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Laura Moore Pruett

Merrimack College, pruettl@merrimack.edu

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A Christmas Eve to Remember:  
William Henry Fry's "Santa Claus" Symphony

LAURA MOORE PRUETT

*Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)* by William Henry Fry (1813–1864) was premiered on 24 December 1853, by conductor Louis Antoine Jullien and his famous orchestra in New York's Metropolitan Hall. An American-born composer, critic, and lecturer, Fry viewed himself as both advocate and representative of a new American art music. He championed his own music as the truest example of a native style. His self-titled *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)* followed his famous 1852–1853 lecture series and two other programmatic, one-movement symphonies, *A Day in the Country* and *The Breaking Heart*.

With its wholly American subject and special effects like sleigh bells and toy instruments, Fry's composition was fashioned as a descriptive piece for the holiday season. His extensive program notes describing the various sections of the work were distributed to the audience members at the premiere (see Appendix A). The 31 December review by Charles Burkhardt, music critic for the *Albion*, typified the reaction from the press: "It is a capital musical Christmas piece. . . . We presume that the composer claims for it no higher rank than that of a *pièce d'occasion*."<sup>1</sup>

Upon reading such reviews that dismissed the work as nothing more than a holiday trifle, Fry instigated what has been called "the musical battle of the century."<sup>2</sup> In a highly-publicized dialogue between Fry and his fellow newspaper critic Richard Storrs Willis, Fry defended his composition against the European standard of the abstract, four-movement symphony. His arguments, while convoluted, often egomaniacal, and considerably protracted, forced Willis to engage in a discussion that at various points touched on form and genre, nationalism, and the merit of programmatic versus abstract music. The Fry-Willis debate has been the focus of most research on *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)*; the piece, its original contextualization, and the highly favorable public reception are often neglected in favor of the critical uproar.

The event was significant for a number of less notorious reasons. Firstly, it was composed expressly for Jullien's international orchestra, including solos for particular instrumentalists specified by name in the score. In addition, it debuted on an otherwise incongruous Christmas Eve *Irish Night* concert and was immediately and enthusiastically encored. Finally, the concert was unfortunately one of the last to be heard in the Metropolitan Hall before it burned down

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This paper was originally conceived during a doctoral seminar guided by Jeffery Kite-Powell at the Florida State University. My thanks to him for the inspiration.

1. Charles Burkhardt, "Music," *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* 12:52 (31 December 1853), 652.

2. Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, vol. 2: *Reverberations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 378.

on 8 January 1854. Combined, these elements illustrate that the premiere was more than fodder for the critical confrontation between Fry and Willis. The work and its first performance can be seen as a significant moment in the history of music in New York. This microhistorical investigation of the premiere, which reveals the unique synthesis of influences, circumstances, and motivations that culminated in that performance, contributes to a more complete picture of musical life in mid-nineteenth century New York.

### New York in 1853: Setting the Stage

In 1853, New York had recently recovered from a seven-year depression (1837–1843) and was quickly developing from just a large city into the metropolis we know today. Franklin Pierce (1804–1869) was serving as the fourteenth president of the United States. Under the new governor, Horatio Seymour (in office July 1853–July 1854), New York was flourishing. In 1845 the population was only 371,223, but by 1860 it had more than doubled to 813,669.<sup>3</sup> The total population of greater New York, which included those who lived outside the city but commuted to work, was over a million.

City life was already quite metropolitan. Newspaper reports of dirty and cluttered streets peopled with vagrants and prostitutes warned against the dangers of pickpockets and saloons. Telegraph wires darkened the skies between buildings constructed larger and larger each year. Five- and six-story buildings were common along Broadway, such as the Prescott House and the newly-constructed Lafarge Hotel.

There was a wide variety of cultural offerings for the residents of the city. An assortment of entertainments was available, including Barnum's Museum on Broadway, featuring side shows, magicians, and unusual artifacts. The minstrel shows—Christy's, Wood's, and Buckley's—were all high-quality troupes. A large number of dramatic theaters lined Broadway, including the Bowery, National Theater, Burton's, Wallack's, and the aptly named Broadway Theater. In 1853 the Hippodrome was also popular. This attempt at relocating Franconi's French circus was short-lived but well-attended.

