifies a Canadian prototype, the gifted musician who establishes a career outside of the country. His retention of close links with it is shown in many ways, for example his participation in a benefit for the family of the executed Louis Riel in 1885. However, since Lapierre's time there has been little interest in Lavallée by either French- or English-speaking musicologists in Canada, despite a regular spate of performances and recordings of his music and despite celebratory events such as the renaming of his native village, Sainte-Théodosie, as Calixa-Lavallée in 1974.

Thus Thompson's volume fills a genuine need. An expanded version of his University of Hong Kong dissertation of 2001, it gives a vastly fuller picture than any previous study, justifying its subtitle ("life and times") by rounding out the life story with details of political and cultural happenings of those past times. The text and the generous selection of illustrations offer quotes from registry certificates, letters, theatre posters, and concert programs, with many names and precise addresses. Lavallée remains in some respects a mysterious personality, but while we may still be puzzled by who he was, we now know much more completely where he went and what he did.

Especially revealing is the coverage of Lavallée's decade or more as an itinerant performer and director in the most popular stage medium of the mid-century, blackface minstrelsy. The author has scoured newspaper advertisements and reviews and sheet-music publications (a "minstrel show paper trail," xxviii), and gives a fresh and extensive account of the travels, repertoire, and performing style. His work is, he says, "about popular culture" as much as about musical nationalism in more "serious" categories.

His meticulousness is suggested by the two hundred pages of back-matter: a catalogue of works, a selection of representative scores, notes (eighty pages), a bibliography (sixty pages), an index. The bibliography includes twenty-eight titles by Lavallée himself. The catalogue includes publication and recording details. Of the twenty-four works for solo piano, sixteen were published, some more than once, and ten have been recorded, some again more than once (for the once-widely-known concert étude "Le Papillon" seven recordings are listed).

From my experience preparing performances of earlier Canadian music, I developed a high regard for Lavallée's facility and inventiveness. His music rarely departs from the conservative forms of his period, but he exhibits a ready melodic gift. Thompson's selection of five short works for his appendix of sample scores precluded orchestral, band, choral, or stage pieces. A few of these have become well known, the overture *Bridal Rose* and the operetta *The Widow* among them. As it is, the five give a fair idea of the composer at his best. I would only question one item, the song-arrangement "Flag of Green." No doubt it is appropriate as another patriotic number, and no doubt like every nineteenth-century composer in North America Lavallée had to produce an Irish song or two – but it remains an arrangement, not an original composition. In his note (254) for the brief excerpt from the operetta *TIQ (The Indian Question)* Thompson cites "a number of First Nations' music clichés that function in much the same way that Sullivan's *faux* Japanese music does in *The Mikado*." Composed to an English-language libretto, the music exhibits awkward accentuation, belying the composer's fluency in English (a strange discrepancy that is even more prevalent in *The Widow*).

In a familiar engraving of 1873 (114), Lavallée, confident and wax-mustachioed, appears as a fighter for status on behalf of Canadian musicians. In sad contrast is his last known photo (Boston, 1889; 297): now forty-six and battling tuberculosis, he looks twenty or thirty years older. His life was one of brilliance and courage in an often unwelcoming context (he quit Canada for good in 1880 when sponsors refused to pay for the première of a major commission). He deserves to be known as much more than the composer of "O Canada," and this full and careful rendering deserves wide recognition.

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