

FORGOTTEN STARS OF THE MUSICAL THEATRE

David Braham

The American Offenbach

John Franceschina



**David Braham**

**FORGOTTEN STARS OF THE MUSICAL THEATRE**

**Kurt Gänzl, Series Editor**

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*Lydia Thompson* BY KURT GÄNZL

*Leslie Stuart* BY ANDREW LAMB

*William B. Gill* BY KURT GÄNZL

*David Braham* BY JOHN FRANCESCHINA

*Alice May* BY ADRIENNE SIMPSON

*Harry B. Smith* BY JOHN FRANCESCHINA



# David Braham

## *The American Offenbach*

**John Franceschina**

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SERIES EDITOR: KURT GÄNZL



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**For Ann Connolly**



David Braham, a photograph from the collection of Ann Connolly.



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## Acknowledgments

**A**n almost obsessively private man, David Braham left only a few clues to the story of his life, preferring to be remembered by his extensive legacy of published music. Uncovering and interpreting the clues was facilitated by the continued and energetic support of Ann Connolly, Braham's great-granddaughter, who provided access to family documents, photographs, and memories that would have otherwise been unattainable. A travel-research grant from the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies at The Pennsylvania State University enabled visits to the New York City Municipal Archives, the New York Public Library, the Museum of the City of New York, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where friendly curators were helpful in solving problems caused by a mass of conflicting information. Librarians at Bird Library at Syracuse University; the Boston Public Library; the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library at Duke University; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin; and the Pattee-Paterno Library at The Pennsylvania State University also provided quick and expert help in this

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## *Series Introduction*

# **“Sic transit gloria spectaculi”**

## **Some Famous but Forgotten Figures of the Musical Theatre**

Kurt Gänzl

**O**ver the past few years, I have spent most of my time researching, writing, and otherwise putting together the vast quantity of text involved in the second edition of my now three-volumed *Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*. And, as the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe* exhaustedly sings, “thank goodness they’re both of them over!” Part of this extremely extended extending exercise involved my compiling bibliographies of biographical works for the hundreds (or was it thousands?) of people whose careers in the musical theatre warranted an entry in the *Encyclopedia*. As I duly compiled, however, I became surprisingly aware of just how many outstanding figures of the historical stage have never, ever been made the subject of even a monograph-sized “life and works.” Time and time again, I found that the articles that I have researched (from scratch, not only by choice but quite simply because no-one has ever, it seems, done it before) and written for the *Encyclopedia* are the largest pieces of biographical copy up till now put together on this or that person or personality. And I do not mean nobodies: I mean some of the most important and most fascinating theatrical figures of the nineteenth and early twentieth century theatres.

This series of short biographies is intended to take the first small step towards rectifying that situation. To bring back to notice and, perhaps, even to their rightful place in the history of the international theatre, a few of the people whose names have—for all but the scholar and the specialist—drifted into the darkness of the past, leaving too little trace.

This is a very personal project and one very dear to my heart. And because it is so personal, even though the majority of the volumes in the series are written by my closest colleagues in the theatre-books world, rather than by myself, you will find that they have me stamped on them in some ways. And I take full responsibility for that.

These books are not intended to be university theses. You will not find them dotted with a dozen footnotes per page, and hung with vast appendices of sources. I am sure that that is a perfectly legitimate way of writing biography, but it's a way that has never appealed to me and, because I am being allowed to "do it my way" in this series, the paraphernalia of the thesis, of the learned pamphlet, has here been kept to a minimum. My care, in these biographies, is not to be "learned"; it is to tell the story of Lydia, or Willie or Alice, of Tom or Harry or of Dave, of her or his career in the theatre and (as much as is possible at a century's distance) on the other side of the footlights as well: to relate what they did and what they achieved, what they wrote or what they sang, where they went and with whom, what happened to them and what became of them. Because these people had fascinating lives—well, they fascinate me, and I hope they will fascinate you too—and just to tell their stories, free of any decoration, any theorizing, any generalities, any "significance" (oh! that word)—seems to me to be thoroughly justified.

The decoration, the theorizing, the generalities, and an exaggerated search for (shudder) significance will all be missing. Perhaps because I've spent so much of my life as a writer of reference works and encyclopedias, I am a thorough devotee of fact, and these books are intended to be made up wholly of fact. Not for me even the "educated guess." Not unless one admits it's just a guess, anyhow.