The music halls were equally diverse. Castle Garden was a favorite haunt for many New Yorkers. Jenny Lind, the so-called "Swedish Nightingale," had made her debut there, and Jullien's tour had also begun there earlier in the year.<sup>4</sup> Other choices included Niblo's Saloon and Garden, where a smaller, more intimate room provided an ideal location for solo recitals of pianists like Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Sigismond Thalberg. One of the most recent additions to performance spaces in New York was the Crystal Palace. This immense structure was built of glass and metal. It was designed as an imitation of the famed Crystal Palace in England,

3. Figures derived mainly from Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham* (New York: University Press, 1956).

4. In August 1855 Castle Garden was leased to New York State and opened as an immigrant landing depot.

and was the site for extravagant displays, huge concerts, and important orations. The acoustics were said to be atrocious, however, because of the cavernous interior.

One of the favorite halls for music was Metropolitan Hall, where Fry premiered *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)* in 1853. Built three years earlier in October 1850, Metropolitan Hall was the first in New York designed expressly for performance of music. The three-story structure was originally called Tripler Hall after its lessee, A.B. Tripler, and was opened by Madame Anna Bishop under the management of Robert N.C. Boscha (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

Tripler Hall was constructed between Mercer Street and Broadway under the supervision of John M. Trimble, the architect of the Broadway Theater. The acoustics were pronounced unmatched by all; some said it even surpassed any in Europe. It was a hundred feet long by a hundred fifty feet wide. One architectural problem was a lack of exits—one door served for the entire audience, which some rightly feared would create a fire hazard. Although she did not open the hall as expected, Jenny Lind did perform there shortly after its opening

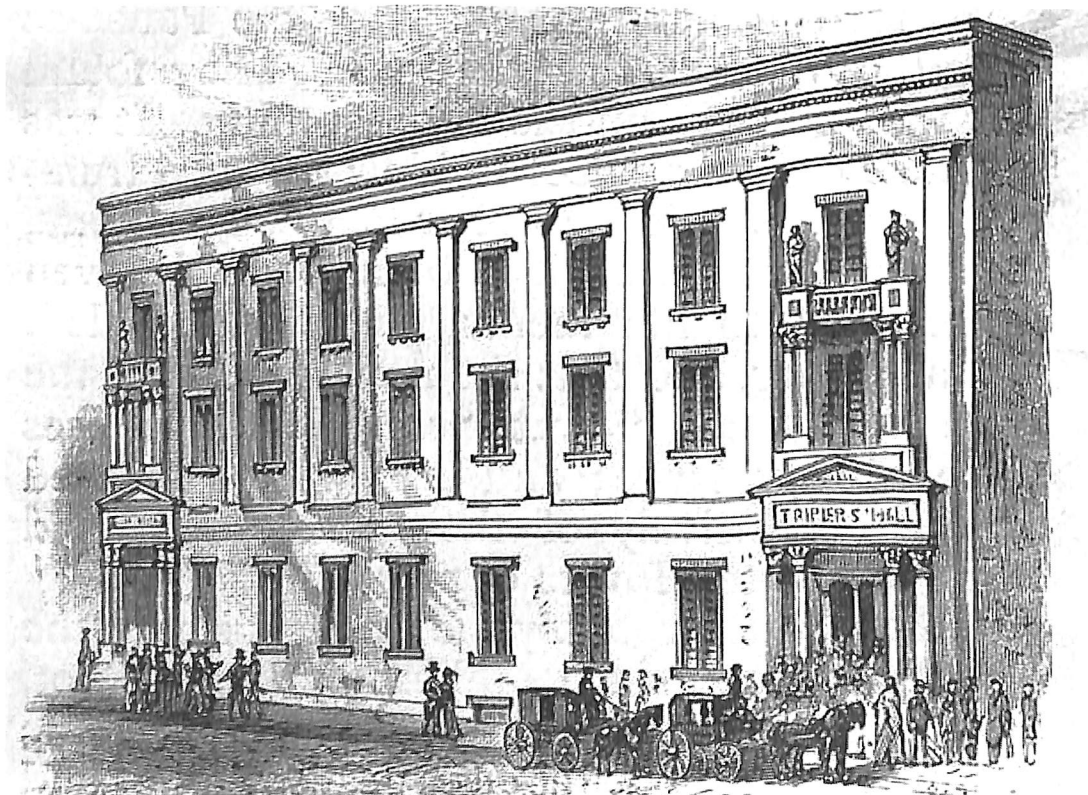


Figure 1. Exterior of Tripler Hall

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5. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, vol. 2: *Reverberations*, 69–71.

in a series from 23 October to 22 November 1850.<sup>6</sup> Other presentations followed, including a 10 December benefit concert for Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, the famous blackface minstrel.

