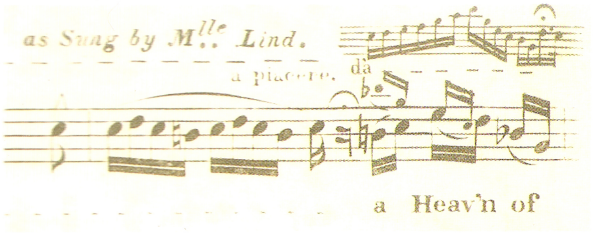
DO NOT MINGLE ONE HUMAN FEELING

JOE MILUTIS

What first intrigued me about Jenny Lind was a sheet music souvenir of her "Concerts in America." It was not uncommon for sheet music to be advertised "as sung by Jenny Lind" in the same way it's not uncommon to see Bing Crosby on the cover of songs that he sang. The difference with this piece of sheet music is that there was an effort to painstakingly transcribe, in the era before the phonograph, Lind's *exact* interpretation (the analogy might be to have the various "bu-bu-bu-buhs" of Bing inserted into the tablature). This piece of sheet music contradicts the idea that music is the material text that must be interpreted, and spiritualized, by performance. Instead, this copy of "Do Not Mingle One Human Feeling" is *protophonographic*, since it tries to capture the essence of the particular performer, rather than providing a material touchstone for future performers.

In the case of Lind, the attempt to capture her elusive presence verged on mania. For those who do not know her story, the mythical 1850 American tour of the Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind, transformed a physically unassuming European diva into "the most popular woman in the world."[1] For some she even came to be called "the New Messiah"[2] since it was thought her voice was from God. In fact, there was a rumor that Jenny Lind looped her hair at the sides of her head because she had no ears,[3] an image

above: Jenny Lind as Amina (from the 1831 opera "La Sonnambula"). Frontispiece of Bellini's "'Do Not Mingle, One Human Feeling,' As Sung By Madlle. Jenny Lind, at her Concerts in America." Published by S. C. Jollie and Firth, Pond and Co. Milwaukee Public Library Sheet Music Collection.



that suggests a body that is the pure fount of an elusive, original source, a singer who does not control her voice through the feedback loop of listening, but who is rather merely a medium. Since no recording technologies were available at the time, the stunning fact of the case of Jenny Lind was that the quality of her voice was taken merely on faith. P. T. Barnum himself, who had just recently featured the famous spirit communicators, the Fox Sisters, in his act, risked his fortune to bring this other type of medium to America, without ever having heard her voice. Yet, despite the absence of radio or phonograph play, enormous crowds paid exorbitant sums for tickets—which, in the first known instance of scalping, would then be resold at higher sums—to Jenny Lind's "Concerts in America" which began on 11 September 1850 at Castle Garden in New York City's Battery Park.

It's hard not to be fascinated by the scene of the first concert as it is described. Beletti, the opening singer, finishes his number, followed by polite applause. Then a hush. Lind is escorted onto the stage. She starts nervously, a bit too humanly. But as soon as she gains her confidence and gives herself over to the song, the audience is swept into her magnetic vortex; as the song ends, there is exultant standing and stomping and shouting. What publicity had—seemingly hyperbolically—created was now actually manifest before them, the voice of the divine. As the tour continued, audiences became more and more unbelieving of the praise that preceded her; yet in concert after concert—from Philadelphia to Cuba—suspicion melted (at different degrees and with different rates) as she sang. From her first appearances in the northeast metropoles to the strange adventure of her concert in an Indiana slaughterhouse,[4] we see America won over by her spiritual charm.

As the memory of Lind's presence faded, the void would be filled by a universe of totems and memorabilia—what collectors term Lindiana—where saintly relic meets commercial tchotchke. Sometimes, Lindiana was phantasmic in nature, and just as ephemeral as the performance itself: for example, a coachman who helped Lind off her rockaway in Boston sold kisses of his hand for five dollars a piece,[5] in what I think of as an early example of sampling. These tokens memorialize a momentary visual and physical presence, more than they do the elusive continuity of song. But what of the memory of the song itself?

