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A Song for Jennie

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A Song for Jennie

Abstract

The simple tune was created by lyricist E. B. Dewing and composer J. P. Webster who hoped they would inspire patriotism in their female audience while they worked to become accomplished musicians. When the Civil War broke out, the young women who played the piece had been left behind on the home front, only to imagine what horrors their men were facing. The government and the warfront alike relied on the homefront to present a brave and loyal face in order to maintain support for the war effort through the fostering of a nationalistic, sentimental culture that bled into all aspects of Union life. Music was a feminine expression of patriotic devotion that many women used to empathize with those on the battle front as well as to inspire themselves and their peers toward acts of patriotic sacrifice on behalf of their war-torn nation. After the war ended and America moved into Reconstruction, music like “Jennie Wade, the Heroine of Gettysburg” continued to inspire women, who were busy honoring the dead and healing the country’s gaping wounds. [excerpt]

Keywords

Jennie Wade, Music

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Song for Jennie

By [Claire Bickers '20](#)

The image shows a page of sheet music for the song "Jenny Wade". At the top, it is dedicated "To Mrs. J. F. Webster's Widow". The title "JENNY WADE" is prominently displayed, followed by the subtitle "THE HEROINE OF GETTYSBURG". A short paragraph describes the heroine: "During the Battle of Gettysburg, the heroic girl who is the subject of the following song, was making bread for our soldiers in a house between the two armies, and exposed to the fire of both, although repeatedly urged, she would not desert from her labors, and fell a victim to her patriotism." The lyrics are credited to E. B. Dewing and the music to J. F. Webster. The tempo is marked "Moderato". The score includes a piano introduction and four verses of lyrics. The lyrics are: "1. Bear with the men, 2. When man has done some, 3. When to the north wind, 4. Thy light as an - gle." The score ends with the number "425" in the bottom right corner.

The above-pictured sheet music is an ode to Gettysburg's own Jennie Wade, who was killed in the crossfire of July 3rd, 1863. The simple tune was created by lyricist E. B. Dewing and composer J. P. Webster who hoped they would inspire patriotism in their female audience while they worked to become accomplished musicians. When the Civil War broke out, the young women who played the piece had been left behind on the home front, only to imagine what horrors their men were facing. The government and the warfront alike relied on the homefront to present a brave and loyal face in order to maintain support for the war effort through the fostering of a nationalistic, sentimental culture that bled into all aspects of Union life. Music was a feminine expression of patriotic devotion that many women used to empathize with those on the battle front as

well as to inspire themselves and their peers toward acts of patriotic sacrifice on behalf of their war-torn nation. After the war ended and America moved into Reconstruction, music like “Jennie Wade, the Heroine of Gettysburg” continued to inspire women, who were busy honoring the dead and healing the country’s gaping wounds.

In that vein, in 1865, Dewing and Webster produced a collection that was patriotically themed. One of the songs in that collection was “Jenny Wade, the Heroine of Gettysburg,” which was a simple tune included in an educational musical collection that described itself as being “divided into two kinds of lessons—the one for *musical* culture and the other for *muscular* culture... those lessons which are designed to awaken, develop, and strengthen a love for music.” Since the performers played this piece to develop their piano and vocal skills, it is likely that many of the earliest performers were young and still early on in their musical journey. It is also likely that many of the earliest performers of the song were in fact young *women*. Since musical ability was considered an asset for women’s marriageability and a marker of femininity and social class, many nineteenth-century young women were musically trained from an early age. If the intended audience for this music was indeed young women, then that makes it all the more interesting that the subject matter of this song is also a tribute to a woman. The women who played the music likely saw themselves in Jennie’s story; the shared experience of being a woman in a war-weary nineteenth century was a unifying force in the lives of both the consumer and the subject of the tune.

The message that these women consumed in the lyrics that Dewing wrote tap into nineteenth century ideas of sentimentalism. Soldiers and civilians alike relied upon the framework of sentimental thinking to understand and justify the brutality and fatality of war: Sentimentalism was an ideology that promoted unflinching courage in the face of seemingly overwhelming grief and honorable sacrifice in the name of a higher cause. Sentimentalism also emphasized the deep-rooted connection between soldier and home, reminding women on the homefront of their duty to remain stoic in the face of loss. Southern historian Lisa Laskin argues that “the people to whom the soldiers looked for emotional support also proved to be the group most capable of sabotaging soldier morale.” To protect soldiers’ morale, it was vital for women to maintain their patriotism during the war, and composers and lyricists such as Webster and Dewing monopolized upon the thirst for inspirational entertainment through the rapidly expanding genre of patriotic music.

At the onset of the Civil war, the patriotic music industry boomed, featuring many different styles of music, a large amount of which was styled after the Napoleonic epic of “The Battle of Prague.” Similarly styled songs, including “The Battle of Manassas” and “Battle of the Wilderness,” were composed throughout the war and attempted to capture the horrors of the battlefield through music, even calling for vocal sound effects (The “Battle of Manassas” encourages performers to exclaim “Chu Chu” at one point to imitate a train’s arrival) and dramatic gestures. Although the patriotic musical genre was dominated by battle songs and odes to the masculine, Dewing and Webster chose to honor a more feminine subject for a predominantly young, predominantly female

audience. The song employs patriotic imagery as they praise her, saying her “spirit yet shall serve Free men defending right” because she died with the “courage of a woman true, [as she] Upheld the dear old flag.” Dewing intentionally chose these words to remind women of their bravery and sacrifice throughout the war, traits they would continue to need while facing its aftermath.

The publishers included a short line at the top of the sheet music that gives a brief explanation of the events that led up to Jenny’s death, noting that “the heroic girl...was making bread for our soldiers in a house between the two armies, and exposed to the fire of both, although repeatedly urged, she would not desist from her labors, and fell victim to her patriotism.” This story must have been striking to the young musicians who were playing the song for the first time. The young women who performed the piece doubtless all knew a man who had gone to war and would never return, but they were far less likely to have met a woman in the same situation. Being presented with the story of a young woman who died a bloody, masculine death must have been a stark reminder of the heavy cost of war: Even a northern woman, who was theoretically supposed to be safe from the danger of battle’s crossfire, could be killed in an instant and that minie balls did not discriminate on the basis of gender.

However, the description that Dewing wrote about Jennie’s death sanitized her passing as much as possible, distancing her death from the battlefield and aligning it with the feminine sphere. Dewing and Webster did not specifically mention how exactly Jennie died; they simply alluded to it and allowed players to infer the rest. Instead, the two men focused on what Jennie was doing at the time of her death – baking bread. This choice in details conveyed the message that Jennie’s physical and symbolic role in the war like all other women and civilians, was meant to be separate from the front-line action. Instead, a woman should prove her patriotic devotion by selflessly serving in the feminine sphere.

At twenty years old, Jennie Wade was probably not much older at her death than many of the musicians who played this piece. The song’s attempts to sentimentalize her death by laying Jennie to rest “with our bravest,” implied to performers that her sacrifice was just as deep and meaningful as the deaths of the more than seven thousand young men who fell on the Gettysburg battlefield. Consumers of “Jenny Wade, the Heroine of Gettysburg” and its message were presented with a sentimental interpretation not of those men’s deaths, but of the death of the one and only civilian killed during the battle. The song gives a face to this feminine martyr while inextricably linking the necessary and heroic sacrifices and sufferings of both the battlefield and the home front. Dewing and Webster’s song inspired their audience with the heroism that was expected of every American, civilian or soldier, in their country’s time of need.

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