On 25 November 1851 Tripler Hall was sold under foreclosure for non-payment. The new owner was John Lafarge, a real-estate tycoon who bought the hall for about \$45,000. Walter E. Harding, the new lessee, had promised a number of improvements to the hall, which was renamed Metropolitan Hall (see Figure 2); unfortunately, one staircase remained the only exit.

Metropolitan Hall burned down in the early morning hours of 8 January 1854, along with John Lafarge's newly built hotel next door.

The most beautiful and spacious place of popular recreation in New-York has been swept out of existence by one of those sudden and disastrous conflagrations which have earned for New-York the appellation of the City of Fires. Metropolitan Hall, which was unrivalled for its extent and splendor by any concert room in the world, together with the superb marble-fronted hotel in which it was enclosed, with all their wealth of embellishment and taste, the embodied forms of labor, genius, and skill were suddenly whiffed out of existence on the morning of the 8th of January.<sup>7</sup>

The conductor Jullien, who had departed for a short tour, had left some irreplaceable items in storage at the hall, including his famous giant drum, other instruments, manuscript copies of music, props, and decorations. The hall was universally mourned, and much later the Metropolitan Opera Hall would assume its name and rich heritage.

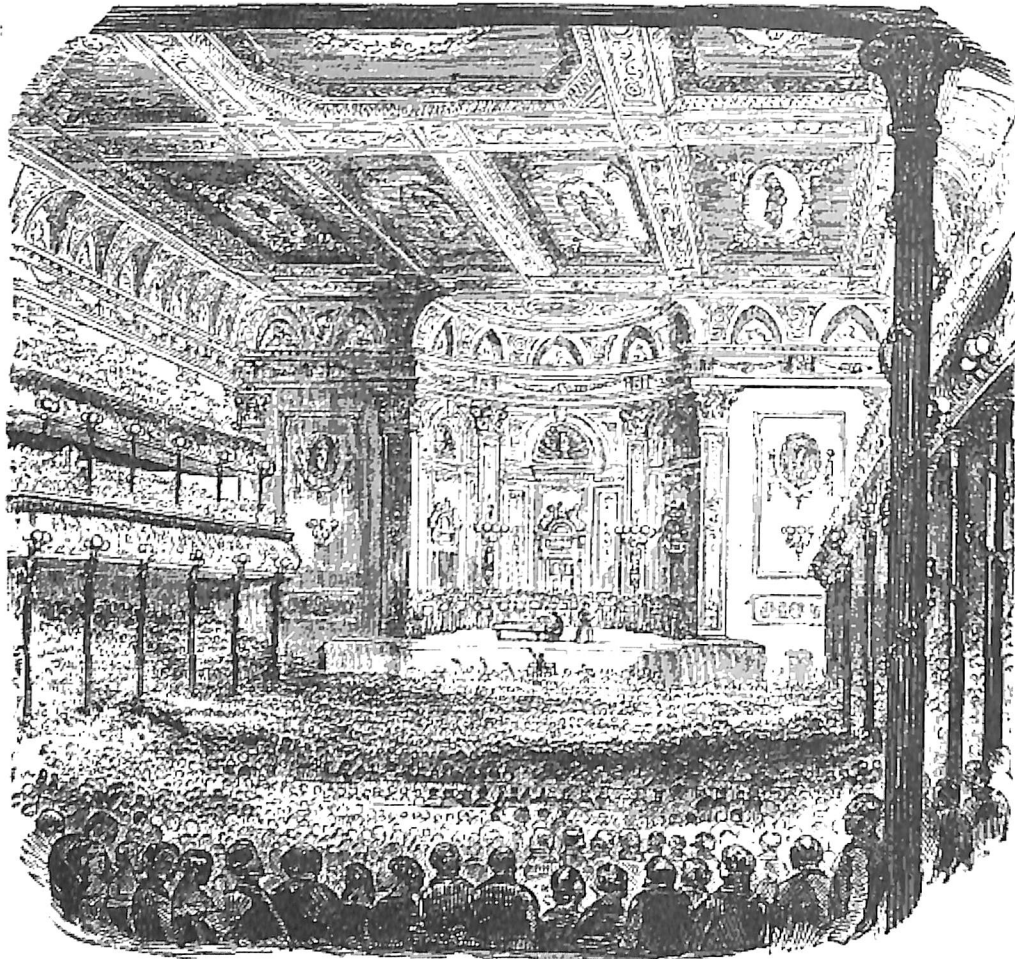
In November 1852, 13 months before the conflagration, William Henry Fry returned to the States from Europe. On the 30th of that month, he began a lecture series on music held on consecutive Tuesday evenings in Metropolitan Hall. In these lectures, Fry utilized local and visiting performers to "illustrate" his lecture topics, mainly by performing his own music. The hall served him well; his series was extremely popular and well-attended. He would return there the following year.