One can surmise it in descriptions of the particular melodic line of Lind's performance, descriptions that seem to presage phonographic grooves, as language tries to approximate these lines never to be repeated in time and space. Most commentary is unanimous on the powers of this line, Lind's "groove." *The New York Herald* claims that her song "spins out from her throat like the attenuated fiber from the silkworm, dying away so sweetly and so gradually, till it seems melting into the song of the seraphim and is lost in eternity"[6]; *The Spirit of the Times* writes "As a bird just alighted upon a spray begins to sing, he knows not why, and pours forth the increasing volume of his voice from an instinct implanted within him by that Power which made him vocal,—as flowers unfold their petals to the air, as zephyrs breathe, as rivulets leave their founts, as thoughts flow, as affections rise, as feelings develop,—so this wonderous creature sang. It was not Art. It was a manifestation of Nature."[7] Even her perambulations were subject to the proto-phonographical device of American journalism as each day newspapers printed a column entitled "The Movements of the Swedish Nightingale"[8]; recording the available minutiae of her daily activities and public encounters, the news transformed the merest biographical detail into a continuation of her song.

But it is through the vehicle of sheet music that the various registers of the absent Lind are brought together. From the buttery, cartoonish depiction of Lind on the frontispiece (whom the more realistic technology of the daguerreotype reveals in a much less romantic light) to the specifics of her vocal flights, there is an attempt to reconstruct the presence of Lind outside the charmed circle of performance. In these glyphs of Lindiana—evidence of the soul and originality of Lind—is the trace of her peculiar virtuosity, as these notes glide far beyond the already challenging standard melodic line. I wonder about the veracity of these traces, since no recording mechanisms were available. Because no proof remains of how her performance got to paper, there is always the possibility that the transcription and transcribability of these notes is merely a cultured phantasm. Did copyists attend the concert, able to intellectually discern each note and immediately transcribe it—not like the needle of the phonograph, but as would a sympathetic mind? Or were there elaborate sessions in which the performer "sat" for the transcriber in a controlled environment in much the same way that one sat for a portrait or daguerreotype?

above: Detail of "Do Not Mingle, One Human Feeling:" "ci formiamo un ciel d'amor." ("we will form a Heav'n of love.")

Strangely, these scenarios are not beyond possibility, since the quality of Lind's voice made it consummately transcribable, her flights of emotion easily captured with Western notation. But, for a performance to be faithfully noted by a score that remains, the performance would have to have been evacuated of any noise, emotion, or intensity. It would be an aria without air, as it were. Indeed, those who did not like Lind's singing recognized most keenly this airless quality—her sonic signature. For example, Walt Whitman, while he was still a hack reporter, ambulance chaser, and music critic for the *Brooklyn Eagle* and other New York papers, wrote cynically of this quality of Lind's artistic singing:

The Swedish Swan, with all her blandishments, never touched my heart in the least. I wondered at so much vocal dexterity; and indeed they were all very pretty, those leaps and double somersets. But even in the grandest religious airs ... executed by this strangely overpraised woman in perfect scientific style, let critics say what they like, it was a failure; for there was a vacuum in the head of the performance.[9]

In some ways, Lind's rationalistic arias appealed to a more Northern European brand of spirituality, and for many her plainness, combined with what could be interpreted as a cold performance, was the chief attraction.

In a time when minstrelsy and Italian opera were the reigning modes of popular music, Lind's performance was heralded for its intellectual control and "transcendence" of emotionality. Indeed her legend made it seem as if she was able to transcend the very source of emotionality, the body itself. Yet this body—conceived as rising above anxieties and divisions stemming from questions of race to which popular music was and is intimately tied—was enacting what Gustavus T. Stadler calls a "whiteface" performance, "aesthetic excellence as a kind of raced, classed, gendered, de-nationalized drag."[10] As if to parody the myth of her non-racial transparency, Lind travesties were a part of minstrel shows well before her "Concerts in America."[11] Yet many bought into the idea that Lind, synonymous with her sonic line melting into air, held the possibility of a pure music that could transcend the unsettlingly embodied music of slaves, immigrants, and Southern Europeans. As John Sullivan Dwight wrote at the time:

True, you would not say of her, in the conventional Italian sense of the word, what is often said in first acknowledgment of a good singer: "She has style*" ... Mdlle. Lind has more than style; she has genius—Northern genius, to be sure, which is precisely what she should have to make her greatness genuine. ... The Northern muse must sing her lesson to the world. Her fresher, chaster, more intellectual, and (as they only* seem *to some) her colder strains come in due season to recover our souls from the delicious languor of a music which has been so wholly of the feelings, that, for want of some intellectual tonic, and some spiritual temper, feeling has generated into mere sensibility, and a very cheap kind of superficial, skin-deep excitability that usurps the name of passion.*[12]

