Victor Pelissier, Composer in Federal New York and Philadelphia

French emigrants made substantial contributions to the intellectual and artistic flowering of centers such as Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Norfolk and Charleston in the early national period. Perhaps the most prominent musician of this group was a composer, Victor Pelissier. Although he is remembered for his distinguished association with the flourishing Old American Company in New York before 1800, Pelissier's activities and connection to Pennsylvania in the second decade of the nineteenth century remain little known today. If Philadelphia was important to Pelissier as his first place of residence in America and the city in which he promptly gained a reputation for his musical abilities, it was also the setting from which he later brought forth his significant collection of American music entitled Pelissier's Columbian Melodies (1812). The title page of that publication announces the contents with the emphatic addition "composed by Victor Pelissier, of Philadelphia."
Pelissier's life in America spans a quarter of a century. Despite a lack of information that still exists regarding particular years, that time may be divided into four broad phases: the initial period of adaptation and travel with the Old American Company, 1792-1797; the New York years with the troupe as focal point, late 1797-1806; the Philadelphia period of maturity notable for the publication of his American music, 1811-1814; the closing years, 1815-1817(?).

Although little has been discovered about the composer's early life, the existence of three complete works written before Pelissier's arrival in the New World permits observations regarding stylistic tendencies. Pelissier was born in France some time after the middle of the eighteenth century and received his musical education there, possibly at the Conservatoire. His first published work, Les Amusements Varié[sic], indicates that he had been employed previously as "page de la musique du Roy." The four chamber pieces of Opus 1 as well as another work from this period, L'Amour de l'Âge d'Or, are models of rococo elegance with their florid ornamentation, graceful formal dances or airs, and short-spanned melodies.

A more impressive example of Pelissier's musical abilities is his pre-classic "Simphonie à 8 parties" in G major. Scored for strings, two oboes, and two horns, the three-movement symphony replaces following anthologies: John Tasker Howard, A Program of Early American Piano Pieces (New York, 1931), 24-26; Harold V. Milligan, Pioneer American Composers: A Collection of Early American Songs (Boston, 1921), I, 5-11; II, 5-11; III, 5-11; Bryceson Treharne, Early American Music: A Series of Part Songs Based on the Famous Melodies Between the Colonial and Civil War Periods (Cincinnati, 1933), 3; and Grenville Vernon, Yankee Doodle-Doo: A Collection of Songs of the Early American Stage (New York, 1927), 35-40, 58-63, 70-75.


6 (Paris: the author, n.d.), 12 pp. This work is also located at the Département de la Musique.

7 (N.p., n.d.), 23 pp. score. A microfilm of the MS from the Universitätsbibliothek, Basel, is located at the Music Research Division, Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, New York.
the light and intimate tone of the chamber music with broader lines, incisive rhythmic energy, and carefully structured dynamic contrasts. Delineated tonal and thematic ideas, balanced phrases, and incipient instrumental exchange among the parts, particularly in the last movement, characterize the score. All three works attest to Pelissier's sound musical training, adept treatment of instrumental color, and skill in formal craftsmanship.

Pelissier left France during the Reign of Terror and, along with other compatriots, traveled to Santo Domingo in the French West Indies. There he served briefly as the first horn player of the theatre orchestra in Cape François but the social revolution engulfing the French West Indies obliged him to flee the island in 1792. He arrived in America and took up residence in Philadelphia, where he first attained musical prominence. The Federal Gazette of May 29, 1792, advised the public of Pelissier's appearance as horn virtuoso and composer in a concert given by his compatriot, the violinist Joseph Cézar.8

The Old American Company, reorganized to accommodate the influx of new musical and dramatic talent coming primarily from England and France, soon acknowledged the multiple abilities of "Monsieur Palissier, composer of music"9 by engaging his services for the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia. Thus began a long association with the Old Americans during which Pelissier played principal horn in the orchestra and also became one of the company's two "accredited"10 composers and arrangers. (His colleague was the renowned James Hewitt, musical director and leader of the troupe's orchestra.)

