1995

A Musical Heritage: German Singing Societies in Pittsburgh as Indicators of Ethnic Change, 1920-1950

Kristin Nicodemus
Carnegie Mellon University

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.cmu.edu/shr

Part of the United States History Commons

Published In
The Sloping Halls Review, 2.
Thousands of immigrants flooded the southwestern hills of Pennsylvania as early as the 1830s, continuing until the country’s immigration laws tightened in the 1920s. Pittsburgh’s strong industrial economy created numerous jobs and labor opportunities that greatly appealed to the masses. Thus, people of various ethnic groups moved to the “Steel City” in search of a new life. According to one observer of the city’s social composition, this influx led to the unavoidable reorganization of social constructs.

Whenever substantial portions of the population of a community (or nation) are derived from diverse ethnic origins, the life of that community is subject to the molding and heaving forces that are released by the conflict and adjustment of different cultures.1

Although inevitable in even the smoothest of cultural coalitions, this adjustment process and ethnic reorganization is further stimulated by any number of cultural or political stressors. An example of such an adjustment can be seen in the ethnic communities of Pittsburgh. The German-American population particularly, although strong in both number and tradition, lost a great deal of ethnic pride and unity through anti-German backlash of W.W.I. Once-cohesive communities were essentially torn apart, and citizens were forced to “blend” into the larger society, in order to avoid suspicion or blame for international affairs. After 1920, in an effort to reunite and restrengthen the weakened ethnic and cultural ties, German-Americans in Pittsburgh fought against the tides of change and assimilation, and banded together in song.

The tradition of German music rang strong and clear, calling out to the thousands of German-Americans momentarily caught up in a wave of ethnic guilt and blame. Thus, the sentiment that prevailed in the organization of male and female choruses reached out in hopes of reviving the admiration that had been shattered by W.W.I. This paper will argue that it was the music and unity of the German singing societies that strengthened the bond of German-Americans in Pittsburgh to their cultural traditions, allowing them to persist through the hard years of the Depression and W.W.II. The study encompasses the period from 1920–1950, and assesses the influence and
sustenance of Pittsburgh’s German musical organizations and events. Focusing primarily on the Teutonia Maennerchoir and Bloomfield Liedertafel Singing Societies, it will be possible to discern and chart a pattern of cultural and ethnic growth and decline in the German-American communities in Allegheny County.

Arriving in Pennsylvania as early as the eighteenth century, German immigrants were certainly not newcomers to the Pittsburgh area by 1920. They had formed their communities, established businesses and livelihoods, and were well along the way to forming a new German-American identity. As the twentieth century opened, the atrocities of World War I appeared in American newspapers and propaganda, flooding the lives of every man, woman, and child. Consequently, the German immigrants endured a period of cultural challenge; one that made it extremely difficult to maintain their ethnic identity and traditions.

Germans have typically been viewed very positively by the American people. Characteristically regarded as intelligent and cultured, at least by the upper strata of society, their contributions were usually seen as enhancing America, rather than invading it. But even as the German people were generally respected and accepted by the community, they were still scrutinized for their differences. The more educated and intellectual German immigrants stressed the importance of cultural identity, and actively prevented assimilation. They associated with Pittsburghers in the social and business scene, but only Americanized to the extent which was necessary to be successful. They viewed their behavior as purely social interaction, rather than a matter of national or ethnic conformity. They isolated and segregated themselves into tight-knit communities, where cultural societies and events maintained the German tradition. Originally, ethnic neighborhoods and organizations were developed as a protective environment in which the immigrant could feel some comfort and security, apart from the surrounding American community. Essentially, these nationality-specific areas were left to thrive on their own.

The repercussions of war however, rudely interrupted these quiet ethnic existences. German-Americans faced their most devastating rejection in 1917–18, as wartime emotions cut every German influence out of the American way of life in one “radical operation.” Their isolation became suspicious to native onlookers, and anti-German sentiment threatened the existing ethnic pride. Many either fled or felt pressured to pronounce their assimilation and Americanization, as well as their direct support of American politics. Several Germans however, struggled fiercely to preserve their ethnic distinctiveness.

In the years just before 1920, the stigma of being German became so severe, that many outwardly denied their origins. Immigrants were no longer proud to identify with the German culture, and the unity of the Pittsburgh communities was shattered. Eventually, many Germans became barely distinguishable from Anglo-Americans, in attitude and mannerisms, yet
A Musical Heritage

they were still a target for discrimination, due to their undeniable language and accent. The German language and national identification essentially set Germans apart from other groups. Learning the English language was seen as the first step towards assimilation and the relinquishing of cultural heritage, which the German-Americans were not yet prepared to do. According to some historians, the Germans often believed that assimilation equaled a decline in ethnic prestige, subordination, and ultimately unconditional surrender of their cultural values. Ralph Wood, a Pennsylvania-German farmer further expressed:

A weakening or the disappearance of any of these supporting traits, such as language, was considered to mean a loss of unity in the family and parish, and perhaps even the abandonment of the ancestral home.