#### **Fry and Jullien: Two American Music Advocates**

William Henry Fry was born in Philadelphia to a family that included a Revolutionary War officer, his grandfather, Joseph Fry. After enduring that infamous winter at Valley Forge, Joseph returned to settle in Philadelphia, where he was renowned for his excellent bass singing voice. His son William Fry became the publisher and proprietor of the *National Gazette*, published in that city; William Henry later covered the musical events for that publication. He

6. Rumors in the press flew as to whether it would be named after Jenny Lind or not and whether she would open the hall or someone else.

7. *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, February 1854.



Interior of Metropolitan Hall.

Figure 2. Interior of Metropolitan Hall (formerly Tripler's Hall)

was one of five brothers, all of whom received excellent educations at the hand of their erudite father and were devoted to the arts, while maintaining an interest in national and international affairs.<sup>8</sup>

From 1836 to 1841, William Henry worked for his father William, reporting on musical productions of the city while sharpening his own compositional skills. On 4 June 1845, his new opera *Leonora*, with a libretto by his brother Joseph, premiered in Philadelphia at

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8. William Treat Upton, *William Henry Fry: American Journalist and Composer-Critic* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1954), 3–5.

the Chestnut Street Theater. It was a remarkable success, especially considering the current vogue for Italian opera.<sup>9</sup> In 1846, Fry traveled to Europe to begin his journalism career. As a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, Fry toured extensively but made his home base in Paris. When he returned in 1852, he was enthusiastically appointed to the editorial staff of the *Tribune*. At the same time, he embarked on the lecture series that would make him famous.

Tickets for Fry's series were five dollars comprehensive. While individual tickets could be bought, they were often sold out and advance tickets were valued. Although it was a well-received venture, Fry actually lost over four thousand dollars in the process. This was partly due to the large orchestra he engaged in order to illustrate the concepts about which he was lecturing.<sup>10</sup> Many of the musical examples were taken from some of his more recent compositions. Two of his orchestral pieces, *A Day in the Country* and *The Breaking Heart*, were both premiered in this way. But Fry was not content to present his works in the context of a lecture series. Thus, in the following year, a collaboration with the conductor Jullien provided Fry with a ready, willing, and able orchestra.<sup>11</sup>

Louis Antoine Jullien (1812–1860) was a flamboyant European conductor and composer who had performed in London for some time when he arrived in New York. His promenade concerts there, featuring popular polkas and quadrilles as well as classic symphonies and overtures, had been enthusiastically received. He came to New York in 1853 to begin a similar concert series at Castle Garden. The tour was subsidized by Chappell & Co., and Jullien was paid \$15,000 for a six-month engagement.<sup>12</sup> One of his star performers, the double bassist Luigi Bottesini, made \$1,000 a month, with three months having been paid in advance.<sup>13</sup> Jullien's concerts were extraordinary: not only did he conduct surrounded by his players and facing the audience, but he used extra-musical devices in his concerts—visual devices such as fireworks and sound effects like cannons (see Figure 3).

Jullien's orchestra was composed of both Europeans that had accompanied him from England and "ringers" from the New York area, including Theodore Thomas on violin. His European virtuosos, who numbered about 25, were known and acclaimed by the public and the press.<sup>14</sup> An article on the entire assemblage reported:

The number of M. Jullien's orchestra is one hundred and two. They are distributed as follows: 3 flutes, 1 flageolet, 2 hautboys, 2 clarionets, 2 bassoons, 4 trumpets, 3 cornets, 4 horns, 4 trombones, 2 ophicleides, 2 pairs of kettle drums, 5 snare

9. Katharine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 3–5.

10. Upton, *William Henry Fry*, 122–123.

11. *Ibid.*, 132.

12. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, vol. 2: *Reverberations*, 360.

13. *Ibid.*

14. These are listed, with their instruments, in Appendix B.

drums, 1 pair of cymbals, 1 bass-drum, 17 first violins, 16 second violins, 12 violas, 10 violoncellos, and 11 double basses.<sup>15</sup>

Jullien’s own compositions for his orchestra frequently featured dazzling solos for selected performers. Among the favorites were Bottesini on double bass and Koenig on the cornet-a-piston. Fry’s symphony also highlighted the talents of these men and others.

Jullien began a new series in Metropolitan Hall from 30 September to 21 October 1853. He departed for a short tour of Boston and Philadelphia, and returned to Metropolitan Hall on 5 December. Jullien championed the works of American composers William Henry Fry and George Frederick Bristow by repeatedly performing their works during this series.<sup>16</sup> By the 24th of December, he was close to the end of his New York engagement. The advertisements for that evening’s concert read as follows: “Jullien’s Concerts, Metropolitan Hall, Last night but six, Prior to the departure of M. Jullien with his orchestra for Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, the Southern cities, and New Orleans.”<sup>17</sup>

The Europeans in the orchestra had performed together for years in England, and even the Americans had been playing with Jullien since September or earlier. Concerts were usually presented six nights a week, with a natural priority given to weekend nights. The orchestra was universally known for its high standard of performance. A particularly ebullient anonymous reviewer for *Putnam’s Magazine* commented:



Figure 3. Jullien conducting his orchestra

15. *Putnam’s* 2:10 (Oct 1853): 425.

16. *Ibid.*, 368.

17. From the *New York Evening Post* (Saturday, 24 December 1853), Amusements Section.



The leader is not alone. His staff is with him. Concerto players on every orchestral instrument, who number upwards of a score. Eminent in victories gained on the fields of Apollo, they come here to fight their battles over again. Welcome all! . . . Welcome great lyrical artists, whose fame has filled Europe! How many dreary hours have been lightened by you! How many thousands have listened to your melodious breathings! How many pulses have quickened under your inspiring numbers!<sup>18</sup>

Although there is a shortage of information about rehearsal schedules for Jullien's orchestra, it appears that they were quite comfortable with their conductor and with one another. *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)* was composed expressly for Jullien's virtuoso orchestra. Fry's composition, which was very similar in style and effect to Jullien's numerous quadrilles, would not have been difficult for the professionals to learn and polish. The program contains explicit references to the performers, naming them at the point of their solos. Fry billed the piece as a symphony, similarly to his other one-movement program pieces *A Day in the Country* and *The Breaking Heart*.

#### Christmas Eve, 1853: *Santa Claus* Premieres

On the 24th of December, there were numerous performances from which to choose. At Barnum's Museum, a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been running for months, while Broadway and Burton's theaters both offered nights of short comedies, one billed as the "laughable piece of *Christmas Eve in Connecticut*."<sup>19</sup> However, the grandest evening was to be had at Metropolitan Hall, judging from the length of the advertisements. The program was called a "Grand Irish Night," with a subheading explaining that "The whole of the first part of the programme [will be] devoted to the melodies of Ireland and the works of Irish composers."<sup>20</sup> The public was informed that "tickets can be purchased during the day at the music stores of S. C. Jollie, 300 Broadway, Hall & Son, 239 Broadway, and Van Norden and King, 45 Wall St., in the evening at the Hall. Doors open at 7 o'clock. Concert to commence at 8 o'clock."<sup>21</sup> The Irish pieces included songs and quadrilles by William Vincent Wallace and Jullien himself (a closet Irishman?). The second half of the concert began with a quadrille called "The Great Exhibition." An enthusiastic reviewer reported:

The Great Exhibition Quadrille has created quite an excitement. It is interspersed with the most beautiful of the melodies of all nations, and brings out the grand solo performers on the cornet-a-piston by the illustrious Koenig, and the thundering ophecleide, with its "deep and dreadful organ pipe," under the windy government of the immortal Hughes, the "Rude Boreas" of the orchestra. Everything

18. *Putnam's Magazine* 2:10 (October 1853): 424–425.

19. *The New York Evening Post* (24 December 1853): Amusements Section.

