

“PLAYING BACK THE DISSONANCES”: THE BATTLE OF MANASSAS IN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Before every performance, enslaved pianist-composer Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins would introduce his Battle of Manassas as a programmatic depiction of the titular Confederate victory. With sharply juxtaposed fragments of Northern and Southern tunes, along with drum motifs, bugle calls, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and vocal enactments of trains and whistles—all continually interrupted by sudden “cannon fire” in the left hand—Tom would finish the piece shouting “Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!” at the top of his lungs before leaving two irreverent slams of the keys to reverberate throughout the hall. Famous for his lifelong ability to perfectly imitate any music, noise, or speech he heard, Tom amazed his audiences for decades claiming to represent Manassas’s events exactly as he heard them described to him. But over 150 years after its premiere, scholars have tended to detect a sense of irony, if not total subversion, in the enslaved pianist’s chaotic Confederate homage. My research considers recent interpretations of the piece with an eye toward its compositional circumstances, including its supposed timeline, its printed foreword’s odd reversal of an anthem’s Southern affiliation, and its likely response to a contemporaneous battle piece by Northern pianist-composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk.

*Let us call him the embodiment, the soul, of music, and there rest our investigations; for all else is
futility, all else is vain speculation.*

—James Monroe Trotter

Introduction

Tom will now play for you his Battle of Manassas. This is a piece of his own conception of a battle.” The foreword to the piece’s score includes these as some of “the exact words” Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins would announce to his audience before every performance (Appendix 1). Having memorized verbatim what his concert manager, Perry Oliver, initially recited for him, Tom would continue by explaining (in the third person) that he wrote The Battle of Manassas after ten days of hearing Oliver’s in-depth discussion of the titular battle’s events. He would then move through an account of the piece’s programmatic elements. It opens with Union and Confederate troops approaching battle to the sound of a pianississimo fife and drum, overlaid by each army’s representative tune: “The Girl I Left Behind Me” for the South, and “Dixie,” surprisingly enough, for the North. Then, after trumpets sound from both sides, cannon fire (represented in the score by fortissimo tone clusters in the bass) erupts amid fragments of “Yankee Doodle,” “Marseillaise Hymn,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and “Dixie” (again), along with Tom’s vocal enactments of a reinforcements-bearing train (“che che che”) and a piercing whistle (“re-r-r-r”). Over the course of a long crescendo, the cannons interrupt the song fragments more and more, gaining speed and vigor all the way to the piece’s finish, where a string of Lisztian octaves riffs on the verse of “Dixie” *il più presto possibile*. Tom would then

shout “Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!” at the top of his lungs before ending the piece with two mighty slams of the keys and “a general harum-scarum close” (qtd. O’Connell 123).

The Battle of Manassas’s printed foreword might seem to offer a decisive summary of the piece’s project: Tom represents the historic occasion exactly as he heard it described to him, every musical quotation and extended technique meant to accurately render the famous Confederate victory. But the historical and biographical circumstances of Tom’s composition have made alternative speculations on the piece’s intentions almost unavoidable in the last two decades. In July 2020, George Lewis compiled a list of often-neglected Black composers for *The New York Times*, in which he claims that Manassas “can be heard today as an anticipation of [the Confederacy’s] collapse—and as a soundtrack for the decommissioning of Confederate statues, those physically imposing paeans to Jim Crow that merely posture as history.” Anthony Tommasini, in another *Times* piece published in March 2021, detects a sense of irony, if not total subversion, in the enslaved pianist’s Confederate homage. A century and a half after its premiere, it seems that one can just as easily interpret Manassas as a sign of the “continually enslaved” pianist-composer’s regrettable lifelong allegiance to the Confederacy as one can see it as a covert act of resistance to his supposed ideology (Southall 1999).

My research is the first to consider recent interpretations of the piece in light of its compositional circumstances. After evaluating various biographers’ speculations on the piece, I will underline the striking connections between Manassas’s compositional timeline and the performance of a recently published piece by Northern pianist-composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, *L’Union*. Through score analysis, I will detect some striking rhythmic, harmonic, and formal similarities between Manassas and *L’Union*. I will then note a reference Tom makes toward the end of his piece to Richard Hoffman’s contemporaneous composition *Dixiana*, variations on the Southern anthem “Dixie.” I ultimately link “Dixie’s” roving historical position between Northern and Southern affiliations to Manassas’s own inscrutable allegiance. Appendix images depicting the textual and musical gestures I refer to throughout these sections will aid my analysis along the way. In my conclusion, I will echo Daphne Brooks’s recent insistence that, rather than continuing to guess his compositional motives, we affirm Tom’s necessarily illegible mode of performance. Whether Manassas was openly pro-Confederacy, secretly pro-Union, or neither, I argue that it remains an important record of Tom’s unique encounter with a fraught American epoch.