Each trait specific to the German culture was important to preserve, in order to strengthen the unity of the group. In fact, there was actually no appreciable loss in the number of people speaking German until the onset of W.W.I. On Pittsburgh’s Northside, a German enclave, there were more people who spoke German pre-W.W.I than English. However, in response to the war and its aftermath, the German culture necessarily became very private, but the small proportion determined to adhere to traditions still proudly honored the customs of the native land.

After 1920 however, new waves of German immigrants flooded the US, especially Pittsburgh, which reinforced major traits of the old German image. There was an increase of approximately 18.5 percent in German immigration to Pittsburgh, in the period from 1920–1940. Many wartime refugees found sanctity in this new homeland, and their “injection of a new active spirit into declining German-American organizations,” contributed to a revival of German cultural traditions. Between 1920 and 1925, a number of former cultural crusaders and ethnic politicians attempted to rebuild the German prewar influence and prestige. They vested much of their energy in the reorganization of cultural societies and institutions that were perhaps briefly abandoned during and immediately following the war. Of these organizations, the German singing societies were greatly supported in an effort to renew national pride and sentiment, but also as a means of getting back in touch with the German language and folklore.

The German population in Pittsburgh did not grow substantially during the Twenties, as new immigrants seemed to balance the number of Germans killed during the war. Throughout this period, however, the group continued to restore and restrengthen its cultural identity through the combination of old and new members and ideas. Additionally, Pittsburghers soon regarded these German communities, especially their contributions to the arts and music, to be enhancing the culture of America. The respect and admiration by Pittsburgh’s elite for great German composers and musicians,
such as Mendelssohn, Brahms, Beethoven and Mozart, facilitated the German organizations and societies centered around the love of music, family and nation, to become supported by the Pittsburgh community at large. Thus, German and American relations improved, steadily meshing the two cultures harmoniously into the Thirties.

As the Thirties came under way, Ray Schmidt, President of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the German-American National Congress, recalls that the relations and culture of German communities settled and remained somewhat stagnant for most of the decade and the Depression. There was not a noticeable change in ethnic identification, as everyone was simply trying to survive. The Depression was an equally hard time for all groups, native or immigrant. Essentially dictated by the economy, the commitment to social events fluctuated slightly, but there was not a substantial decline in the adherence to tradition. The arrival of new German immigrants however, did drop dramatically and did not increase substantially again until the end of W.W.II. Even so, the support of the societies remained fairly steady throughout this period, with very little accountable loss.

In contrast to W.W.I, the onset of the second World War did not destroy or disband the German communities either. German-Americans were still the objects of some suspicion, but their persistence and past loyalty, allowed them to avoid severe hardships. There seemed to be more of an agreement among all groups on the common goal of peace. A speaker during the Conference for Victory and a Free World, held in Pittsburgh in November, 1942, stated precisely that “the kind of world we are fighting for is one in which such groups as those presented here may live side by side in comity and cooperate for common good.” The conference was sponsored by the Church Peace Union, and was attended by groups from all levels of the social structure, including a fairly representative immigrant population. Reverend Father Vincent C. Donovan, Head of the Catholic Thought Association, expressed the general sentiment of the conference:

Peace is something we have got to work for because we must live with each other. Therefore, there must be this constant striving and progressive organization which issue in a good will to work together as human beings.

The opinion of the Pittsburgh community had become more enlightened and geared towards peace and unity. They generally came to accept the German-Americans and could no longer assign blame so easily. The people of Pittsburgh, representing a diverse immigrant population, were also aware that their German-American neighbors were not of the same mind and orientation as their counterparts across the ocean. One could not hold these new Americans accountable, nor ignore their contribution to the community. When asked to address the German immigrants of Pittsburgh, and their
connection to the inhabitants of Nazi Germany, Colonel Vladimir Hurban, Minister of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, responded that,

In spite of the criminal behavior of the German people, we, their present adversaries have to concede that the Germans are an able people whose positive achievements cannot be erased, even by the most bitter hatred.22

