

Music Moves West

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THE TOWNSITE VENTURE promoted by Ignatius Donnelly at Nininger was the lure which attracted his friend Philip Rohr of Philadelphia to St. Paul in the summers of 1856, 1857, and 1858. A musician of German birth, Rohr was the publisher, and for a time the editor, of the *Deutsche Musikzeitung*, which was issued in Philadelphia from 1856 to 1861.¹ He went to Minnesota not only to watch over his investments at Nininger, but to interest subscribers and correspondents in his periodical. On each of his visits he sent back to Philadelphia reports for publication in his magazine. Among them is the letter here published in translation, which was written at Detroit, Michigan, in August, 1858.

In the year that followed, Rohr removed to St. Paul, but he did not remain long, returning to Germany in 1861. During his three years of residence in the Minnesota capital, he became prominently identified with the cultural life of the frontier community as the proprietor of a music store, a music teacher, a soloist, the director of a German choral society, and the organizer of concerts, operatic performances, and masked balls. He also served as a member of the state legislature, and he was the co-founder of a St. Paul German newspaper, *Das Minnesota Volksblatt*. Further evidence of his versatility is to be found in Donnelly's characterization of Rohr as "the best man I know for outdoor effort and excitement—a man at home everywhere and with everybody."² To some extent his varied interests are reflected in the letter that follows.

[From the *Deutsche Musikzeitung*, 3:348 (September 1, 1858).]

How easy it is to promise and how difficult often to keep the promise. In my last note I promised to report on the cultural conditions in St. Paul, and now, after a stay of five weeks there, I hardly feel able to do this. The conditions there, as in every young city, change as rapidly as the pictures in a kaleidoscope, it is not possible to talk of stability in this connection. If, for instance, a musical society has been organized and the first difficulties have been overcome, if gold fever or an economic crisis de-

¹A complete file of the *Deutsche Musikzeitung* is owned by the New York Public Library. A microfilm of volume 3 was obtained from the Library of Congress.

²Donnelly to John Nininger, September 25, 1856, Donnelly Papers owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

velops, in an instant the society disintegrates. The first tenor usually departs for parts unknown, armed with a guitar or a flute; the second tenor goes prospecting and takes a claim somewhere on 160 acres of land, the basses go hunting or to the pineries. The results of long months or years of effort are destroyed and the task has to be started again from the beginning. If unfortunately this is a too frequently noted truth with respect to our German choral societies, it is no less the case among the so-called "upper classes" of American society, with the difference only that the persons in question, instead of taking claims or prospecting, lay out cities or set up trading posts.

Hence nothing well-organized and of high quality can be expected in St. Paul. Thus, for instance, the accomplishments of the present choral society, Germania, are far inferior to those of the Freier Sängerbund, which existed two years ago.³ A second society, a branch of the German Reading Society, has good material, to be sure, but it is still too young for us to expect musical excellence of it.⁴ In the American musical circles of St. Paul, there prevails exclusively a taste for Italian music. Because of the nature of the music, improvement or deterioration are less noticeable than in the German groups.

The music in the various churches of St. Paul is just as bad as it was two years ago. I had an opportunity to attend a performance of the Thalia Theater Society.⁵ *Heirathsantrag auf Helgoland* was presented, and it was the unanimous opinion of the spectators that the first performance of this play last winter was far better than this, the second. The two concerts which I myself arranged were in every respect very successful, thanks to the help of the assisting artists. Best liked were the mixed choruses, presented to the St. Paul public for the first time, the piano playing of a lady from Stillwater, and the splendidly executed violin solo of a Mr. [Gustav] Hancke.⁶

An excursion into the charming environment of St. Paul, led us (friend N[ininger] and me) by way of the rapidly growing little city of Nininger, the dead town of Hastings, Hampton etc., through the prairies,

³ The Freier Sängerbund was a German male chorus. It presented its first concert under the leadership of Conrad Zenzius on March 31, 1856. During 1857 it seems to have been inactive, but it resumed its activities in 1858 with the same director but a new name — Germania.

⁴ The German Reading Society, which was incorporated in 1854, was originally organized early in 1852 as the Deutsche Bildungs-und Leseverein.

⁵ This organization, established in 1857, was a branch of the German Reading Society. Rohr saw its members present the "Marriage Proposal on Helgoland," a comedy by Louis Schneider, at Irvine Hall on July 20, 1858. An earlier performance was given on February 13 of the same year.