Geneva Southall’s 1999 biography helped inaugurate the renewed scholarly and literary interest in Tom’s life over the past 20 years. Specifically, she advocates for due recognition of Tom’s autodidactic greatness by letting his musical accomplishments speak for themselves (171). More recently, the mission has extended to appreciating Tom’s music in light of his own underacknowledged interiority. Deirdre O’Connell, in her thoroughly researched 2009 biography, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, calls for a more holistic understanding of Tom’s composition, rooted neither in the general supposition that no enslaved Black pianist could have openly supported the Confederate cause nor in the spirit of “right[ing] the historical wrong” done to Tom’s musical legacy in particular (171). O’Connell certainly laments Tom’s treatment in music history: the possibility was continually denied that the mentally disabled Black man, famed for his merely “imitative genius,” could have expressed any creative

impulse of his own (qtd. 43). But she hesitates to validate claims like Lewis's and Tommasini's, which offer undoubtably speculative, if thoroughly vindicating, interpretations of Tom's response to the unfortunate exploitation and manipulation he endured well past emancipation's heyday. Instead, O'Connell leverages these optimistic approaches to Tom's music with what she sees as his evident historical, biographical, and psychological limitations. For better or for worse, O'Connell often sees Tom's most celebrated abilities—he had a flawless and instantaneous musical memory, his perfect pitch knew no limits, and he could repeat speeches exactly after one listening, whether Oliver's introduction to his own composition or a German-speaking politician's rigmarole (O'Connell 106–108)—as following directly from his lifelong disabilities.

O'Connell's argument that Manassas could not have been “a sugar-coated, patriotic version of the battle but a dispassionately accurate depiction of the mayhem and chaos of war,” then, follows step with her general portrait of the composer-pianist, which sets nearly all of his artistic accomplishments against the backdrop of his physical and mental conditions (121). Diagnosing him with what we would now call autism, O'Connell cites numerous neurological studies to defend her claim that Tom could perceive only “a mass of objective sensory information that was never processed, filtered, censored or simplified into meaning” (35). These data, she writes, remained “trapped in his mind and never entered the realm of language where [they] would have been imbued with individual and cultural reference points” (35). In the case of Manassas, this would mean that Tom's “highly literal” mind could not have plotted a self-empowered subversive seed meant to germinate a century past his death, as recent understandings of the piece have assumed plausible (118).

I do not mean to put too much stock in O'Connell's diagnosis, though. Cognitive speculations aside, O'Connell's call for a realistic understanding of Tom's project actually affirms what modern interpretations like Lewis's and Tommasini's suspect: that Manassas could not be as simple as its printed introduction suggests. In her largely biographical approach to Tom's music, O'Connell takes issue not just with the prospect that Tom could have loaded a composition with rebellious undertones, but that Tom would have documented the sonic world of anyone but himself to begin with—let alone one described to him in plain speech, as the piece's introduction claims. “Think of all the vital sensory data that would be lost once it was transposed to language!” she writes. “No words could accurately convey the sound of musketry and cannon and Tom would never be so imprecise to approximate another person's description of it” (118). From as early as age five, Tom's compositional impulses sprung directly from his nonverbal sensory world. One Bethune relative recalls Tom running into the yard and sprinting back to the piano to play. “Asked what it was, he replied, ‘It is what the wind said to me,’ or ‘what the birds said to me,’ or ‘what the trees said to me,’ or what something else said to him” (qtd. 50). Aligning this anecdote with her general belief that Tom “had no hidden agendas—no concept of their existence—but instead accepted reality at its face value” (114), O'Connell concludes that “For him, [it] was not a case of ‘What Mr. Oliver Read to Tom’ but ‘What the Cannon and Musketry Told Tom’” (118). Whether or not one accepts O'Connell's verdict on Tom's psychological capabilities, what matters is that neither Tom's realistic (if derogative) biographer nor his optimistic interpreters can ignore the incongruity between his “own conception of a battle” and its supposed origin in a narrative filtered through the biases and exploitative practices of the Confederate regime.