20. The concert program appears in Appendix C.

21. *The New York Evening Post* (24 December 1853): Amusements Section.

that occurs in a crowded city like ours has been imitated by Jullien—the chimes of the bells have a very pleasing effect; it concludes with a march of all nations, peals of bells, and a salute of musketry and artillery; altogether it was very effective, and received with tremendous applause.<sup>22</sup>

The quadrille was followed by the aria “Ah! non Giunge” from Bellini’s *La sonnambula*, performed by Anna Zerr, the only vocalist Jullien brought with him from Europe. Finally, William Henry Fry’s “New Grand Christmas Symphony” was presented.

Nineteenth-century audiences in New York were fairly well-versed in art music by 1853. They had heard renditions of Beethoven and Mozart symphonies, Rossini operas, and Chopin and Liszt piano works. Consequently, certain musical performances came equipped with corresponding expectations. A symphony, for example, was expected to consist of four movements, the first in sonata-allegro form, following a particular harmonic path. Beethoven symphonies often lasted about 40 minutes or longer. *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)*, on the other hand,

consists (in one massive movement) of an Introduction, Slow Movement, Christmas Merrymakings, Juvenile Dances and Songs, Separation of the Merry-makers as midnight approaches, Prayers of the Children, Lullaby, Stillness (all being hushed in slumber), A Snow Storm and Episode of a Perishing Traveler, The Church Bell tolls midnight, Santa Claus comes in his sleigh and distributes Christmas Gifts, Visions of happy sleep, Angels chanting the glad tidings, Sunrise, Joy of Children on discovering their toys, Christmas Hymn, *Adeste fidelis*—and Grand Finale—Hallelujah Chorus!<sup>23</sup>

The entire piece lasts about a half-hour, with no discernible breaks other than shifts of “scenario.” A program was distributed to the audience containing a detailed description of each event and how it is portrayed by the musicians. This program included references to specific instrumental performers and their virtuosic skills. Such a piece was not unprecedented in mid-century New York; in fact, it clearly mirrors the artistic genre of the panorama, much in favor among audiences at the time. Yet the subject matter—Santa Claus himself—was rather unorthodox, especially for a so-called symphony.

In 1853, Santa Claus was a relatively new yet widely popular national symbol. In Washington Irving’s satirical 1809 publication, *The History of New York*, Santa Claus was first associated with Christmas rather than the more traditional feast day of St. Nicholas, 6 December. A number of illustrations housed at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, depict Santa’s pictorial evolution throughout the century. An early depiction of Santa Claus with reindeer appeared in a small pamphlet in 1821, *The Children’s Friend*. An illustration from *Family Magazine* in 1841, however, retained St. Nicholas’s bishop-style hat.

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22. *Spirit of the Times* (31 December 1853): 552.

23. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, vol. 2: *Reverberations*, 375.

Clement Moore's poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* was first published in 1822. The first illustrated printing of that poem, in 1848, featured a mischievous dancing Santa. In 1850, a poem entitled "Santa Claus and Jenny Lind" was published in booklet form, along with illustrations; at that late date Santa looked more like Napoleon than an elf, and rode not in a sleigh but on a broomstick with the Nightingale. It was not until the 1860s and 70s, with Thomas Nast's illustrations for *Harper's Weekly*, that Santa assumed his final, modern guise. When Fry wrote his symphony, Santa Claus was still discovering his American identity.

Fry's Santa Claus is undoubtedly the central character depicted in the composition, but by no means the single one. As evident in his program notes, the work begins in Heaven, with celestial tidings of the birth of Jesus Christ. From angels' songs the work shifts to children's dances at a Christmas Eve party. These same children then are put to bed with the Lord's Prayer and a lullaby. Perhaps the most unfortunate character in the work is the "Perishing Traveler," who, lost in the snowy night, dies to the tones of Bottesini's famous double bass. Santa Claus is depicted by the bassoon, a fitting musical representation of the jolly old elf. According to Fry's program notes, Santa Claus apparently drives a single horse and sleigh, portrayed by sleigh bells and a cracking whip. He flies down the chimney and throws toys in the children's stockings, then heading back up the chimney and to the next house. The work concludes with an orchestral rendition of the Christmas hymn "Adeste fideles."

