

## How Midwestern American Farm Girls Reinvented Imitative Composition by James Linderman

At the start of the industrial revolution in North America there were a few developments that converged to popularize a particular form of academic composition.

One of the factors was the mass production of the parlour piano that would be called an apartment size or studio size today.

This pianos short stature allowed the player to look over the top of it to lead sing alongs, a popular past time with the urban aristocracy in Europe and with the new urban wealthy in America.

The other development was the invent of the catalogue store, usually the general store in rural America. Companies like Sears would sell items from a catalogue in the rural general store that could be shipped to remote areas that would not otherwise have access to those items.

The last piece of the puzzle was the availability of farm equipment that could allow farmers to harvest much larger yields with much less manpower and in a fraction of the time. This created a new class of rural wealthy that aspired to use, at least some of that wealth to appear cultured and urban.

These converging developments combined to place a parlour piano in the front rooms of farm houses all across North America, but there remained one last decisive factor.

Piano music, and "cultured" music in general had been, to this point, a European art form, powered by male composers and dominated by male virtuoso performers. Men, in North America's rural mid-west, however were still primarily labourers despite the modernization of farming and did not have the time or inclination to learn the piano.

Grown women as well were not usual candidates to take up this newly purchased instrument as much of a woman's work in that setting, in that era, was also still primarily manual and not yet automated. The preparation of a chicken dinner started with a live chicken.

Young boys did not fair well with this instrument either as they often helped with farm chores after school and looked at the piano as more of an extension of a school day. The work and play that pulled them outdoors also made the piano a less than ideal addition to their day.

That, of course, left young farm girls as the natural choice for this instrument. Their chores were mostly indoors where the piano was located, they were encouraged to become cultured ladies and the piano's reputation made it the ideal instrument from a sociological standpoint.

This also saw the inception of the itinerant piano teacher who would travel from farm to farm and village to village teaching these young farm girls how to play the music in their piano bench. One obstacle, however, was the shortage of mass print sheet music and so many of these fledgling musicians had only one or two sheets of music to play, as the printing industry lagged behind the demand for more accessible music.

The solution for this for many of these developing musicians was compositional tessellation.

Tessellation is the art of taking smaller patterned items and making a larger pattern out of them. A quilt is a tessellation and so is the picture I have seen of a runner made up of thousands of small photos of runners.

Farm girls would take a random bar of melody from say, "New World Symphony" and combine it with an equally random bar of melody from "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and compositional tessellation would be born.... Not so much **born** because they did not invent this practice but more adopted and certainly mastered. Bar after bar would be brought into the composition and adapted through editorial shifts of pitches and rhythmic placements.

Lots of this early North American music is not archived since blank staff paper was also not readily available and many of these composers would have not considered this so much composing but more just recreating on their instrument.

As mentioned, once the melodic motifs are stuck together there is often an editorial adjustment that is required to seamlessly join them into a single musical statement and then there is the work of re-harmonizing them into a more full musical expression.

To my estimation, that is every bit as much an act of composing as we songwriters would do today, either knowingly or merely intuitively as we attempt to create new original music from our collection of past musical experiences and present abilities. In other words, the resources available.

Tessellation is a great way to take some "target practice" at writing melodies and since the source materials are from already existing and at least

somewhat popular songs, there is a good chance that your tessellated melody will be very likely to be very likeable. It is a great way to get practice at setting chords to a melodic pattern as well and a terrific way to test drive your ability to solve the various kinds of problems that melodic motifs can cause when trying to create our new work.

If we find we like what we are creating with a tessellation and want to turn it into a commercially available original work, there is often more work to edit it to not sound like you just stuck a bar of Katrina and the Waves "Walking on sunshine" on the front end of a bar of Jason Mraz's "I'm Yours". But if you edit and then play it for a few close friends and associates and they cannot trace your song back to its original source materials then the original composers (and their legal team) will not be able to either and your song will be no more plagiarism than anything else we write from the collection of other peoples musical ideas we have floating around our sub conscience.

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