HENRI HERZ IN PHILADELPHIA

Edited by Henry Bertram Hill and Larry Gara*

FEW American cities inspired more descriptions by foreign travelers than Philadelphia. Its sights and sounds were a must for all those visitors who planned to write a travel book upon their return to the Old World. European readers of such travel literature sometimes obtained an “image” of life in pre-Civil War northern American cities from accounts of Philadelphia. Like many other authors, Henri Herz,¹ the French pianist and composer, devoted considerable space in his travel book to the Quaker City.

Herz’ picture, however, adds some elements that stemmed from his personality and interest. He devoted a minimum of space to describing the physical appearance of the city, but he penned an interesting description of what he believed to be a typical American merchant and his family. Herz was a first-rate raconteur and his talent was put to good advantage in the humorous accounts below. Perhaps the narrative tells more about the writer than about his subject, but the Herz book may have furnished some Europeans with their sole basis for forming an opinion of American behavior.² A translation of the text relating to Philadelphia follows.

*Dr. Hill, who is Chairman of the History Department at the University of Wisconsin, translated Herz’ book. Dr. Gara, of Grove City College, prepared this article for publication.

¹Heinrich Herz (1806-1888) left his native Austria as a child prodigy to study music in France. He considered himself French and used the name Henri Herz. Besides making a number of successful concert tours, Herz held a professorship at the Paris Conservatory, twice went into the business of manufacturing fine pianos, and built a concert hall. His concerts and numerous compositions were very popular in his day, but some critics claimed that he lacked first-rate musical ability. Eric Bloom, ed., Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians (5th ed., 9 vols., New York, 1955), IV, 259-260.

²Herz toured the Americas from 1846 to 1851 and published his Mes voyages en Amérique in Paris in 1866. Parts of this book, edited by Professors Hill and Gara, have appeared in other journals, but the work as a whole has never been printed in English. The translation appearing in this article has been reviewed by Johannes Gaertner of Lafayette College.
Philadelphia, which for all those who have tried to learn the rich and harmonious language of Homer, signifies city of brotherly love, is also called the Quaker City. It is the [former] capital of the state of Pennsylvania, and we already know that that state was the place where the members of the Quaker sect established themselves in America. Like almost all cities in America, Philadelphia is clean, well built, and has streets both straight and sufficiently wide. . . .

It is in the city of Philadelphia and the state of Maine that the most progress has been made by temperance societies. Philadelphia contains a great number of water drinkers who have condemned themselves to the exclusive drinking of that much too primitive liquid in order to uphold the thesis that certain men abuse fermented liquors. If it were necessary to deprive oneself of all things of which the abuse was harmful, one would end up by renouncing absolutely everything. But the cause of temperance is a passion in America, where there are so many passions, and passions are not rational, precisely because they are passions. . . .

Everything wears out in this world, and the pleasure of listening to music does not escape that universal law. In spite of all the enthusiasm which the American public had and continued to have for me, Ulmann\(^5\) one day wanted to add a new feature—something powerful, irresistible—to the old one of just music. He thought about it for a spell, and then, slapping his forehead in a gesture of inspiration, he let out the cry of Archimedes leaving the bath: "Eureka!"

"What a concert, sir, and what an idea!"

"What are you going to do?" I asked Ulmann, "Are you going to hire one orchestra, two orchestras, or three orchestras?"

"I would not exchange my idea for all the orchestras in the world."

"Then you have an unbeatable idea?"

"Absolutely unbeatable."

"And you aren't going to tell me about it?"

"You are the last person I would like to tell about it, for I know from experience that you disagree with me on the proper ways to arouse public interest, and you can't be reasoned with too

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\(^3\) The deleted section tells of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and reprints the Declaration. There follows a long story about a young lady who pretended to be one of Herz' pupils.

\(^4\) In the deleted section Herz told about a woman whose puritanical nature caused her to cover the legs of a piano, and recounted a story about Stephen Girard.

\(^5\) Bernard Ulmann was a well known nineteenth-century impresario who managed Herz' American tour.
easily, but since you ask me bluntly, it has to do with a thousand candles.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“A thousand candles, I tell you.”

“I heard you say that before, but I do not understand how you plan to use these candles. . . . Are they musical candles?”

“My dear Herz, the musical part of the concert is the part which gives me the least concern, since you are in charge of that.”

“Ah, Mr. Ulmann, you are extremely courteous and the most ingenious of flatterers.”

“Yes, I am well known for that. But seriously, it is not musical candles I am thinking of; it is the regular variety, and that is why my idea is so original.”

Ulmann left me knowing nothing more about his invention, which, I concluded, could not be anything but brilliant if it involved so many candles. I had forgotten this conversation completely when, on taking a walk through the city, I saw the gigantic posters announcing my next concert, at the top of which was printed:

A THOUSAND CANDLES!

I read this on the posters and at last I realized that the idea was to light the concert hall with a thousand candles. This method of drawing an audience of music lovers seemed to me ridiculous, as well as impractical. I was, however, in error. Those one thousand candles excited so much curiosity among the American people, virile in essence, so naive at times, and so often infantile, that in less than a day all the seats were sold. In spite of the results obtained, I wanted the reference to the thousand candles taken off the posters, but Ulmann categorically refused to do it, telling me bluntly that I knew nothing about business.