### Critical Reception, and "The Musical Battle of the Century"

Notwithstanding reports of an immediate and enthusiastic encore of the entire work, critics were not sure how to receive this piece called *Santa Claus*.<sup>24</sup> Some deemed it a children's piece; not many judged it a serious piece of classical music. Fry was not pleased. Two typical reviews follow:

From *Spirit of the Times*, 31 December: Mr. Fry's symphony called "Santa Claus" was performed on this occasion, and seemed as a whole to please the audience mightily. It is certainly a very curious affair, full of eccentricities and not wanting in absurdities.<sup>25</sup>

From the *Albion* (Charles Burkhardt, music critic), 31 December: It is a capital musical Christmas piece, written expressly for M. Jullien's orchestra and for the present occasion. We presume that the composer claims for it no higher rank than that of a *piece d'occasion*, and as such it is exceedingly clever, rising occasionally above the standard of a mere time-serving production. Its principal fault is its great length.<sup>26</sup>

24. It should be noted that such reports appeared most prominently in the *New York Tribune*, Fry's own newspaper.

25. *Spirit of the Times* 23:46 (31 December 1853), 552.

26. Charles Burkhardt, "Music," *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature* 12:52 (31 December 1853), 652.

The greatest insult to Fry came from the pen of Richard Storrs Willis, music critic for the *Musical World and Times*.

Mr. Fry’s “Santa Claus” we consider a good Christmas piece: but hardly a composition to be gravely criticised [*sic*] like an earnest work of Art. It is a kind of *extravaganza* which moves the audience to laughter, entertaining them seasonably with imitated snow-storms, trotting horses, sleigh-bells, cracking whips, etc. Moreover, in the production of these things there is no little ingenuity displayed. The discordant winds are most discordantly well given; and among the graver features of the piece, our Lord’s Prayer (as given in musical recitative) is marked and impressive.<sup>27</sup>

Fry took great umbrage at the brevity and tone of this review. He wrote an extended and passionate reply, which Willis published in the *Musical World and Times* and John Sullivan Dwight reprinted in his Boston *Journal of Music*. Called by modern historian Vera Brodsky Lawrence “an uninhibited display of self-glorification intermingled with an outpouring of personal grievances,”<sup>28</sup> this letter was Fry’s opportunity to lay out his philosophy of musical composition and defend *Santa Claus* as a “serious” work of art.

The letter was answered by Willis, and thus began a correspondence since unmatched.<sup>29</sup> Both writers were fervent about the topic at hand, and both make points that, in twenty-first-century hindsight, have merit. In his original gargantuan letter, published on 14 January 1854, Fry attempted to illustrate that an instrumental work need not be in a classical four-movement symphonic format to have musical unity. This was in fact a central issue in the evolution of Western compositional styles throughout the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the tone poems of Liszt and others. In the course of making his argument, however, Fry denigrated significant abstract symphonic works, especially Beethoven’s *Pastoral* Symphony no. 6, op. 68, in a way that Willis could not abide.

Perhaps most remarkable are Fry’s comments on copying and invention:

[I]f I thought the classic models perfect and unalterable, I would not write at all, or be their obedient ourang-outang [*sic*]; and as there are but two things in this world—substance and shadow—and a man is either the one or the other; I would not play shadow. . . . Now, what is unity? Define it. . . . [I]n music: some, because Corelli wrote sonatas in a certain form, and then Boccherini, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Onslow, and other great men, copied them—call that form a “unity”—and the only unity in music. If you think so, I do not; I think I can invent as good forms as Corelli or the others, and if I did not, I would consider myself out of place before the public.<sup>30</sup>

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27. *Musical World and Times* (7 January 1854): 5–6.

28. Lawrence, *Strong on Music*, vol. 2: *Reverberations*, 480.

29. Lawrence has extensively documented and commented upon the printed confrontation. *Ibid.*, 479–489.

30. *Musical World and Times* (14 January 1854): 30–31.

. . . [T]he four movement business [in classical symphonies] is mere matter of fashion, and fashion sanctifies any stupidity. In music I am guided by those rules which are founded in reason.<sup>31</sup>

In a way, Fry's words symbolize the struggle of all the Romantic composers who pushed against – and broke away from – the confining boundaries of the classical forms.

For his turn, Willis assumed the side of Germanic classicism:

What is *Santa Claus*? It is a *Fantasia*. It is a one movement piece, of irregular construction, and comes under the regular, by-all-artists-acknowledged-and-accepted, category, of *Fantasia*, [whereas] symphonic unity, then, implies unity of musical (not dramatic) design, and unity of key: in other words, an intelligent, consecutive, proportional work of Art: a work that has a beginning, a consequent middle, and an inevitable end:—not a vague, disconnected, illogical, plan-less composition, like a *Fantasia*, where the only unity ever attempted is that of ending in the same key in which one began. *Santa Claus* is a *Fantasia*, and *Santa Claus* has no musical unity.

