

Musical Fund Hall

Joseph Quinn

Walking west on Locust Street you may have glanced at number 810 and wondered about the significance of the words inscribed over the entrance: **Musical Fund Hall.**

It's a free-standing, three-story building (with basement), symmetrical in design, of buff-colored brick with Corinthian pilasters and decorative terra cotta embellishments. It does not announce itself ostentatiously, but claims its space with quiet dignity. It's crowned with a copper pediment; a lyre displayed on the tympanum is another signal that this address has some connection with the musical arts.

A plaque on the building proclaims that "this was the first dedicated concert hall in Philadelphia." A Pennsylvania historical marker documents its importance in American political history as the location of the first Republican Party national convention to nominate a slate of candidates, held in June 1856. The main topic debated at that gathering was the extension of slavery into new territories, opposed by the Republicans. As reported by the *Evening Bulletin*, "a more important convention than the one in question has not been assembled in our city, perhaps not the country, since the days of 1776."

(Historical Note: The party nominated John C. Frémont of California for president and William L. Dayton of New Jersey as vice

president. Dayton was chosen over another candidate for VP: Abraham Lincoln. The Democratic ticket of Buchanan and Breckinridge won the election.)

It would be hard to underestimate the importance and centrality of this building and its founding organization, the Musical Fund Society, in the cultural and social life of our city during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Judge John K. Kane, the Society's first secretary, records that it was established in 1820 for "the relief of decayed musicians and their families, and the cultivation of skill and diffusion of taste in music."

In his indispensable study, *Annals of Music in Philadelphia and History of the Musical Fund Society* (1896), **Louis C. Madeira** maintains that an important goal of the Society was "to advance music to the highest point, and to present to the public the finest compositions, both sacred and secular."

Madeira's colorful history is filled with historical insight, as well as flashes of wit. He notes that regarding concerts in public, "there was still a goodly remnant of old prejudice," and "a suspicious taint still clung to the professional musician," especially, it seems to female musicians, as the Society felt it necessary to resolve "That no female professional members be admitted without a written certificate from

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Exterior of the Musical Fund Hall showing the 1847 renovations by Napoleon LeBrun. Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion (1854). Courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.



This is what it looked like at the time of the Republican convention in 1856. The caption at the bottom of the sketch reads: "Republican Convention--Announcement of the Nominations at Musical Fund Hall, Philadelphia." Scharf & Westcott. Free Library of Philadelphia Digital Collections.

"To prevent an inconvenience... it is most respectfully requested that ladies attending the concert will avoid wearing large bonnets or high head-dresses."

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Sketch of the Interior of the Musical Fund Hall by John Skirving. Thomas Ustick Walter Collection. Courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

some lady of established character in this city.”

Nor did ladies in the audience escape scrutiny, per this request: “To prevent an inconvenience that has formerly been complained of, it is most respectfully requested that ladies attending the concert will avoid wearing large bonnets or high head-dresses.”

Of interest to Hopkinson House readers, he refers to an amusing exchange of correspondence, filled with musical puns, between the Society’s secretary and two members-elect: James Henderson and one **Francis Hopkinson**, likely the son of our building’s namesake.

Today the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia describes itself as “the oldest continuing musical organization in the United States.” Their membership

“represents an unusual cross-section of the Philadelphia community that includes professional and amateur musicians.”

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Society to curtail celebrations of its bicentennial anniversary in 2020. But since its founding it has maintained a robust and influential presence in the city’s cultural life by promoting concerts, sponsoring emerging artists, and commissioning new compositions.

In 1824, the Society acquired the “dilapidated” ruins (and graveyard) of the Fifth Presbyterian Church and selected one of its own founding members, William Strickland, to convert it into a space suitable for formal concerts and other public gatherings. Strickland, a former scene-painter, had

gained notice in theatrical circles with his design for the Second Chestnut Street Theatre (1822), which accommodated up to 2,000 theatergoers in three tiers of boxes arranged in a horse-shoe formation. He would achieve greater recognition and fame for designing two other buildings that still grace our historic district. For the Second Bank of the United States (1824), Strickland drew inspiration from no less than the Parthenon. He would later employ a similar Classical Revival vocabulary for the Merchant’s Exchange Building (1834).

After the first concert in the new hall on December 29, 1824, a reviewer, Madeira notes, praised the space as simple, elegant and “exceedingly neat in its decoration... and admirably calculated for the conveyance of sound.” The second-floor

auditorium, or “grand saloon,” featured a balcony, and could accommodate up to 1,500 listeners. The total cost, including lot, building, furniture and incidentals, came to \$23,547.08.

Vintage prints and photographs show a shoe-box-shaped room adorned with subdued but tasteful décor. Straight rows of simple pew-like benches, oddly reminiscent of a Quaker meeting house, face an elevated stage at one end.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries the hall was constantly in use for a wide range of social and artistic activities. Crowds flocked to hear renowned speakers and authors, including Dickens, Emerson, and Thackeray.

Over time it became a neighborhood gathering place for political meetings, pageants, weddings, commencements, and holiday celebrations by the city’s many ethnic clans. Depending on the occasion, it might be thronged by laborers at a union meeting (during the 1920s it was headquarters of the Philadelphia Labor Institute), or resound to the city’s social elite dancing and supping at a glittering assembly.