In particular, the outside impositions embedded in Manassas's printed foreword came straight from the mouth of Tom's outspoken concert manager, Savannah tobacco planter and fervid Barnumite Perry Oliver. Just ten days before Manassas's premiere, Oliver attended Louis Moreau Gottschalk's concert in St. Louis, where the New York-based pianist played his recently published *L'Union*. The performance of the piece, a paraphrase de concert of Northern anthems like "Yankee Doodle" and "Hail Columbia," was met with outrage (O'Connell 119), and Oliver's personal resentment of *L'Union* seems likely for a few reasons. To start with, the piece incorporates one of Tom's most celebrated pianistic tricks, which Oliver's publicity posters advertised in a heavy bolded font: a rendition of two tunes at once in either hand (Appendix 2). By then, Oliver already would have been reckoning with Tom's deep admiration for the Northerner's music, the New Orleans native's piano pieces often played alongside the likes of Liszt, Beethoven, Chopin, and Rossini at Tom's concerts (O'Connell 189). Tom's critics seemed to find the comparison irresistible, possibly elevating it to the level of a rivalry in Oliver's mind. Even if one Philadelphian wrote that "There is no use in talking about Gottschalk while Tom is around, for the latter holds the winning hand, and takes down the pile every night," and even if another Cincinnati writer denounced those who compared Tom to other eminent artists, one New York reporter's lauding of Tom as the "Gottschalk of the Negro Race" certainly would have hung in the air (all qtd. Southall 1975, 143). Suffice it to say that the man whose livelihood depended on advertising Tom as the "Musical Prodigy of the Age" (Appendix 2) easily could have taken Gottschalk's pro-Union, virtuosic performance as a multivalent personal assault (O'Connell 77).

So, was Manassas truly inspired by the eponymous battle of February 1862, waiting to premiere for nine inexplicable months? Or was the compositional setting posited by the piece's introduction Oliver's own "publicity coup" to favor his personal political agenda (O'Connell 118)? Hardly conspiratorial, O'Connell's suspicion of the latter behaves well in light of the express ten-day time frame noted in the piece's foreword. If Tom in fact listened to the events of the title battle for ten days, as audiences were made to believe, the piece would have sat as a dead letter from the Confederate trenches for three seasons, waiting to become Tom's most celebrated and widely played original composition (189). It seems much more likely that Tom would have spent those ten days between Gottschalk's concert and Manassas's premiere accompanying Oliver, who toured the U.S. border states himself in early 1861 (123), somewhere he could witness battle firsthand. The piece's introduction only states, after all, that Manassas is Tom's "own conception of a battle," leaving open the possibility that the actual one depicted isn't the Confederate triumph at Manassas, but one whose components could easily suit Oliver's partisan narrative.

But if Manassas were really Oliver's "musical revenge" on *L'Union* (119), why are so many of Tom's pianistic hallmarks absent from his programmatic depiction of battle? For all their possible similarities—all the opportunities Tom had to outplay or at least invoke *L'Union*'s own programmatic elements—the pieces seem to have distinct representational agendas. Both are, of course, pasticcios of national airs, even holding two tunes in common: "Yankee Doodle" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." But Manassas begins almost immediately with a one-note rendition of "The Girl I Left Behind Me," played pianississimo in the right hand over an austere, hypnotic drum motif in the left. Gottschalk, by stark contrast, doesn't present his first explicit musical quotation until the score's eighth page, after over 40 measures of boisterous

introduction. A massive fortissimo Eb-minor opening, followed by a recurring theme of dramatic Lizstian octaves marked *Strepitoso*, leads to a series of virtuosic stride-like triplets in the bass, a fast passage of eighth-note chromatic complexes in both hands, a Chopinesque cadenza spanning over two whole systems in the score, and a key change to F# major. Only then does Gottschalk transition to $\frac{3}{4}$ time for “The Star-Spangled Banner,” played at a subdued piano. Tom harmonizes his “The Star-Spangled Banner,” too, but the two composers’ arrangements are hardly similar—Gottschalk’s a gallant F#-major stride, Tom’s a quick, continually interrupted arpeggiation in D major (Appendix 3). Though much more harmonically complex than the one-note statements of “The Girl I Left Behind Me” and “Dixie” that open the piece, Tom’s paraphrase of the national anthem proves his compositional aims to be, again, quite different from Gottschalk’s musical intentions. But all the drama gained by Manassas’s piece-length crescendo and intensification shows an entirely different side of Tom’s pianistic virtuosity than the sheer musical prowess Gottschalk’s grandiose opening gestures would have challenged.