[Musical unity] is that which shows design in the composer—design, the attribute of reason. It is that which distinguishes a perfectly sound and coherent mind from an unclear and incoherent one. This continual introduction of new musical themes and ideas, is a thing that no audience can long stand, any more than the disconnected vagaries of a crazy man.<sup>32</sup>

Willis also took Fry to task for his negative comments about the great composers Beethoven and Mozart. He concluded, somewhat condescendingly, “My dear Fry, I admire your genius, but it is genius astray. You are wrong in your views of Art.”<sup>33</sup>

Fry's final rejoinder to Willis was published a few weeks later, after his return from traveling. Once more taking the Romantic perspective, Fry reflected, “I am not surprised that I am attacked as having ‘queer ideas about music;’ because I consider it chiefly the language of passion and emotion.”<sup>34</sup> By this time John Sullivan Dwight had entered the fray, commenting on the music and the debate as he reprinted both sides in his *Boston Journal of Music*. Fry responded to some of Dwight's criticisms as well, suggesting that he and other critics would prefer to “make this country, in music, a Hessian colony.”<sup>35</sup> Although the discussion began about *Santa Claus*, it is evident that Fry had much more in mind when he wrote: “How are Americans to win their way in composition unless their compositions are played?”<sup>36</sup> It is

31. *Musical World and Times* (18 February 1854): 74.

32. *Musical World and Times* (28 January 1854). 38–39.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Musical World and Times* (18 February 1854): 78.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

equally clear that Willis was more interested in the big picture than one so-called symphony when he replied: “You must come up to high standards of Art if you, or anyone else, expect to be heard.”<sup>37</sup> The war of words, which commenced upon the premiere performance of the *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)*, has since become an iconic moment in the ongoing, critical debate among critics and composers of music in the United States in the nineteenth century and beyond.

The symphony, therefore, was the catalyst for the articulation of a central question: how should American musical compositions be valued? Should they always be compared to works by European masters, or is there perhaps a valid reason to take them simply on their own terms? Willis believed the former, and used high culture terminology to articulate his position: “The Temple of Art is an *universal* temple: and that you are an American is no reason that you shall have free admission there . . . Let us strive for art—*universal* Art.”<sup>38</sup> For Fry’s part, he was eager enough to have his work compared, if it at least meant it would be performed: “[I]f you will cause a symphony of mine . . . to be played by the New York Philharmonic Society and by M. Jullien, I will undertake to produce one in from four to six days . . . and I have no objection to have a symphony so performed, sandwiched between any two classical symphonies played on the same evening.”<sup>39</sup>

A modern review of Fry’s composition might indeed be quite similar to those written after its premiere performance. Despite his lack of eight reindeer, Fry’s *Santa Claus* acts much as we expect him to, driving a sleigh, going down the chimney, and leaving presents. The rest of the scenario is fairly unobjectionable as well, although the moans of a dying traveler can be a bit off-putting. Musically speaking, the high tessituras for strings and winds, the featured solos, especially those for double bass and the newly-invented saxophone, and the extended length of this one-movement work all attest to both Fry’s innovative compositional techniques and Jullien’s incomparable orchestra. Long relegated to archival study, the piece has experienced a recent renaissance due to its first commercial recording, released by the Naxos label in 2000. *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)* is an enjoyable piece that should also be recognized as technically challenging and freshly original for its time.

William Henry Fry composed his *Santa Claus (Christmas Symphony)* for a particular orchestra, a specific occasion and location, and a certain conductor. Its seasonal subject was relatively new to the public and, by that time, undeniably American. However, its premiere performance and the subsequent reviews opened the door to an unrestrained discussion on nationalism in American music. Fry’s own passionate views on musical Americanism generated his composition and then fueled the ensuing debate, which has yet to be resolved. The “Santa

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37. *Musical World and Times* (25 February 1854): 87.

38. *Ibid.* Italics in original. Note the repeated capitalization of the word “art.”

39. *Musical World and Times* (18 February 1854): 76.

Claus" Symphony is significant not only for its unique subject and circumstances but also for its far-reaching repercussions.