Countering the musical and spiritual histrionics of the Southern European—the emotional virtuosity of Italian singers—Lind's strange popularity depended on her ability to reinforce an idea of white supremacy over the "Southern races" which had dominated music up until this point. In addition, her performance of northern uprightness was also placed in contradistinction to the minstrel show, but not necessarily in contradistinction to black music—which in its "authentic" form was seen by some critics as just as genuine as Lind's arias. Yet this appreciation of authenticity is intimately tied to racialist notions of the origins of and essential access to musical emotion and soul, creating hierarchies that "would only allow black culture to be performed and written . . . as a representation of slavery's spiritual pain."[13] The main racial division that is created is not then one between authentic and inauthentic, but between music which is highly disciplined, commensurable to rational notation (paradoxically transcendent), and music which, while soulful (transcendent in another way), is such because it exceeds and challenges written notation, referencing not heaven but the materiality of the performer's worldly pain.

The question of musical soul, then—uncapturable, invisible, unquantifiable—would impinge on not only the definition of American music, but also the notion of American identity in general. It is precisely in the attempt to visualize, analyze, and understand more invisible notions of performance—such as soul, emotion, and anything that might fall under the "spiritual" interpretation of musical material—that the notion of race as a visible index of soul intersects with the way in which sheet music, and the whole visual culture surrounding musical production, shores up the absence of the performer. It also, perhaps more powerfully, but less obviously, intersects with the scientific understanding of the sound wave, and the march of visualization technologies that begins in the late nineteenth century. As American music began to define itself against the elaborate and calculated aria, the emerging science of ethnomusicology, while instrumental in giving this definition legitimacy, would substitute elaborate scientific devices for European musical rationality in order to understand music that exceeded written notation. As we will see, this soft science of ethnomusicology may also have been a way to manage the racial anxieties that accompanied American noise.

In the now mostly forgotten 1928 book, *Phonophotography in Folk Music: American Negro Songs in New Notation* (published after the *Jazz Singer* but before *The Broadway Melody* and *Hallelujah!*), early ethnomusicologist Milton Metfessel introduced a new notation that would become quickly obsolete as advances in sound film made the process of archiving and analyzing folk music much simpler. For Metfessel, new scientific advances in sound-wave capture and representation would finally provide "scientific" means with which to analyze "primitive" performances, which, in large part, had a tenuous relation to the standard notation. If Jenny Lind represented the perfect rationalistic singing that would vindicate standard Western notation, African-American music represented to ethnomusicologists "noise"

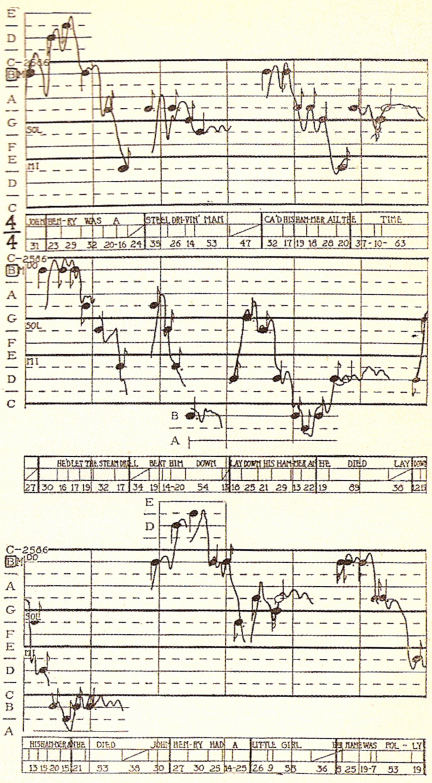


Fig. 33. A. Graphs 1, 2, 3. John Henry.

Fig. 32. John Henry. Close-up of quick sound shifts. Upper the vowel [*ah*] of *time*. Center, and lower, [f] and [o], respectively, of *'Forc*.

previously untranslatable into clear notation, providing a challenge that justified the use of and investment in new recording technology.

Metfessel's phonophotographic device, built into a suitcase, is a primitive dual-system set-up, with a silent-film camera capturing images at the same time that a phonelescope picks up sound waves and inscribes them on a surface in a way similar to an oscilloscope. The sound wave information is then transcribed into a notational system invented by Metfessel. When combined with image, the promise of phonophotography would, in addition to recording an unnotatable music, unlock the psychological dimensions of artistic singing—typified by African-American song. As Metfessel explains, "With the objective facts in hand, we may correlate the vibrato with principles of neural discharge, showing the relation of artistic expression in music to nervous instability in terms of neurological concepts, for a tender emotion is a condition of nervous instability."[14]