While *L’Union* wears its virtuosity on its sleeve—far more a case of Gottschalk performing Gottschalk than of Gottschalk presenting a programmatic (or even narrativized) rendition of national airs—Manassas refuses to employ even Tom’s best-known virtuosic tricks without a clear representational purpose. The other tune shared by the two pasticcios, “Yankee Doodle,” confirms this sense of reserve especially well: without any anticipation of either tune individually (as in, say, a canon), Gottschalk begins a simultaneous rendition of “Yankee Doodle” in the right hand over “Hail Columbia” in the left (bottom of p. 16 in the score). As I have said, this is a trick directly out of Tom’s book. Gottschalk’s score even indicates the clarity with which he wants the simultaneity itself to sound, rather than combining the two in the name of general muddle: between the staves, the performer reads, “Ben chiaro i due temi,” the two themes are clear. Audiences would marvel at Tom’s performance of the exact same airs included in his battle piece, playing “Yankee Doodle” in one hand and “Dixie” in the other while singing “The Girl I Left Behind Me” (Southall 1999, 3). Nonetheless, Manassas at no point flaunts Tom’s signature pianistic spectacle; it remains strictly programmatic: “‘Yankee Doodle’ heard through the noise of battle and canon,” the score indicates. The paraphrase emerges as if from a lone soldier’s mouth, and without any of the pianistic embellishments, harmonizations, and showiness Gottschalk’s composition foregrounds (see Appendix 4).

Still, Tom would have had just as much of a personal stake in the threat of Gottschalk’s *L’Union* as Oliver. He was well known both privately and publicly for guarding his musical material “with the ferocity of a lion”—especially Manassas. Once, recalling a journalist who liked to test his fury by sitting down to play the piece without warning, Tom said, “Oh, yes,” he liked Mr. Watterson very well. “But he would steal my homminies” (O’Connell 122). Tom’s protectiveness would reach public eyes in 1880, when fifteen-year-old piano prodigy John William Boone, also blind and Black, gained recognition as the “only known rival to Blind Tom.” To settle the score between them, Tom’s manager arranged a spectacular piano duel, in which Tom stopped the show with none other than *The Battle of Manassas*. (Counterintuitively for Tom, the incident turned “Blind Boone” into “Blind Tom’s” most celebrated Midwest imposter, going on to perform such Tom classics as a simultaneous rendition of “Yankee Doodle” and another popular tune and, of course, Manassas [O’Connell 194–196]). Why would Tom opt for stark, unimpressive quotations of some of the

same popular airs as the Northerner's piece rather than directly invoking its musical challenge? Why would Tom not simply imitate anew the composer he already seemed to know so well?

For one, *The Battle of Manassas* commits itself far more than *L'Union* to an explicit representational narrative, adhering to a brand of program music particular to the American Civil War. Elizabeth Morgan includes *Manassas* in her 2015 article "War on the Home Front: Battle Pieces for the Piano from the American Civil War," putting its vivid representation of a historical event in line with a number of other popular American program pieces of the period. Though Morgan seems to neglect the fact that Tom's composition would have partaken little in what she sees as the American genre's distinct attention to eyewitness accounts of battle, newspaper reports, sheet music, and mass media (381)—almost all visual affairs—*Manassas* does include many of the genre's central criteria: episodic configurations of march tunes, bugle and trumpet calls, patriotic songs, and cannon shots, all explicit in the score (385–387).

To be sure, Gottschalk also seems to express a familiarity, if not an indebtedness, to the genre Morgan identifies as uniquely widespread during *L'Union*'s composition. Both pieces employ a drum motif in the bass—a staple of the battle genre (see Appendix 5). Someone predisposed to seeing Tom's program piece as directly responding to Gottschalk's could see this motif alone as a sign of *Manassas*'s reply to *L'Union*. But Gottschalk presents his embellished figure midway through the piece, while Tom's starts in measure one. The Northerner's is also punctuated by subtle harmonizations; the Southerner's remains unison, in one low, muddy register. The Northerner's appears once, briefly, and never recurs afterwards; Tom's lasts over twice as many measures as Gottschalk's figure. And, to begin with, the two motifs are rhythmically distinct: Tom's, in 2/4 time, goes | | h | h | q q | iq q | |, and Gottschalk's, in 4/4, goes | | h h | q q q ; | |. Both pieces also hint at an evocation of trumpets (see Appendix 6). But here, too, Gottschalk's quasi-military references come nowhere near the level of Tom's score—explicit bugle calls.

