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Conductor, Composer, Philanthropist; the Life of Emma Roberto Steiner

Emma Roberto Steiner was a conductor, composer, and philanthropist at a time when it was very difficult for a woman to be any of those things. She was born in 1856, in Baltimore, to parents Catherine Mundy and Colonel Frederick B. Steiner. Colonel was one in a long line of military men in Emma's family. Her grandfather was a colonel at the Battle of North Point, famous for being the battle in which Francis Scott Key completed the Star-Spangled Banner. Steiner's mother was an excellent amateur pianist and gave her some basic lessons as a child. However, her father was openly hostile towards the idea of her learning music, so her mother's lessons were limited and she was mostly left up to her own devices to learn. Her father, in fact, "does not approve of her lighter veins of music...her talent has not been so much appreciated at home as away, and she has worked her way up by her own unaided efforts" ("One Woman Composer." *Iowa County Democrat*, 9 Feb. 1984, p. 7). She taught herself piano, voice, and some violin before starting to compose. By age eleven, she had composed two scenes from a grand opera, *Amainade*. Emma said its lack of completion was "because of the acute discouragement I suffered from the disparaging remarks from family and friends, to whom the idea of a woman's choosing opera as her profession was ridiculous." ("Orchestra Leader 50 Years." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 31 Jan. 1926, pp. 84-85). The head of the Peabody Institute of Music in Baltimore heard of her work on the opera and ultimately produced a scene from it at a concert at the Institute. Because of her father's refusal, she was unable to attend that school. Steiner continued to compose, and during a time when her father was away, went at a family friend's request to conduct an operatic performance. It was said that she played the piano with

one hand and conducted the orchestra with the other. Everyone who saw the performance was impressed at her skill, but her father was mortified and forbade her from repeating it. Compare the facts about Colonel Steiner's role in Emma's life with this quote from the St. Paul Daily Globe: "Her father is a well-known businessman of the Monumental City, and to his lavish expenditure of money in the development of the genius of his daughter, which he discovered while she was a mere child, is the world indebted for this consummate artist, whom many competent musicians look upon as a phenomenon" ("An Opera By A Woman." 20 Jul. 1891). There is no evidence that Colonel Steiner ever played a role in Emma's life beyond scorning her dream. It is telling of the way women were thought of at this time, the roles they were expected to play, that this reporter gave the credit for her entire career, her every achievement, to her father, to the man who was expected to be in charge of her life.

Emma's first job was as the music director under Edward Everett Rice. He was very progressive for his time, and booked *Clorindy*, the first musical written by African-Americans to appear on Broadway, in 1898. Emma began as a singer, and somehow caught his eye. From there, she began touring under several opera companies to perform light operas, including *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *Amorita*. She composed another opera, *Fleurette*, but couldn't get any managers to hear it, so she gathered a group of well known financial sponsors of opera, who adored it and pushed for its production. She toured with it in 1889 and again in 1891. Emma had a composition performed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Then, she founded her own opera company, the Emma R. Steiner Gaiety Opera Company. Unfortunately, the company began losing money at alarming rates, including during the production of *Fleurette*, which was a net loss of \$6000 for Emma. She no longer had the money to pay the musicians in the company, so they refused to perform one night. Steiner had pneumonia and could hardly leave her hotel room,

so could do nothing and her company disbanded. This started a series of tragedies. In 1902, a fire started in a warehouse where her works were being stored, destroying most if not all of their remaining copies. This was before photocopying, so unpublished music had to be recreated by hand, a practice which Emma would not have had time to do. After this fire, Steiner contracted an unnamed illness that led to her eyesight failing, and had no money to continue to tour or compose. Incredibly, Steiner decided at that point the smartest move would be to go to Alaska and pan for gold. She found tin instead, in a discovery that would be called “one of the most important mineral finds in recent years” (“Miss Emma Steiner Leaves Music for Mining and Finds Rich Tin in Alaska.” *The St. Louis Republic*, 24 Jul. 1904, p. 42).

Steiner was in Alaska for almost a decade, continuing to mine and buying a lot of property, as well as giving some local concerts as a pianist. When she finally returned to “The Outside”, as people in Alaska called it, she became an outspoken advocate for the state and toured high schools around the country, giving lectures on Alaska’s bounties. Her musical output slowed down a lot at this point, but one of the highlights of her entire career occurred in 1926, when a concert dedicated to her work was performed at the Metropolitan Opera. That concert was the last time they would allow a woman to conduct there until 1976. Before she died, Emma’s last project was a home for elderly musicians in Long Island. She died on February 27, 1929.