It is important to consider briefly the musical ambience that greeted Pelissier upon his entry to American musical society. The new milieu was largely English in the sources and prototypes of its vocal and instrumental music as well as musical life. The English musical model was particularly marked in the domain of the ballad

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8 Oscar George Theodore Sonneck, Early Concert Life in America (1731-1800) (1907; reprinted New York, 1949), 137.
10 Oscar George Theodore Sonneck, Early Opera in America (1915; reprinted New York, 1963), 88.
opera with its light songs of a sentimental or ballad nature interspersed by easily understood spoken dialogue in the vernacular. A sprightly and straightforward style marked the English music and even Continental operas performed in America after production in London had undergone simplification in harmonies and accompaniment patterns as well as a shortening of forms and a reduction in ornamentation. This musical idiom formed a large part of the repertory performed by troupes such as the Old American Company, and it was in the cosmopolitan theatre orchestras that Pelissier and other musicians of varied national backgrounds acquired familiarity with it.

An integral part of Victor Pelissier's professional responsibilities for the Old Americans was the arrangement and instrumentation of many English comic and semiserious operas. His work on Stephen Storace's *The Haunted Tower*, Samuel Arnold's *The Mountaineers*, and William Shield's *Rosina*, among many others, provided the ideal training ground in the currently popular musical idiom and served as a model for his own musicodramatic works composed in America.

His initial period of adaptation and travel with the Old American Company commenced with a successful season at the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia after which the company moved to New York for the reopening there of the John Street Theatre in January 1793. This relocation was hastened by the formation in 1792 of a rival Philadelphia theatrical company headed by Thomas Wignell and Alexander Reinagle, an enterprise that was eventually housed in the splendid New Theatre on Chestnut Street, formally opened for theatrical events in February 1794.

The Old American Company traveled considerably between 1793 and January 1798. Between intermittent seasons at the John Street Theatre, the company performed in Providence, Hartford, Newport

11 Ibid., 11-12. See also Krummel, I, 13-18.
12 See as examples the pasticcios based on Monsigny's *Le Déserteur* and Grétry's *Richard Coeur-de-Lion: The Songs in The Deserter, A Musical Drama as Perform'd with universal applause at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, Composed by Messrs. Monsigny, Philidor, & Dibdin . . .* (London: Broderip & Wilkinson, n.d.), and *Richard Coeur de Lion, An Opera, as performed with Universal Applause at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, Composed by the Celebrated Grétry, Anfossi Bertoni, Dr. Hayes, Dr. Wilson, Carolan, and William Shield . . .* (London: n.p., n.d.).
and Boston. The virulent yellow fever epidemic that struck New York in the fall of 1795 forced the Company to remain away from the city until February 1796. The Old Americans were finally able to move into a new permanent home at New York's Park Theatre on January 29, 1798.13

The Music Directory of Early New York City14 assists in establishing that Pelissier resided continuously in lower Manhattan from 1797 through 1806. This stable period in Pelissier’s life coincides roughly with the years during which the artist and playwright William Dunlap wielded tremendous power as a manager and then sole proprietor of the Old American Company. Dunlap’s own writings yield pertinent information about the musical and dramatic milieu of the company and Pelissier’s association with it.

Pelissier was particularly active in the last years of the eighteenth century. He wrote and arranged music for every type of dramatic production presented by the Old American Company including the incidental music to plays, patriotic and scenic extravaganzas, pantomimes, and melodramas. He composed the music for Elihu Hubbard Smith’s opera libretto, Edwin and Angelina; or, The Banditti, An Opera in Three Acts (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1797), based in part on Edwin and Angelina. A Ballad by Oliver Goldsmith. The work, performed in New York on December 19, 1796, has been described as “the first opera of which all parts are known to have been created in America, and which then came to public production.”15 In the following year, Pelissier’s composition of a four-part glee earned him a prestigious prize medal awarded by the Columbian Anacreontic Society of New York.16 One of New York’s four musical societies,17 the Columbian numbered among its members the President and founder, John Hodgkinson, leading actor-singer of the

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13 Sonneck, Early Opera, 89; Durang, 38.
15 Edward Ellsworth Hipsher American Opera and Its Composers (Philadelphia, 1927), 25. This claim has been disputed in some later sources such as Howard, Our American Music, 94.
16 Pelissier’s Columbian Melodies, VIII. 73-76.
17 Sonneck, Concert Life, 204-207; Mates, 9.
Old American Company, as well as William Dunlap and Elihu Smith.