Seemingly unrelated to any hallmark of the battle genre, the end of *Manassas*, for the first time in the piece, invokes a rhythmic figure strikingly similar to the opening motif of *L'Union*: a rapid succession of octaves evoking one of Franz Liszt's pianistic signatures (see Appendix 7). *Manassas*'s direct response to *L'Union* may just build up slowly, Tom waiting to invoke the Northern piece until the very last measures. This rapid stream of octaves could also simply be a pianistic trope Tom picked up on and implemented in his own compositions throughout his life. *Rain Storm*, for instance, another one of his most celebrated original compositions (and one of his earliest), ends with a similar configuration of melody-embellishing octaves (see Appendix 8 [Southall 1975, 148]). And, in all likelihood, these gestures would have surfaced even before Tom began receiving lessons from one of Liszt's own pupils (Southall 1999, 169), and well before he became acquainted with Sir Charles Hallé, one of Liszt's personal acquaintances, in 1866 (Smith 171). In any case, no matter whether Gottschalk's *L'Union* (or Liszt) had anything to do with Tom's "own conception of a battle," *Manassas*'s raw, programmatic enactment follows hardly the same guidelines as Gottschalk's classically inflected paraphrase.

But to say that the two pieces adhere differently to the program genre does not negate their striking similarities, nor does it wholly answer the question of their direct relationship. Even if *Manassas* really was an oddly timed, miraculously impartial imagining of a battle described to him thirdhand, and even if Perry Oliver had nothing

to do with the Confederate tribute, its generic exemplification does not entirely account for Tom's anomalous unadornment of the same airs he normally played all at once. The opening one-note renditions of "The Girl I Left Behind Me" and of "Dixie" might well represent soldiers' distant cries, but why would Tom leave the quotations the same throughout the battle's climax? Especially when "Yankee Doodle" and "Dixie" re-enter amid the mayhem of tone-cluster cannons in the bass, why not include at least a few virtuosic flairs, or something even slightly more dramatic than the same homophonic lines? With tunes so widely known and so easily coded Northern ("Yankee Doodle") and Southern ("Dixie"), Tom already enacted "an uncannily apt reflection of the divided nation" with their astonishing simultaneous performance (O'Connell 115). But in Manassas Tom opts to downplay the exact same tunes whose juxtaposition cinched his fame, along with, it seems, their programmatic potential.

Don't forget, though, that however obviously these airs might seem to side with the Union or with the Confederacy, "Dixie" in Manassas is explicitly Northern. The piece's introduction spends a remarkable amount of time explaining its function as a contrast to the Southern Army's "favorite tune of 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,'" as if to defend the piece's generally supposed identification with the South. Before every performance, Tom would announce: "He will represent the Grand Union Army leaving Washington city to the tune of Dixie. You will all recollect that their papers, and our papers, and their prisoners, spoke of the fact that when the Grand Union Army left Washington, not only their bands were playing Dixie, but their men were also singing it" (Appendix 1). The song's Northern delineation gets reiterated in the score, too, which labels the "Northern army leaving Washington to the tune of 'Dixie.'"

Here Gottschalk's shadow begins to loom even larger than before. Right around when he was performing *L'Union* to a riotous St. Louis crowd, the Northerner was also reckoning with his own variations on "Dixie," whose reception was colored by the air's overtly Confederate association. Gottschalk even attributes the piece's partisan undertones to its specific ties to General P. G. T. Beauregard, who famously sent the North into retreat at Manassas and whom the introduction and score of Tom's Manassas refer to by name at several points. In a letter he wrote a day after witnessing a major riot in Baltimore, Gottschalk weighed his desire to perform the "Southern negro air" with its historical baggage:

I very well understand how to fill the hall; but it is dangerous. It would be to announce that I would play my piece called '*L'Union*,' and my variations on "Dixie's Land." In the first I intercalate '*Yankee Doodle*' and '*Hail Columbia*.' The second is a Southern negro air, of which the Confederates, since the commencement of the war, have made a national air. It is to the music of Dixie's Land that the troops of [General] Beauregard invariably charged the soldiers of the North. At the point at which men's minds are now—the hall would be filled with partisans of both sections, who would certainly come to blows. But I should make three or four thousand dollars. It is true that in the tumult I might be the first one choked. (Gottschalk 1881, 140)

