

Henri Herz, *Mes Voyages en Amérique* (1866)

Henri Herz was the first European pianist to undertake (in his case, so as to keep his piano manufacturing business afloat) a large-scale concert tour: over the course of five years (from the autumn of 1846 to the summer of 1851) he gave almost two hundred concerts in nearly fifty towns, from the eastern seaboard of the United States to California, by way of Mexico, Cuba, Jamaica, Chili, and Peru. He was also the first musician, along with Louis Gottschalk (*Les Voyages extraordinaires de Louis Moreau Gottschalk, pianiste et aventurier*), Henri Kowalski (*À travers l'Amérique, impressions d'un musicien*, 1872), and Jacques Offenbach (*Notes d'un musicien en voyage*, 1877) to describe his impressions of travel in America.

The beginning of this veritable odyssey, in the states of the East Coast, resulted in two different texts: upon his return Herz published a weekly *feuilleton* in *La France musicale*, from [12 October 1851](#) to 22 February 1852, under the title “Mes souvenirs de voyage en Amérique”; then, fourteen years later, a new version, much more romanticised and more detached and humorous in tone, appeared as “Mes voyages en Amérique” in *Le Moniteur universel*, from 11 to 19 July 1865 and 16 to 19 July 1866. This latter version was the one collected in volume format. An advertised sequel would never come to fruition, perhaps because P.-A. Fiorentino had already published, in *Le Constitutionnel* on 21 September 1851 (reprinted in *Comédies et Comédiens*, vol. 1 [Paris: Lévy, 1866], pp. 83-82) a long article entitled “Un concert en Californie” relating Herz’s adventures in San Francisco at the time of the Gold Rush.

Herz, who had in the meantime become an important personage, the head of a major piano factory and a busy concert hall, no doubt hoped to project an image as a man of letters; he therefore enlisted the aid of his friend Oscar Comettant, himself the author of a *Trois Ans aux États-Unis* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1858). Besides one complete passage lifted from Comettant’s book (Herz, pp. 133-8), one finds others directly inspired by it, such as the description of the pianist Leopold de Meyer (pg. 127 in Comettant) even if Herz avoids giving his name (pp. 179-80). The chapters treating of general subjects (cod-fishing, Newfoundland dogs, etc.), added to the first version and conforming to the classic model of the travel tale, are also definitely the work of Comettant.

The reader has to wait until Chapter 9 for the account of the journey properly speaking, it too embellished with numerous digressions into generality. Like all European travellers, Herz was struck by the comfort of American hotels (and their lavish water consumption), the dubious means of transport, the puritanism of the Philadelphia Quakers (some of whom reportedly covered up the legs of pianos out of a sense of decency), and the suffragette movement. He was especially shocked to discover that in the land of democracy (his manservant did not hesitate to leave him and set himself up as a piano manufacturer) slavery still existed (pp. 220-74, 290-

95). Herz describes at length a public sale of slaves in Mobile and the racism directed at freedmen and one of his own students, and devotes several lines to the “banjoo” and to the music of the blacks, noting the importance of rhythm to it.

Herz also emphasises the backwardness of musical life relative to that of Europe (pg. 183), manifested in the rarity of concerts and orchestras, the absence of halls and the scarcity of good piano-makers except for Chickering, as well as the plagiarism industry flourishing in the absence of international treaties on intellectual property, of which he himself was a victim. He also registers the shock that he felt as a Parisian musician faced with a nation of colonists, in which audiences would include several thousand persons from all social classes; yet he also notes the difference between the cultivated society of the slave states and that of the northern ones, and the welcome afforded him by the French of New Orleans. He recounts with humour his improvisation at the end of his concerts (a practice abandoned in France by then) on themes suggested by the audience, including, in Baltimore, “airs taken from the not very musical repertoire of the redskins” (pg. 181).

Finally, the description of the impresario Bernard Ullmann - just getting his start at that time - makes this book a precious record not only of cultural life in the United States before the Civil War, but also of the rise of concert tours on a grand scale and the internationalisation of the musical market.

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Further reading

Allen Lott, *From Paris to Peoria. How European Piano Virtuosos Brought Classical Music to the American Heartland*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002.

Laure Schnapper, « Bernard Ullman-Henri Herz: An Example of Financial and Artistic Partnership, 1846-49 », *The Musician as Entrepreneur, 1700-1914*, William Weber (ed.), Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 130-144.

Laure Schnapper, *Henri Herz, magnat du piano*, Paris, EHESS, 2011, ch. 5.

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