Pelissier collaborated with Dunlap as composer of the music for the manager’s own opera libretto entitled Sterne’s Maria; or, The Vintage. Dunlap’s Diary reveals the gradual stages in the shaping of the music between June 1797 and the first performance on January 14, 1799. It shows the close working relationship maintained between composer and librettist and indicates the approbation accorded to Pelissier by Dunlap as well as the performers of his music. The critic of the Commercial Advertiser of January 16, 1799, echoed the laudatory sentiments after the work’s premiere, noting that the music composed by Mr. Pelissier “would do honor to any composer now living; and the execution of it by the performers does them honor, and must have been highly satisfactory to him.”

Pelissier’s eminent professional stature and his multiple responsibilities with the troupe earned him special recognition in financial terms as well. Among the fourteen members of the orchestra, he received the highest salary (Dunlap, Diary, 267–269, 273–274). His fee, fifteen dollars per week, included remuneration for instrumental performance, original composition, and arrangement or instrumentation of other works. It exceeded the average pay of ten dollars weekly for orchestral musicians and even the salary granted to Hewitt, with whom Dunlap secured an agreement “to lead my Orchestra next season and attend to the getting up of Operas for $14 per week” (ibid., 302). By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Pelissier had become established and respected for his multiple abilities as composer, arranger, teacher and instrumentalist.

Philadelphia city directories document Pelissier’s residence from 1811 to 1814 in the city in which he had first gained musical dis-


20 In addition to the directories, the title pages of the first and succeeding numbers of Pelissier’s Columbian Melodies, together with information gleaned from the copyright pages and advertisement insert, precisely locate the composer’s address in Philadelphia for 1812 as “No. 46 south Fifth Street,” his residence there from 1812 through 1814.
tinction. This period of his maturity is particularly significant for the publication of his important collection, _Pelissier’s Columbian Melodies_. It was Pelissier’s presentation of his American works in a permanent and accessible form. A prospectus advertising the forthcoming volume, which was to be sold by subscription for “six dollars per annum” and to nonsubscribers for one dollar per number, noted Pelissier’s earlier success as a composer in Europe, the “marked approbation” accorded his music in America, and “the very favourable reception they [his musical pieces] have met with, at the Theatres of New York, Philadelphia, &c., not only by an illumined community, but by eminent connoisseurs” (_Pelissier’s Columbian Melodies_, insert facing VIII, 71). Despite Pelissier’s established reputation, however, few of his pieces had been available previously in published form.

Only one complete volume containing twelve monthly issues is extant. This rare collection consists of songs, duets, romances, overtures, a rondo, and dramatic pieces. It includes excerpts from three operas, two melodramas, four pantomimes, several entertainments, and a play in addition to the complete music for a dramatic ode. The pieces were written originally for theatre and concert performances held in New York and Philadelphia from 1793 to 1812, the volume’s year of publication. They range widely in origin and function from orchestral dramatic music adapted for the piano to works written specifically for the keyboard to texted songs and duets drawn from operas and plays. In its rich diversity, the collection mirrors the influence of the later eighteenth-century English semiserious opera on the dramatic vocal music and it also presents nineteenth-century features in certain dances as well as music composed specifically for the piano. Each monthly issue comprises eight pages of varied kinds of music. This arrangement follows the norm for the period in its mixture, rather than discrete separation, of vocal and purely instrumental compositions within each number.

The title of the volume, _Pelissier’s Columbian Melodies_, proudly affirms its American authorship. It is significant that Pelissier chose to publish his American works in a version arranged for the piano, the most popular instrument of the era. The decision indicates Pelissier’s desire to reach the widest possible American audience. As added assurance for the commercial success of the collection, the
composer assumed only moderate technical proficiency at the keyboard among his buyers and provided many pieces accessible to amateur music lovers. To this end, texted pieces generally appear in the two staves customary for song prints in the early nineteenth century: the performer would simultaneously sing and play the notes of the melody written on the upper staff while accompanying it according to the simple patterns shown on the lower staff. Pelissier's occasional employment of three staves, however, presents a more challenging concept of a vocal line freed from essential pitch identity with the piano part, assures a dynamically independent accompaniment, and indicates that those pieces were composed originally for public performances by highly skilled actor-singers in operas and stage entertainments.