It goes without saying that Manassas's foreword has its "factually dubious" moments (O'Connell 119), but its disowning of an anthem so attached to the Confederacy that Northerners considered it the South's "national air" begins to verge on the incredible when Gottschalk laments the tune's place as the one to which Southern troops "invariably charged the soldiers of the North." Something in Manassas's programmatic material would have had to justify the historical oddity so central to the piece's realism and so often insisted upon in its text.

It is possible that Southern audiences found great (if subconscious) relief in Manassas's confusing reversal of the Confederate air once it was reiterated for a third time during the piece's final frenzy. The song's reprise is unmarked in the score and would have been easy to miss amid Tom's bellowing "Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!"—not to mention the string of Lisztian octaves expanding out to the keyboard's edges. But, if heard, it might have clarified the air's odd Northern coding: the anthem's tonal disintegration could symbolize the Union's loss, as opposed to the kind of shadowed "anticipation of [the Confederate] regime's collapse" George Lewis implicitly makes of the closing gesture. In this case, one would take Tom's introduction at its word, suspending all disbelief in "Dixie's" otherwise Southern charge. Even then, though, the tune's Confederacy-redeeming iteration at the end of Manassas does not necessarily follow from its first explicit appearance as the Northern soldiers' approach. When "Dixie" reappears in the concluding mayhem, marked "The Retreat" in the score, a repetition of past musical material changes key for the first time in the whole piece: here, the verse of "Dixie" is in F major, not the original C.

Though still a long way from any key presented in Gottschalk's program piece (moving through Eb minor, F# major, and Bb major on the way to an Eb major finish), Tom's decision to transpose "Dixie" into a different key at the end of the piece may nod to some other rendition of the tune—maybe even Gottschalk's variations. But the Northerner's piece, too, might have been inspired by another rendering of the Southern tune, published just a year before Manassas and *L'Union* by one of Gottschalk's chief compositional comrades. In 1861, Richard Hoffman's *Dixiana* was met with as much resistance in the North as Gottschalk's own unpublished (and seemingly lost) variations, Hoffman's caprice "being necessarily sent to storage when the tune became the war song of the South" (Offergeld 12). Beyond its politically fraught subject, though, Hoffman's piece went against the grain of nearly every extant publication of the popular air, almost always printed in C major. Hoffman presents "Dixie," just as Manassas's chaotic close does, in F (see Appendix 9). Whether Tom knew anything about either Gottschalk's or Hoffman's version of the air remains uncertain. But both composers appear as some of the only American composers in Tom's regular concert repertoire, one program having three pieces by Gottschalk listed alongside two by Hoffman, with two by Liszt sandwiched between them (Southall 1999, 43–45). While "Dixie's" anomalous third appearance in Manassas might clarify the song's programmatic function for some, it adds even more layers to the piece's elusiveness for others.

Regardless of its juxtaposition to "Yankee Doodle," regardless of whether it was in fact the Northern army's arriving chant or the Southern troops' triumphant cry at Manassas, and regardless of whether Perry Oliver fashioned its denotation to suit his own partisan agenda, "Dixie" emerges in Manassas as in itself the "apt reflection of the divided nation" Tom already knew it could enact. No matter one's interpretational approach to the piece—psychological or historical, purely musical or

biographically contextual, partisan or impartial, complicit or subversive—no account of Manassas can deny its most-played air’s roving place in the American Civil War. The day after General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox, Abraham Lincoln embedded the piece’s porous identity into his celebratory remarks, referring to it as the North’s “lawful prize”: “I thought ‘Dixie’ one of the best tunes I ever heard,” he said, adding, “I had heard that our adversaries over the way had attempted to appropriate it. I insisted yesterday that we had fairly captured it. . . . I presented the question to the Attorney-General, and he gave us our opinion that it is our lawful prize. . . . I ask the Band to give us a good turn upon it” (qtd. Offergeld 37). Beyond the question of Manassas’s particular origins—irrespective of what was psychologically possible or contextually likely for Tom—the piece helped tighten a national musical knot even before Tom sat down to play a note.