Ulmann’s candles, I have to admit, enjoyed a greater success than my Russian rondo, which I played in the midst of the general distraction. I was rather unhappy about the affair, but Ulmann found his justification when he added up the receipts, which in his eyes was the most worthwhile part of the whole business. At the end of my first number, one of my listeners arose and addressed me in a loud voice:

“Sir,” he said to me, “there are not a thousand of them.”

I had forgotten the candles.

“A thousand what?” I asked him.

“A thousand candles, for heaven’s sake! I came here only to see them.”
“And how many are there?”

“There are eight missing.”

This distinguished student—of candles had patiently counted them all, and, as a man who did not like to be duped, had demanded the missing eight.

“So be it, sir,” I said to him in complete seriousness, “I owe you eight candles and I will get them for you.”

I told Ulmann about this episode and he said to me:

“You do not know Americans; your man will not fail to come for his candles. He sees a bargain there, little it is true, but still good, and so worth putting through.”

I had a package of eight candles made up, and wrote on the outside: “Good candles make good friends and good concerts.”

No one, however, came to get the candles...

I took many charming walks in the vicinity of Philadelphia, and like other inquiring folk, I did not fail to visit and admire the great pumps on the Schuylkill which supply fresh water to the inhabitants of the city of brotherly love. Here, as in so many other places in the United States, man has had to struggle against the greatest of difficulties imposed by nature, and he has come out triumphant. In this case it was nothing less than raising the river’s water to a reservoir big enough to serve generously the whole of Philadelphia. And the good Lord knows how much water is consumed in America, where each house has a bathroom, where all households do their own laundry, where bedrooms generally have lavatories with hot and cold running water, and where every Saturday the servants wash the fronts of the houses with streams of water from hoses, as if they were extinguishing a fire.

The Schuylkill pumps seemed to me to be constructed on the same principle as our older pumps at Marly. The reservoir contains 22,000,000 gallons of water, which is distributed widely through a system of buried pipes. One cannot help admiring the great pumps in their great stone building facing the river, but what catches the eye above all in this clean and inviting spot are the beauties of nature which abound on all sides. What captivating scenery, in which a simple and pleasing artistry has embellished the work of the Creator! The flowing natural stream pleases the eye and cleanses the air as it winds over the rocks in crystalline threads; while over the walks and lawn there spreads the broad shade of catalpa trees whose crimson-dotted silvery flowers seem

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"The deleted section contains Herz' comments on plans for a farewell concert in Philadelphia which never took place, musical trickery used in concert tours, and the steam calliope."
to be the greatest desire of the water nymphs standing in a graceful stone basin opening from the rocks where a jet of water perpetually plays. A gentle and indescribable harmony seems to pervade such almost mythological places, where the spirit dozes voluptuously, cradled by dreams both pleasant and melancholy at the same time. I was not alone when I took this walk, the memory of which still moves me today. I was in the company of a most friendly family, at whose home I passed my best evenings in Philadelphia. I am going to give a short description of each member of this family and sketch a picture of a characteristic day for each, in order to show the nature of a typical family in the honest and inflexible state of Pennsylvania.

This family consists of Mr. Thomas G..., merchant, about fifty years old; of his wife, about thirty-five years old and in the full bloom of a chaste and severe beauty; of a son of seventeen years; and of twin sisters three years younger than their brother, always identically dressed and looking so much alike that Mr. Thomas G... frequently takes Jane for Mary. The mother, of course, never makes a mistake about them. Women have eyes in their hearts which always see correctly in such cases.

Mr. Thomas G..., born in New York of English parents, began his career as a merchant by being a clerk in a drygoods store. At twelve years of age he was entrusted with the duty of collecting accounts, and from a single trip he returned with ten thousand dollars in his pocket. At sixteen he could make signatures in the name of the company, and at twenty-four he had a business of his own. His youth had passed without his knowing any of the joys of youth, and his faculties were all directed toward an end from which he could not escape—to get rich by working. Such an organizing of life as that of this austere merchant can be counted by the thousands in the United States. Did there ever exist in France a child who was anything but a child? It is neither a criticism nor a commendation that I intend to make here; I state a characteristic fact, that is all.

Possessor of a fortune valued at three or four million francs, Mr. G... has not lessened his business activities, for the reason that he could never modify his manner of living in the least detail. Even in the middle of winter he rises at dawn, drinks a cup of tea and leaves the sumptuous residence in which he lives in order to go to miserable little premises, badly furnished, poorly ventilated, in an immense sort of shed always blockaded by bundles of merchandise, and which he calls his office. In this wretched hovel seated in a worn and tattered chair, Mr. G... transacts a great
amount of business every day, with that calm and that mental
rectitude which is the genius of the Anglo-Saxon race. Neither
rain, nor snow, nor ice stops him. When the streets are covered
with ice and when there is danger of breaking one's leg, he puts
on the soles of his shoes little devices with crampons on them, and
thus shod he goes to his office as a soldier goes to his post or a
priest to his church. Quite evidently, for him as for the great
majority of American merchants, business is more than a means
of earning money; it is a veritable ministry.