In 1847 there was a flare-up of racial animosity when, after a performance by the abolitionist Hutchinson Family singers, Mayor John Swift declared that “no Anti-Slavery lecture shall be delivered” and “no colored person may form a portion of any audience.” continued on page 14

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It's not clear exactly what effect the ban had or for how long it was enforced. We do know that it presented no barrier to the appearance in the 20th century of such celebrated African Americans as civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and, in what may have been her public debut, Philadelphia's own Marian Anderson.

On June 23rd, 1915, the Musical Fund Hall was the site of a "Popular Benefit Concert to assist in Musical Education of Miss Marion [sic] E. Anderson." In the

first of several appearances at the hall, the eighteen-year-old budding contralto, featured as a member of the African-American People's Chorus, sang Saint-Saëns' "My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice."

Miss Anderson claimed her place in a long and distinguished line of fabled soloists and singers who had graced the Hall's stage. Jenny Lind, Adelina Patti, and Maria Malibran, who were the toast of opera houses worldwide, thrilled enthusiastic audiences.

Surely a high point occurred on February 8th, 1841, when the American premiere was given, in concert form and in English, of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, drawing music lovers all the way from New York and Boston. The program for the event, given for the benefit of St. John's Orphan Asylum, was printed that day in *The National Gazette and Literary Register*. It boasted that "no expense has been spared securing the services of the most distinguished Vocal and Instrumental Performers." A long,

laudatory review appeared the following day, and reported: "The singers were in excellent voice... the audience demanded an encore from every one."

The Society's own Germania orchestra presented regular concerts in the hall between 1856 and 1868, introducing listeners to works by Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart and other European masters.

The opening of the Academy of Music in 1857 inevitably stole the spotlight from the Musical

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Interior of the Musical Fund Hall showing 1847 renovations by Napoleon LeBrun. Courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.



Renovations to the interior of the Hall were made in 1891 by Addison Hutton. Courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.



In 1891, Addison Hutton also made renovations to the exterior of the Musical Fund Hall. Note the third story addition. This is essentially the façade still in place today, which was incorporated into the condominium makeover in 1982. Courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

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Fund Hall. Sentiment had been building among the city's cultural elite in favor of a new facility. One commentator sniffed that the "Musical Fund Hall... was not a suitable auditorium for anything like grand opera." The Academy's *Proceedings* refer, with a certain patrician hauteur, to "the confusion & personal exposure which all of us have witnessed in the neighborhood of the Musical Fund Hall."

The alluring new Academy, modeled after Milan's La Scala, became the preferred venue for musical events, especially elaborate productions of grand opera and the fancy cotillions and assembly balls favored by the wealthy and socially prominent.

The Society moved its Germania Orchestra performances to the Academy in 1868, and it became a core element of the Philadelphia Orchestra, which gave its first concert on November, 16th, 1900.

The history of the Musical Fund Hall is one of visible changes both inside and out and the evolution of activities that occupied the space. Evidence of the various transformations has been preserved and can be examined in archives and public records, many available online.

As early as 1847, the hall received its first makeover by none other than Napoleon LeBrun, who would later design the building that would hasten the hall's eclipse—the Academy



The Music Fund Hall today. Photo by Joseph Quinn.

Addison Hutton's impressive 1891 façade remains for us to admire.

of Music. LeBrun extended the front of the hall by 16 feet, thereby lengthening it to 122 feet, enlarged and repositioned the stage from north to south, and redesigned the façade. This is the version of the Hall that hosted the 1856 Republican Convention.

In 1891, Addison Hutton changed the appearance considerably by adding a third story. He also replaced the arched windows with square ones, and redecorated the interior in "Victorian style." Two years later he completely rebuilt the frontage, which is essentially the one still in place today.

By the early 20th century, the hall's glory days as a musical showcase were fading, and it became more of a community and recreational center. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* published an article on March 27th, 1921, lamenting that the "Music Hall May Soon Disappear." It went on to describe the neighborhood as "deteriorating badly," and "as near real slums as Philadelphia [has] to offer."

Unable to keep up with the costs of maintenance and staff salaries, the Musical Fund Society sold the hall in 1924 to

the Philadelphia Labor Institute. From 1937 to 1942 boxing matches and other athletic events were on the bill. And in 1946 it was acquired by a cigar company and converted into a tobacco warehouse by architect Howard Carter Hill.

In 1964 it passed into the jurisdiction of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, and suffered its final indignity in 1980 when, due to serious structural deterioration, it was declared "imminently dangerous."

Soon thereafter it was acquired by a developer, gutted, and in 1982 converted into condominiums. In a win for historic preservation, Addison Hutton's impressive 1891 façade remains for us to admire.

The building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1974. But as part of the condominium conversion, historic elements such as the auditorium and balcony were removed. As a result, the designation was withdrawn in 1989. However, it still retains a position on the National Register of Historic Places.

The next time you walk past 810 Locust, take a minute to admire the gracious exterior. Look up until you can discern the lyre on the copper pediment. Try to imagine a time when the building resounded with glorious music and played an indelible role in Philadelphia's cultural history. ■