“They Sang and Took the Sword” – Music of World War I (Aug 6th - Dec 21st)



July 18, 2018

In our new exhibition entitled “They Sang and Took the Sword” – Music of World War I, opening August 6th 2018, the Music Library observes the 100th anniversary of the conclusion of World War I, as marked by the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918. The exhibition brings together selected materials from the Music Library’s Special Collections and Collection of Historical Sound Recordings pertaining to the war. Several of these feature the work of Yale students, alumni, and faculty.

One focus of the exhibition is popular songs, illustrated by sheet music covers and recordings. The earliest is “There’s a Long, Long Trail A-Winding,” with music by Zo Elliott (Yale Class of 1913) and lyrics by Stoddard King (Class of 1914). Although it was composed in 1913, it became a wartime favorite and in intervening years has been used in film, television, and radio shows that refer to the war. From 1914 to 1916, the United States stayed out of the war, and the pacifist song “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” expressed a widespread feeling. That this was controversial and that many Americans supported joining the war is reflected in the song “He Was a Soldier from the U.S.A.,” also from 1914. But after the declaration of war in 1917, patriotic fervor swept the country, and this was reflected in songs that called upon people to support the war effort by volunteering, registering for the draft, or buying Liberty Bonds. George M. Cohan’s “Over There” is a well-known example. There were also romantic songs of parted lovers, sad songs of soldiers who might not return to their families, comic songs or novelty songs, marches, and victory songs. Our exhibition includes illustrated covers from sheet music, the way most popular music was marketed and sold during the war years, as well as audio examples from the still-budding recording industry. The recordings were made by popular groups and singers as well as by leading operatic and concert artists, such as the Irish tenor John McCormack, to help support the war effort.

The war also impelled composers and lyricists to write art songs and large-scale choral and orchestral works. Charles Ives (Yale Class of 1898) created the movement “From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose” for his Orchestral Set No. 2, based on the response of the crowd on the day that the news of the sinking of the Lusitania reached New York in 1915. He also composed “Three Songs of the War,” including “Tom Sails Away” from 1917. At the end of the war Horatio Parker, Dean of the Yale School of Music, set the words of “A.D. 1919: An Ode” by Brian Hooker (Class of 1902) to music for a ceremony

commemorating the service of Yale men in the armed forces. Excerpts of both pieces can be heard in the audio exhibition. Our title, *“They Sang and Took the Sword,”* is drawn from Hooker’s ode.

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