In this spirit, the Germans’ artistic organizations and contributions were not harshly scrutinized, but widely supported. The war did not diminish the organized social events for which the Germans had always been known, some activities were simply put on hold. Ray Schmidt further recalls that unlike the discrimination which stimulated the ethnic breakdown of W.W.I, membership in social organizations during W.W.II may have declined only slightly, with male members in the armed forces. In fact, after the second World War and up until the Fifties, the organizations flourished like never before, as immigration boomed and veterans returned with a new nationalist spirit.23

The German organizations that most vividly illustrated the ethnic stability during this era of hardship and change were the German singing societies. These groups embodied a tradition and musical heritage that was not only revered by the German participants and community, but also accepted and respected by Americans. The singing societies strengthened and reinforced the German culture by reaffirming old customs and folklore to enrich the minds and hearts of each generation of German people. Through the music, these groups were also able to reach various facets of immigrant and American life. The lyrics had spiritual, education, cultural and patriotic value which appealed to numerous groups, societies and organizations. The songs had the ability to cross cultural boundaries with the common appreciation and love of music. To further promote this acculturation, American intellectuals held a deep respect and reverence for the musical contributions of the German people, which included a willingness to accept their innovativeness.24

The music of the German people was instrumental in continuing the folklore and stories of German heritage and tradition. This folk music not only united the Germans, but also distinguished them from other immigrant groups in the content and language of the songs.

As music springs directly from the daily life of the folk, it will be easily understood that there is naturally as great a difference in the music of the peoples of various lands as that found in their language, customs, dress and daily habits.25
Songs undoubtedly depict customs of a people, in many different forms and in many different settings. Each group of people will create their own form of music, style of performance, and mode of expression. For the Germans, dance was a very common and appropriate way to express stories and emotions, some as common as daily routines of work or play. Thus, the music made the Germans a self-conscious group, while setting them apart as different. It helped maintain a certain degree of solidarity and social stability that prevented disintegration. The German-Americans could always come together and form a special bond in song and find security in a familiar and protective environment. They could share experiences as well as connect to their common roots through the words and stories of the music.

The musical entertainment of the Germans also led to the fine tuning of skill and eventual competition among groups and performers. Not only did performers and composers compete for mastery within private groups, but also musical mastery of the community. According to Alan Levy, this practice derived from the need “to tap the city-state’s musical pride, engaging people in festivals, holiday celebrations, choruses and bands.” Thus the Germans succeeded in bringing their music to the forefront of community attention, as “the most effective advertising lay in the skill of fine performance.” The desire to outdo fellow artisans arose, and competition necessarily opened the road to excellence.

This competitive fervor was best seen in the existence and support of the traditional Saengerfests and music festivals. These German songfests were national in scope, yet largely attended by several local societies. As late as 1948, the Saengerfest was represented by twelve societies from the Pittsburgh area alone, and one from Latrobe. Typically, the festivals were held in various regions, in order to make them more accessible to groups across the nation. The first Saengerfest in Pittsburgh was in 1858, the centennial year of the city, and one was to take place every three years. Several clubs and societies traditionally competed for a prize and recognition, while also celebrating their common heritage and fellowship. However, during W.W.II, the event became less closely observed than in former years, as the people needed to refocus their priorities. These festivals similarly adjusted, creating a new objective for the embetterment of the German people. The net proceeds for the 1948 Saengerfest were to be turned over to the American Relief Association of Pittsburgh, Inc. and forwarded to the Quakers for distribution in Central Europe for relief purposes. Thus the singing societies and musical organizations had become unique in combining charitable, cultural, and social aims.

In Pittsburgh specifically, the singing societies and clubs flourished for more than a century. By 1937, there were 73 German singing clubs alone, including the well known Teutonnia Maennerchoir, the Bloomfield Liedertafel, and Eintracht Singing Societies. There were fewer than a half-dozen left in 1983, but they had managed to maintain substantial influence for many years. The various groups usually had a tight connection with one another, which
enabled them to share their music, goals, and ideas. The Pennsylvania Federation of Musical Clubs, based in Pittsburgh, was largely responsible for keeping these groups in contact with each other, as well as prominent in the community. The Federation aimed to bring music clubs, organizations, and individuals associated with music into working relation with one another in order to aid and encourage musical education. They also sought to make music an integral part of the civic, industrial, and social life of America. The Federation appears to have been nondiscriminatory and supportive of all ethnic heritages. Additionally, many of the group’s officers were of an ethnic, and specifically German, descent. Thus, the Pennsylvania Federation of Musical Clubs was obviously willing to surpass cultural boundaries in order to achieve its goals. As a result, the musical organizations of Pittsburgh, especially the German societies, were actively shaping themselves as “more positive instruments to further the interests of members of nationality groups.” They were very concerned with and involved in promoting music and community affairs, as well as aiding in many relief efforts during the Depression and World Wars.