The songs in the collection include patriotic airs alluding to the country's heroic battles, operatic arias, several "bird-song" imitations in vogue during the era, and a few comic tunes. Most of the songs contain sentimental or pastoral texts whose simile-laden verses and rhymed couplets extol love or country life in symmetrical phrase groups and rounded musical forms. Among the more elaborate pieces are two songs and a duet from the Dunlap-Pelissier opera, Sterne's Maria, and two songs from the Smith-Pelissier opera, Edwin and Angelina; or, The Banditti.

Pelissier's manifold connections to the music and musical life of Philadelphia are manifest in the Columbian Melodies: Philadelphia was the original place of performance for twenty-five of the forty-six pieces for which the location is designated. He wrote dramatic music performed at the Philadelphia New Theatre on Chestnut Street and the Olympic Theatre on Walnut Street, concert music first heard at the Philadelphia Amateur's Concert, and dance music for balls such as those held by the celebrated dancer and Philadelphia ballet master, Mr. Quesnet. In one instance, Pelissier adds the proud phrase "written by a Citizen of Philadelphia" directly below the title of his new comic song, "A Justice I Am" (XI, 108–109). A particularly successful combination of text and music is Pelissier's melodrama, "Ode on the Passions" (V, 43–48) to words by William Collins, inscribed to the Society of Artists of the United States, and

performed “with great applause at both Theatres of Philadelphia.” As is frequently the case in this collection, the main or solo instrumentation of the original version is indicated above the staff; the ample horn melodies written to express passions as diverse as melancholy and cheerfulness connected to the joys of the hunt suggest that Pelissier enjoyed participating in these performances. Among the instrumental pieces, a well-constructed set of three variations on a march theme, “March As Performed by the Philadelphia Militar [sic] Bands and also at the Olympic Theatre on the 4th of July 1812 with Variations for the Piano Forte” (X, 93–95), signals the notable circumstances of its performances by the city’s musical forces. The march is virtually identical to Pelissier’s “March to Canada” published separately by C. Taws in Philadelphia, dedicated “to the Army of the United States,” and joined in this instance to a Quick Step rather than to the variations.

Pelissier’s Columbian Melodies contains sprightly dances remarkable for their international character and similar only in their adherence to periodic rhythms and internally repeated strains. The dances display Pelissier’s adept versatility in supplying music appropriate to widely diverse plays and stage entertainments. Some are traditional and others exotic: alongside three hearty British hornpipes are two delicate allemandes and one tambourin recalling Pelissier’s French heritage, two waltzes heralding that form’s new popularity in the era, a colorful Spanish fandango, and a “Negro Dance,” one of several pieces from a pantomime about Jamaican voodooism. The solo keyboard music in the collection is noteworthy for its presentation of the most popular and newer categories of piano music in the nineteenth century. The important volume is a tribute to Pelissier’s versatile adaptation to the different tastes and requirements of his American employers, audiences, and buyers.

Pelissier’s closing years, 1815–1817, were apparently spent in and near New York. Several benefit concerts and balls were arranged during this period for the elderly musician who was now nearly blind. Distinguished colleagues, such as James Hewitt, and orchestral players including “amateurs and professors of music”

22 Pelissier’s name and address are listed for the years 1815 and 1817 in Redway, Music Directory of Early New York City, 18.
joined talents to present the concerts at Washington Hall in New York.\textsuperscript{23} No official record of his death has been located, but it is reported that he may have spent his last days in New Jersey.\textsuperscript{24}

Victor Pelissier contributed richly to the land that became his home for a quarter of a century. In so doing, he accepted, drew upon, and enriched the prevailing musical idioms of his new country. As a consequence of his direct connection with theatres, stage performers, and orchestral musicians in Philadelphia and New York, he concentrated on the creation of small-scale forms to suit specific requirements. In response to the emergent domination of the piano as the pre-eminent instrument in American nineteenth-century concert halls and home parlors, he later rearranged his orchestral and operatic music for that new medium and added to the burgeoning literature of solo keyboard music. Victor Pelissier’s activities and compositions offer a fascinating perspective on the interaction between a leading composer and his cultural milieu during the federal period of this nation.

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\textsuperscript{23} Odell, II, 444, 487. Benefit concerts were given on Dec. 20, 1814, and Mar. 18, 1817. 
\textsuperscript{24} Wolfe, II, 672.