I have entertained several plausible theories of The Battle of Manassas’s original intentions—that it was openly pro-Confederacy, that it was secretly pro-Union, and that it was neither. Nearly every interpretation, it turns out, holds to some degree of historical or biographical conjecture. One thing seems indisputable, though: if “playing battle music was not simply representational, but performative: theatrical mimesis in which drawing room became battlefield and parlor pianist became soldier,” Tom would have embodied the spirit of the battle-piece genre in his very pianistic being through Manassas (Morgan 399). For decades, audiences observed Tom becoming the train, becoming the whistle, becoming the soldiers crying “Retreat!” Retreat! Retreat!” at the end of the piece. Any narrative drawn from Tom’s music, then, as Daphne Brooks recently insists, has to acknowledge his distinct mode of “performative listening,” which no visual remains can replicate. Tom’s blindness notwithstanding, no biography, foreword, score analysis, or historical interrogation could fully account for his purely “sonic expressiveness,” which necessarily “exceeds and complicates the written word” (Brooks 2). Whatever first inspired Manassas, the piece ultimately leaves behind shadows of “cultural acts” that can neither speak to an openly Confederate allegiance nor deny a quietly anti-Confederate resistance decisively (7). Whether linguistically transposed or directly imitated, historically embellished or strictly programmatic, Manassas remains a testament to a singular experience of an American epoch, Tom’s “own conception of a battle” ceaselessly “playing back the dissonances of the nation” (14).

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: *The Battle of Manassas's* Foreword

2

The director of Blind Tom's concerts was at first accustomed himself to announce the pieces to be played; connecting with them such incidents or facts with regard to this wonderful being as would be of interest. Noticing however that Tom often repeated to himself what had been said, after they returned to their apartments from the performances, it occurred to him that it would be interesting to the audience to have Tom announce himself, which is now done; and he speaks of "This boy Tom" "This singular being" &c; with as much gravity and earnestness as if he were speaking of another person. The following are the exact words with which Tom announces his Battle of Manassas. (Remember that it was the director who was laid up by the accident)

"Tom will now play for you his Battle of Manassas. This is a piece of his own conception of a battle.

The circumstances under which he produced it were these: Soon after the battle occurred, I happened to a very serious accident which kept me in Nashville for several months. Tom was often in my room. Every little paragraph about the battle was discussed in various forms for a week or more. He heard this thing read of and talked of, and after hearing it for ten days he took his seat at the Piano and produced what he will now play for you; and when asked what that was, he was playing, his reply was, that it was his battle of Manassas.

In the first place he will represent the Southern Army leaving home to their favorite tune of 'The Girl I left behind me', which you will hear in the distance, growing louder and louder as they approach Manassas, (the imitation of the drum and fife) He will represent the Grand Union Army leaving Washington city to the tune of Dixie. You will all recollect that their papers, and our papers, and their prisoners, spoke of the fact that when the Grand Union Army left Washington, not only their hands were playing Dixie, but their men were also singing it.

He will represent the eve of battle by a very soft sweet melody, then the clatter of arms and accoutrements, the war trumpet of Beauregard, which you will hear distinctly; and then McDowell's in the distance, like an echo of the first. He will represent the firing of cannon to Yankee Doodle, Marseillaise Hymn, Star Spangled Banner, Dixie, and the arrival of the train of cars containing Gen Kirby Smith's reinforcements; which you will all recollect was very valuable to Gen Beauregard upon that occasion after the arrival of which, the fighting will grow more severe, and then the retreat:

Appendix 3: "The Star-Spangled Banner" (top: *The Battle of Manassas*; bottom: *L'Union*)

Star Spangled Banner.

f

4907

This image shows a page of musical notation for the "Star Spangled Banner" from the score for "The Battle of Manassas". The score is written for piano and features two systems of music. The first system includes a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The second system continues the piece with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte). The number 4907 is printed at the bottom center of the page.

8

Poco rit.

"THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER?"

Malinconico.

p

3 Ped.

4756

This image shows a page of musical notation for "THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER?" from the score for "L'Union". The score is written for piano and features two systems of music. The first system includes a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. The second system continues the piece with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) and a *3 Ped.* (three pedals) instruction. The number 4756 is printed at the bottom left of the page.