When he reaches his office, he examines his books and puts them
in order. In this temple of business, where his clerks always
arrive at least an hour after he does, the air is saturated with
austere duties, and toil turns men into ants. At nine o'clock Mr.
G . . . arises from his businessman's chair and goes to lunch at a
restaurant frequented by other businessmen. In five minutes, that
is, in one gulp, he eats a meal invariably composed of a piece of
roast beef and a plate of raw cress seasoned with vinegar and
mustard. Then he returns to his office, receives clients, reads the
papers, visits the stock exchange, and, making a stop at the cus-
toms, he goes back to his office to give his final directions before
returning to his private abode, to use the English expression. He
dines silently with his family, in a quarter of an hour, and passes
his evenings in a little room reserved for his own use, when he
does not go to a club of studious thinkers of which he has long
been a member.

The richest man in the United States, Mr. Astor of New York,
whose fortune is something in the neighborhood of $40,000,000
(around 200,000,000 francs) lives exactly in the same way as Mr.
G . . . A little one-storied office, located in New York on Prince
Street, two doors off Broadway, with iron bars which make it re-
semble a prison cell, such is the modest asylum where he conducts
his business. There he concerns himself personally with every-
thing, knows each dollar which goes into his cash-box or is owed
to him, and keeps his own books. Ordinarily he comes to the down-
town district early in the morning in an omnibus, and is absorbed
in his business affairs all day. He takes little exercise and gets
virtually all of his pleasure from his business activities. He does
not leave his office until five o'clock, when he slowly walks up
Broadway to Lafayette Place.

To return to Mr. Thomas G . . ., I said he liked to study as well
as engage in business undertakings. Long before I knew him he
had begun preparation of a complete statistical compendium on
the United States from the day of its independence. He consented
to let me see several parts of his curious manuscript, and permitted me to use some of the figures found in this volume.

Let us pass on to Mrs. G. . . .

This lady, conforming to the customs established in Pennsylvania, arises very early in all seasons, and invariably leaves her bedroom clothed as formally as if she were going out. Her two little girls, prim, well but not ostentatiously dressed, appear a little later. At eight o'clock, summer or winter, breakfast is served. Nine times out of ten they have fried ham and eggs, with large cups of very thin coffee. After breakfast, the young girls take their books and go to school alone.

With Jane and Mary gone, Mrs. G . . . ties an apron as white as snow around her waist and directs the servants by giving them an example of her own industry. Each day the house is cleaned and straightened out, from cellar to attic. When everything is in order, with a symmetry a little cold, it is true, but irreproachable, Mrs. G . . . retires to her room, where she dresses a second time.

Either by carriage or on foot, she goes out every afternoon from two to five o'clock to make calls or to run to the drygoods stores. In the latter she almost never has any intention of making a purchase, but she has twenty pieces of cloth unrolled, inspects entire cartons of ribbons, and tries on a dozen shawls. This manner of passing time—to the despair of the store clerks—is so common among American women that it has been given a name; it is called shopping.

As for the younger Mr. G . . ., he is employed in his father's business, where he works without respite from morning to night. After dinner he goes to a play or retires to the basement, where he practices on the piano or studies German.

Such is the life of the G . . . family, and such is the life of almost all families of businessmen in the United States, whatever may be their degree of wealth.

It was with this young man that I had the opportunity of seeing the actor Booth in a play of Shakespeare's. He had already appeared at the Drury Lane in London, and while not a Talma, a Kean, or a Rossi, he struck me as talented and his performance was a success. Who would have thought then that one of Booth's sons would become the execrable assassin of President Lincoln?

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2 Junius Brutus Booth (1796-1852) was a famous Shakespearean actor and the father of three sons who achieved outstanding success in the theatre.  
3 François Joseph Talma (1763-1826), Edmund Kean (1787-1833), and Ernesto Rossi (1829-1896) were all famous as nineteenth-century Shakespearean actors.
Ulmann could never be easily persuaded to give up his pet ideas. He kept returning to the notion of arranging a political concert and he was forever insisting on the good effect which could be produced by a triumphal march played by forty pianists. He harped on this scheme so often and insistently that I finally consented to write a piece, not for forty pianists, but for eight, which seemed enough to me. A concert for eight pianists playing on four pianos was accordingly announced, and the enthusiasm of the public for this new exhibition proved the good judgment of my shrewd manager. There were so many people in the hall when I came in to play that it was literally necessary to carry me in. It was suffocating inside, but eight pianists made the audience forget such things. Had there been forty of us, people might well have been stifled. This concert with eight pianists was my farewell concert in Philadelphia. . . .

9 Ulmann had tried unsuccessfully to interest Herz in a concert of American patriotic music which was to include a grand triumphal march by Henri Herz, dedicated to young America and arranged for forty pianos.
10 The deleted section contains Herz' comments on the sewing machine and an anecdote concerning American table manners.