⁶ Hancke was for many years first violinist and soloist with the St. Paul Musical Society. The pianist probably was Madame Elizabeth Muller, wife of a Swiss physician, Dr. Alfred Muller, who settled at Stillwater in 1856.

just then at the height of their splendor, to the farm of an acquaintance.⁷ About four miles from Hampton I suddenly missed a walking stick which I prized and in spite of all objections I decided to retrace my steps and to let friend N. continue. With some difficulty I was able to follow the tracks of our carriage and was horribly tormented by mosquitoes. Several times I lost the trail but always found it again, however not the lost article. Extremely fatigued, I finally arrived toward evening in Hampton, a "city" consisting of two inns, half a mile apart, and a saloon. As I entered the first inn, a genuine backwoodsman was just presenting my walking stick to the comrades grouped about him.

"Friend, that is my stick," I addressed the finder.

"Stranger," was his answer, "if this is your stick, you shall have it back, but—but you must treat the whole crowd."

Joyfully I agreed, received the article and the group went to the nearby saloon, since the house in which we were sold no liquor.

The one treat became several, it began to grow dark and my friend had not yet returned. I felt somewhat uneasy among the wild fellows but still I preferred to stay with the whole crowd rather than to accept their various invitations to sleep with one in the loft or with another in the barn. At any price I wanted to keep the crowd together for a while, for I was convinced that my friend would not leave me in the lurch.

A happy idea! The one who had found my stick and who had left for a few minutes, came back into the saloon and brought a violin with three strings.

"Stranger, I found your stick, I think you ought to fiddle for us."

Although I have never received a diploma for my violin playing, and especially in recent years my playing has been limited to the first position, still I succeeded for a considerable time in entertaining the assembled listeners. The scene was worthy of a painter's brush. The writer sitting on a whisky keg and manipulating an old cracked violin with all vehemence, around him in the most picturesque groups the backwoodsmen, some lying down, some sitting, and occasionally marking time with their feet. Before the door a fire was burning to keep the mosquitoes away and only the dim light of a tallow candle illuminated the scene. Midnight was near and the fellows were preparing to leave and I had to think up something new to keep the crowd together.

"Boys, can't one of you sing?" I asked.

⁷ Rohr's companion doubtless was John Nininger, another Philadelphian who was actively interested in the townsite, named for him. He laid out the town in the summer of 1856 and began at once to sell land and build on the site. Incidentally, Nininger was Governor Ramsey's brother-in-law. See Dudley S. Brainard, "Nininger, A Boom Town of the Fifties," in *Minnesota History*, 13:128 (June, 1932).

"Sure, Mike over there sings fine," was the answer and Mike did not require much urging and sang, or better, growled a dozen verses of a song, not a word of which I understood with the exception of the refrain, "the bold privateer," in which the chorus always joined.

"Stranger, I found your stick, you might sing something for us." For better, for worse, it was now my turn and luckily I remembered the words of an American patriotic song "The Red, White and Blue," which I sang. This was the finale of the evening's entertainment, for at the conclusion my friend N. entered the room; he had lost his way on the prairie.

"Stranger, I found your stick, you might treat once more," mumbled the finder of the frequently mentioned article, and so ended my first concert in the prairies of Minnesota. In the meantime the moon had risen and joyfully we drove back to Nininger.



"THE DAWSON ROUTE," which followed Minnesota's border waters from Lac la Croix to the Northwest Angle of the Lake of the Woods, is the subject of an informing article by Lyn Harrington in the *Canadian Geographical Journal* for September. In 1857 a Canadian engineer, Simon James Dawson, was sent west to find a practicable route from Lake Superior to Fort Garry, now Winnipeg, and at that time he traced the route that bears his name. From Port Arthur it stretched westward 530 miles, through a maze of lakes and rivers and portages, to the Manitoba post. Ten years passed before actual construction began, and then, after more than a million dollars had been spent on it, the route was abandoned. It was, however, used both as a military highway and as a colonist's route. First to use the route were soldiers of the Wolseley expedition, sent west to combat the rebellious half-breeds under Louis Riel in 1869. In the 1870's, according to the writer, "steamers or tugs with barges met travellers and settlers as they made their way west, and towed them across the larger bodies of water." With such assistance, immigrants were able to traverse the route in three weeks. For a time, a stage line operated over the road between Winnipeg and the Northwest Angle. Mrs. Harrington reports that some sections of the Dawson Road are still in use, and that its portage trails "are still travelled by canoeists and sportsmen." A map of the route and excellent photographs of sites along its course appear with the article.



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