Appendix 4: "Yankee Doodle" (top: *The Battle of Manassas*; bottom: *L'Union*)

This musical score is for the 'Yankee Doodle' section of 'The Battle of Manassas'. It features a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The tempo is marked $\frac{2}{4}$. The score includes several measures of music, with a section marked 'Fifes.' and 'Cannon'. A dynamic marking of *ff* is present, along with the instruction 'Yankee Doodle heard through the noise of battle Drums.' The score is divided into four systems, each starting with a measure rest of 8 measures.

This musical score is for the 'Yankee Doodle' section of 'L'Union'. It features a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The tempo is marked *Ben chiaro i due temi.* The score includes several measures of music, with a section marked 'HAIL COLUMBIA!'. The score is divided into two systems, each starting with a measure rest of 8 measures.

4756

Appendix 5: Drum Motif (top: *The Battle of Manassas*; bottom: *L'Union*)

by BLIND TOM.

The Southern army leaving home to the tune of "The Girl I left behind me"

This musical score is for a piece titled "The Southern army leaving home to the tune of 'The Girl I left behind me'" by Blind Tom. It is written in 2/4 time. The score consists of three systems of music. The first system shows a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The second system is labeled "Fife." and includes a drum part with a treble clef and a bass clef. The drum part is marked "ppp" and "Increase very gradually." and features a rhythmic motif of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment in the second system is marked "pp". The third system continues the piano accompaniment, also marked "pp". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Drums.

Fife.

ppp Increase very gradually.

pp

571-10 4907

This musical score is for a piece titled "L'Union". It is written in 2/4 time. The score consists of three systems of music. The first system shows a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The second system is labeled "Drums." and includes a drum part with a treble clef and a bass clef. The drum part is marked "pp" and "pp Tamburro." and features a rhythmic motif of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment in the second system is marked "pp". The third system continues the piano accompaniment, also marked "pp". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Drums.

pp Tamburro.

pp

Cres

cen do.

Appendix 6: Trumpets (top: *The Battle of Manassas*; bottom: *L'Union*)

Gen. Beauregard's trumpets.

ff

Gen. McDowell's trumpets in the distance.

pp

4907

Fifes.

Cannon

ff "Yankee Doodle" heard through the noise of battle Drums.

8

Un poco animato. Vibrante.

f Trumpets.

4756

Appendix 7: End of *The Battle of Manassas* (top) and Beginning of *L'Union* (bottom)

The Retreat.
Il piu Presto Possibile.

ff
Ped at fine.

574 10 4907

This image shows a page of a musical score for 'The Retreat' by Franz Liszt. The score is written for piano and includes dynamic markings such as *ff* and *Ped at fine.* The tempo is marked *Il piu Presto Possibile.* The page number 4907 is visible at the bottom.

9min with cut

"UNION"
PARAPHRASE DE CONCERT.

L. M. GOTTSCHALK.

Allegro Moderato. *Marcato.* *Strepitoso.* *Con Bravura.*

ff

3

Copyright 1883 by W. B. Hall & Co.

This image shows the beginning of a musical score for 'L'Union' by Louis Gottschalk. The score is written for piano and includes tempo markings such as *Allegro Moderato*, *Marcato*, *Strepitoso*, and *Con Bravura*. The score is titled "UNION" and is a paraphrase of a concert. The page number 3 is visible at the top right.

ff

Agitato. *Con Passione.*

4

574

This image shows a continuation of the musical score for 'L'Union' by Louis Gottschalk. The score is written for piano and includes tempo markings such as *Agitato* and *Con Passione*. The page number 4 is visible at the top left.

Appendix 8: Rain Storm Excerpt

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Rain Storm Excerpt". The score is written for piano and violin. The piano part is in the upper system, and the violin part is in the lower system. The piano part begins with a dynamic marking of *mf* (mezzo-forte) and a tempo marking of *And.* (Andante). The violin part begins with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) and a tempo marking of *Allegro*. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and slurs. The piano part features a prominent melodic line with a series of eighth notes, while the violin part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern. The tempo changes from *And.* to *Allegro* in the piano part, and the violin part maintains the *Allegro* tempo throughout. The score concludes with a dynamic marking of *rit. sm.* (ritardando, mezzo-forte).

Appendix 9: End of *The Battle of Manassas* (top) and Verse Section of *Dixiana* (bottom)

The Retreat.
Il più Presto Possibile.

Ped *Ped* *Ped:Ped:* *Ped* *ff* *Ped at fine.*

Ped:Ped:

4907

cantando

p *marcato* *Ped* *ff*

5181