Two of the more prominent societies of Pittsburgh, and still active today, the Bloomfield Liedertafel Singing Society and Teutonia Maennerchoir, played a key role in aiding relief efforts of the war, while simultaneously keeping alive the musical heritage of their German ancestors. The oldest society, the Teutonia Maennerchoir, from the Northside of Pittsburgh, was not only the largest, but also much more renowned than Bloomfield. Founded in 1854, it had been incorporated from an earlier singing society, “Liederkranz.” Teutonia’s purpose was “to promote and preserve German-American songs and dances.” However, the group had a few necessary qualifications for membership. An applicant had to be a US citizen and had to possess his first papers of legal citizenship. Thus, while it was important to preserve the German traditions, it was just as necessary to the German immigrants to fully understand and be thankful for the freedom that America was allowing them.

The concerts of Teutonia had many functions, including the relief of suffering. Even though their primary interest was the choir, Teutonia stood ready to aid in any worthy cause. The singing group sponsored several musical contests which awarded prizes to talented musicians; yet it gave almost as many benefit and relief concerts. For example, in 1925, a benefit concert for Pittsburgh orphan homes brought hope to many desperate children. Twenty years later, the Maennerchoir was still giving selflessly in a Relief Concert on November 23, 1946. The purpose this time, however, was to aid the innocent victims of war in Germany. In that concert program, a message from the current President, Henry C. Robel, conveyed his “sincere hope and desire that through the common efforts of us all, we may achieve a goal worthy of the noble and great cause so dear to our hearts.”

Aid however, was only one of the numerous functions encompassed by this prominent organization. The Twenties were spent primarily in an effort
to rebuild pride in the German language and tradition. Membership offered a fraternal bond, an outlet for expression of customs and traditions that had been briefly smothered. The group created card leagues, held dinners and dances, and heartily participated in the Saengerfests and Oktoberfests. The German culture regained the esteem of its fellow Americans, and public functions were revived and renewed. The Annual German-American Charity Ball was also revived after fifteen years, in the spring of 1930. Twelve of these balls were held in the years to follow, the last taking place in 1941 just before the entry of America into the war.

Of the numerous German-American organizations, Teutonnia proclaimed its close intermingling with Pittsburgh’s native-born community. Throughout this period, concert programs illustrate the change in the types of songs performed, which gradually appealed to the larger audiences. The music had originally been all German, but by W.W.II, many American songs and traditions were incorporated. The purpose for this mix of music was not only to capture American listeners, but also to convey support for American livelihood and politics.

In the program for the 80th Anniversary Concert of Teutonnia in 1934, the majority of the songs were in German, with the exception of the last three. These songs were very typically American, such as “American Lullabye,” and “Peter Pan.” Indeed, by the end of the war, concert programs showed much more American music and dedication. The “Star Spangled Banner” was performed at the start of every show, and its lyrics were published in the programs as well. Not only was American support conveyed through the music, but more than eighty members of Teutonnia alone, served with the US Armed Forces in W.W.II. The Teutonnia was successful in reinforcing German culture and tradition, while simultaneously maintaining and nurturing a working relationship with the Pittsburgh community, which allowed its sustenance. Its no wonder that by 1949 it was the only such club in the area which still gave regular music performances, and also enjoyed the largest membership and attendance.

A slightly younger and much smaller group, the Bloomfield Liedertafel Singing Society, was founded in 1884. The name ‘Liedertafel,’ chosen for its significance, actually means “singing table.” This stems from the practice of German warriors after a battle singing of their efforts while seated around a circular table. Through their singing, the society maintained a bond and brotherhood similar to that of the warriors. In the first years, the group sang predominantly in German, which pulled the strings of tradition even tighter. However, as the years passed and it became necessary to appeal to a larger audience, English songs were incorporated into programs, thus extending the fraternal spirit to the surrounding community. Regis Mittereder, fifty-one year member of the society, recalls that during W.W.II there was not a noticeable change in the strength of members’ dedication. There was however, a wider variety of people drawn in and unified in song. As the end of W.W.II approached, it became apparent that something must be done to
renew the support of the society. Italians and Irish were extended membership, increasing the spectrum of the group even further. Additionally, membership proceeded to double, as veterans returned from war and rejoined. The numbers grew from approximately 150 to 300 by 1949–50.48

Mittereder also remembers community aid to be one of the main contributions of the group. Although they did not have the kind of strength and influence of the Teutonia Maennerchoir, Bloomfield was still able to make substantial donations to the community. The organization would volunteer its services on both the local and national level, and took great pride in its selfless service. Mittereder recalls participating in numerous fund-raising activities and benefit concerts. He mentioned visiting individual homes during the cold winter months, bearing gifts of life, such as food or clothing, or just the simple gift of song.49 For the members and the community, the singing societies were much more than a group of musicians; they fostered brotherhood and neighborly love.