In concentrating on the sonic qualities of vibrato—seen by some as evidence of vulgar or unskilled singing—the most radical contribution of Metfessel was to point out that these emotional flutterings, challenging clear registration of pitch, do not belong merely to folk music but are the source of all artistic expression in music. In his books, he places the pitch inconsistencies of African-American amateurs in the company of charts comparing the quaverings of classical singers.[15] Exploding the myth that there could be, as was presumed with Lind, a purely rational performance, Metfessel placed musical emotion back in the irrational locus of the body—even as he paradoxically attempted to rationalize this vital origin with excessive quasi-scientific rigor, reminiscent of more contemporary white sound-artists' almost scientific obsessions over black noise. (Think, for example, of Steve Reich's early phase-loop pieces—"Come Out" and "It's Gonna Rain"—which sample African-American voices; or John Oswald's deconstruction of racial musical identity in Plunderphonics, especially his pieces "Black," "Brown," and "White"; or Neil Rolnick's electroacoustic literalization of Robert Johnson fetishization in "Robert Johnson Sampler.") Repeatedly zeroing in on a presumed essence of African-American music that paradoxically only white technologists could know, the scientific analyses of Metfessel et al. should come off as a shield for racial (or performance) anxiety. However, Metfessel's democracy of vibrato potentially dissolves this shield. He made clear that there was something that all music had in common, a sort of prime mover at the subsensory level. Hidden within the folds of every wave of song, like the slips in language that Freud attempted to unlock, is that elusive thing to which heaven is barred, the human instability that is covertly celebrated in musical rites and is neither possible nor desirable to eradicate from performance.

Could it be that in the future, however, it will only be a matter of historical curiosity that humans once appreciated in music its flaws, slips, and off-notes—traces of emotion locked forever in the materiality of the body, the tics that partake of the past? When I first came upon Jenny Lind's "Do Not Mingle One Human Feeling"—more than a hundred and fifty years after its performance in America—I was struck by the vanguard feeling of the title and its sentiment, as if the world had already been secretly experiencing, in the guise of electronic music and its philosophical counterparts, a Lind revival. If Metfessel at one point discovered that all music has in common a trace of unstable humanity, this discovery came precisely at the point where one could begin to recognize another commonality—the non-human matrix that sends a song out into the ethers of information. Our music is an index of how the comminglings of the non-human compete with the clamor of the cardiac. I wonder if someday soon (or has this someday already passed?), I will find myself going on about the vicissitudes of the past, only to have my companion remind me, with a touch of dispassionate condescension, that the heart, after all, is just another low-frequency oscillator.

1 M. R. Werner, *It Happened in New York* (NY: Coward-McCann, 1957), p. 175.

2 Ibid., p. 145.

3 Joan Bulman, *Jenny Lind: A Biography* (London: James Barrie, 1956), p. 243.

4 W. Porter Ware and Thaddeus C. Lockard, Jr., *P. T. Barnum Presents Jenny Lind: The American Tour of the Swedish Nightingale* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pp. 88-9.

5 Gladys Denny Shultz, *Jenny Lind: The Swedish Nightingale* (NY: J. B. Lippincott, 1962), p. 212.

6 Cited in Werner, p. 157.

7 Cited in Ibid., p. 157.

8 Werner, p. 149 and Bulman, p. 243.

9 Cited in Ibid., p. 158.

10 Gustavus T. Stadler, *Suspicious Minds: The Cultural Politics of Genius in the United States, 1840-1890*, ms (forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press), p. 97.

11 Ibid., p. 122.

12 Cited in Ibid., pp. 101-02.

13 Ibid., p. 125.

14 Milton Metfessel, *Phonophotography in Folk Music: American Negro Songs in New Notation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1928), 5. See also Milton Metfessel, "The Vibrato in Artistic Voices," *The Vibrato*, University of Iowa Studies in the Psychology of Music, Vol. 1, ed. Carl E. Seashore (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1932), pp. 14-117.

15 Metfessel was an ambiguous product of his time. His analysis of this data oscillates between the impulse to perceive a universal quality in all artistic singing—influenced by the models of cultural relativism coming out of anthropology at the time—and the habit of couching his descriptions in the hierarchical vocabulary of a an older, racist anthropology. Even his apparently more enlightened moments are fraught with the unexamined complexities that his use of technology brings to the study. See the brief discussion of Metfessel and ethnomusicology's origins in Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman's introduction to *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp.22-23.

opposite: A graph of Metfessel's new notation and selection from an accompanying film. *From Phonophotography in Folk Music* (1928).