In her lifetime, Steiner conducted over 6,000 performances. It’s difficult to understate how massive that number is- it would be a lot for even a prominent male conductor, let alone a female in the early 1900’s. This included over 700 performances of *The Mikado*. She was known for being, and frequently mentioned in newspapers as, one of the first women to make a career as a conductor. Emma herself, however, was uncomfortable with this characterization, writing “It

has been said at different times that I am the only woman in the United States who conducts a large orchestra; that I am the only woman who has produced and composed several comic operas; that I am the only woman who has written the complete instrumentation for operatic and other musical compositions. For myself I make none of those claims, for I know each of them to be incorrect, although it may be perhaps a fact that I am the only woman in America who has done all three of the things above enumerated” (“To Compose an Opera.” *The Providence News*, 19 Apr, 1895, p. 6).

Emma preferred operettas over operas, saying “Ever try to have an opera produced? No? Well, never try. I have called times without number on managers, and when I said ‘opera’ they always had an excuse: just going out, important business engagement, sorry, but time solidly booked, and such. I struck a new idea. It’s not an opera, but an operetta comedy. That’s different. You get an opening and announce a grand production of a new operetta comedy, when all at once it is in demand. They come around and say I thought you wanted to produce an opera. Yes, I answer, but the American people are too busy to find out if an American can even write operatic music, and when you put a theme in your subject you are gone.” (“An Opera By A Woman.” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, 20 Jul. 1891, p. 2). A list of her known operas includes: *Fleurette* (1877), *Day Dream* (1894), *Brigands* (1894), *The Man From Paris* (1900), *The Little Hussar*, *The Viking*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Alchemist*, and *A Flower Divinely Fair*. Because so many of Steiner’s works were destroyed, little is known about the content of these operas.

Emma wrote an article about her process for composition, where she said “I really have none, strictly speaking. My first plan in composing an opera is first to saturate myself with the atmosphere of the libretto, trying to catch the spirit of the author as nearly as may be. Then I begin on a scene or a lyric which has happened to make the greatest impression upon me. My

aim is to write a melody which, while it is appropriate, shall be of such a nature so as to haunt the ears of those who have heard it.” (“To Compose an Opera.” *The Providence News*, 19 Apr, 1895, p. 6). She goes on to entreat that every year, beginner American opera composers should be allowed to produce their original works.

Steiner did much work as a philanthropist throughout her life. She was a member of the Professional Women’s League in New York City, an organization which regularly gave lectures on suffrage and women’s issues. She played piano at some of these events, and marched for suffrage with them in 1913. Some of the benefit concerts Steiner conducted or played piano for include one for victims of yellow fever, one for a church, several for her own musicians’ home, and one to establish classes of dancing, fencing, and languages for local high school students. One such concert with the Professional Women’s League was a production of *As You Like It*, with all female musicians. When Steiner arrived at the theater for dress rehearsal, the man in charge said they would provide their own male orchestra for the show, rather than let Emma use her musicians. She reared back to punch the man when someone had to get in between them to stop a fight. Those present were told not to say a word about the engagement, and a woman interviewed on behalf of the Women’s League denied that there was almost an altercation, and said “all the trouble is due to the trouble women have in getting business ideas into their heads.” Her greatest venture into philanthropy was the founding of the Emma R. Steiner Home for Aged and Infirm Musicians. Her “friend and associate” Margaret MacDonald co-founded it. Emma said of the home, “It has been the inspiration of my life’s work to build a refuge for incapacitated musicians. Homes have been provided for the blind, for cripples, for Masons, for printers, for horses and dogs. But there is no place in the United States where poor, aged or sick Musicians would be comfortable and happy. My aim is such a home - and mind you, I mean a

home, not an institution of charity- in every State in the Union. That takes time and money. But we have heart.” The first of those homes was beginning to be developed in Long Island in 1926, just three years before her death. Unfortunately, Steiner died before the home could be finished or open. (“Orchestra Leader 50 Years.” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 31 Jan. 1926, pp. 84-85).

Newspaper articles about Steiner’s antics show an unflinching, determined personality. She owned a dog, Mollie, and was walking to a corner store in New York in 1859 when the dog vanished and was held by a dog catcher. Emma immediately started attacking the dog catcher with a whip, and hit him in the face. A policeman was called and forced the catcher to return her dog. Emma was arrested in 1885 for whipping another man- this time, one who would not stop harassing a 16 year old singer who was in her care. Emma was a woman who never married, who lived exclusively with other women, was heavily involved in women’s issues, and was entirely uninterested in living the way a woman was demanded to in that era, with a husband who controlled her every whim and several children to look after. I think it is safe to make assumptions about her sexuality with this information, and because of her close collaboration with her “niece” in Alaska and Margaret MacDonald later in life. MacDonald wrote a tribute poem to Emma in *The Democratic Advocate*; “A woman of many parts; a woman of noble mind. One whose heart is filled with love, a queen among her kind. Strong of body and strong of soul, gentle and good and true. Rare attributes of man and woman, blend eternally in you. Sunshine and not shadow, tis your portion to impart, the tender sweetness of your smile cheers many a weary heart. Then onward, ever onward! Thou brave, achieving soul, Divinest forces aid thee in the winning of thy goal. The love that you have given is the love that you shall keep, and songs of praise shall still ring on, when you have fallen asleep.”

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