One other society worthy of mention is the Eintracht Singing Society from Lawrenceville. The last of the three to be established in 1886, it was still fairly well maintained throughout the first half of the twentieth century. "Eintracht" has a number of different meanings, and was chosen because it expressed the wishes of the members. It can be interpreted as "harmony in thought," "to live in peace," "peaceful harmony," and "good fellowship."50 The group held a substantial membership, but during the Depression years, the society dwindled to a small band of singers. In an effort to renew its strength, Eintracht organized a mixed chorus for the first time. With the added support from the womenfolk, Eintracht continued to prosper, and by 1937, Director and Professor Lawrence O. Fitz had raised the organization to its highest point in many years. He had managed to maintain old customs, including adherence to the German language, and consequently made Eintracht one of Pittsburgh's most important singing groups.

During W.W.II however, the social activities were once again restricted, and by 1941, membership had fallen to 400.51 By 1949, larger plans were discussed about future growth, but unfortunately the prospects looked dim. The society enjoyed only a few more years of prosperity, until eventually, as with most local organizations, interest of the younger generations faded and shifted away from tradition towards the new, exciting attractions of American culture.52 Teutonia is the only society which has successfully maintained a substantial place in the community today. Even so, its members once numbered close to 1000 in 1949, and today only average about 150.

Organizationally, most social and mutual aid groups eventually declined or disbanded. There can be seen somewhat of a cycle of ethnic community and stability in this thirty year inter-war period. The societies flourished and promoted tradition at the times when society was flexible and healthy enough to sustain diversity. When people of a nation are secure in their political position and future, it seems that they are more willing to accept others of different cultures and heritages. But when this security is threat-
ened, nationalities contract, thus expelling and ostracizing outsiders or ‘invaders.’ Accordingly, the German Singing Societies, as well as the German people, suffered the most when the political outlook of the world was shaky, and unable to harmoniously contain the heritages of many. As a result, various nationalities were forced to assimilate in hopes of reaching a workable compromise. Ultimately, however, the community paid a price for its ideology of successful integration. It rarely succeeded in retaining the interest of its younger generations, thus losing many cultural ties to once honored traditions.

Compared to most other ethnic organizations at this time, the singing societies of Pittsburgh were remarkable in the commitment of members, and also in their support by the community. The Germans especially were set apart from other ethnic groups by their strong heritage and cultural bonds. Through their love of art and music, German-Americans were able to bring more than just music to the hills of Pittsburgh. They brought a greater appreciation for family and community, as well as a neighborly respect for others, regardless of heritage. The German singing societies meant brotherhood. From their own private world, the German-Americans were able to extend a voice and hand, successfully creating an unbreakable bond among themselves, but also throughout the entire Pittsburgh community.

The Pennsylvania German is close of clan. [They] cling to old customs, and are sufficient unto themselves. They are neither easily impressed or quickly influenced by outsiders. But while, in the past, they have seemed to ‘let the rest of the world go by,’ all the while, they have been fostering their own culture and crafts with the homely dignity that has been their ever-present virtue since the 17th century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Secondary Sources:


A Musical Heritage


Thomas, Clarke, ed. "They Came to Pittsburgh". Pittsburgh: *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 1983.


**Primary Sources:**

**Records:**


**Interviews:**


**Other:**


**Notes**

Sloping Halls Review—1995


8. Curran, *German Immigration*, 44.


11. Clarke Thomas, ed., "They Came to . . . Pittsburgh" (Compiled by the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 1983).


23. Schmidt, German-American National Congress.


A Musical Heritage

33. Official Program 22nd Annual State Convention of Pennsylvania Federation of Musical Clubs (Pittsburgh, PA, 29 April–4 May, 1940), 5.
34. Klein, A Social Study of Pittsburgh, 244.
48. Regis Mittereder, Member of Bloomfield Liedertafel Singing Society, interview by author, Note in possession of author, 15 November 1994.
51. Records do not indicate membership numbers over a long period of time, which would specify the membership at the highest point. However, it can be gathered from available documentation that during the greatest prosperity of the society, membership well exceeded 400.
53. Trommler, America and the Germans, 261.
54. Good, Some Musical Backgrounds, 33.