So, what you will get from us are quite a lot of dates and places, facts and figures, quite a lot of theatre-bills reproduced word for word from the originals, quite a lot of songwords from the songwriters and singers, of text from the playwrights and actors and, where we have been able to dig it up, as much autograph material from the hands of our subjects as is humanly possible.

What you won't get any more than can be helped is the "he must

have felt that . . .” (must he, who says?), or the “perhaps she . . .” There will be no invented conversations. No “Marie Antoinette turned to Toulouse-Lautrec and said ‘you haven’t telephoned Richard the Lionheart this week . . .’” Direct speech in a biography of a pre-recording-age subject seems to me to be an absolute denial of the first principle of biography: the writing down of the content and actions of someone’s life. Indeed, there will be nothing invented at all. My theory of biography, as I say, is that it is facts. And if the facts of someone’s life are not colorful and interesting enough in themselves to make up a worthwhile book, then – well, I’ve chosen the wrong people to biographize.

Choosing those people to whom to devote these first six volumes was actually not as difficult as I’d thought it might be. When Richard, my editor, asked me for a first list of “possibles” I wrote it down—a dozen names—in about five minutes. It started, of course, with all my own particular “pets”: the special little group of a half-dozen oldtime theatre folk who, through my twenty years and more working in this field, have particularly grabbed my interest, and provoked me to want to learn more and more and indeed everything about them. The only trouble was . . . I was supposed to be editing this series, not writing the whole jolly thing. And there was no way that I was handing over any of my special pets to someone else—not even Andrew, Adrienne, or John—so I had to choose. Just two.

Lydia Thompson, to me, was the most obvious candidate of all. How on earth theatre literature has got to its present state without someone (even for all the wrong reasons) turning out a book on Lydia, when there are three or four books on Miss Blurbleurble and two or three on Miss Nyngnyng, I cannot imagine. Lydia chose herself. Having picked myself this “plum,” I then decided that I really ought to be a bit tougher on myself with my second pick. Certainly, I could take it easy and perhaps pot the incomplete but already over-one-million-word biography of the other great international star of Lydia’s era, Emily Soldene, which is hidden bulgingly under my desk, into a convenient package. But then . . . why not have a crack at a really tough nut?

When I said I was going to “do” Willie Gill, almost everyone—even the most knowledgeable of my friends and colleagues—said “who?” Which seems to me to be a very good reason for putting down on paper the tale of the life and works of the man who wrote Broadway’s biggest hit musical of his era. Tough it has been and tough it is, tracking him and

his down, but what satisfaction to drag from the marshes of the past something which seemed so wholly forgotten. A full-scale biography of a man about whom *nothing* was known!

Having realized that these two choices were pinned to the fact that it was I who was going to be writing about them, I then also realized that I ought to be considering my other choices not from own “pet” list, but to suit the other authors who were going to take part in the series. First catch your author.

Well, I caught three. The fourth, pretexting age, overuse, and retirement, got away. But I got the other three—my three (since the fourth is retired) favorite and most respected writer colleagues in the theatre-books business. Enter Andrew, Adrienne, and John: one from England, one from New Zealand, and one from America. A very judicious geographical spread. And the subjects for the four final volumes were, of course, chosen in function of what enthused them.

For Andrew, the not-so-very-forgotten English songwriter Leslie Stuart, whose *Florodora* songs stunned Broadway, and the rest of the world, in the earliest years of this century. For Adrienne, the mysterious Alice May, whose career ranged from Australia and New Zealand to the West End and Broadway and who has gone down in history—when anyone reads that bit of history—as Gilbert and Sullivan’s first (full-length) prima donna. For John, two very different American writers: the musician Dave Braham who, while his wordsmith Ned Harrigan has attracted repeated attention down through the years, has been himself left puzzlingly in the shade, and the prolific, ebullient Harry B Smith, the writer who flooded Broadway with over two hundred musicals in an amazing and amazingly successful career.

I feel bad about the ones who have got left on the cutting-room floor . . . but, maybe later? If we all survive what I’ve discovered with some apprehension is the intensive work needed to extract from the past the life and works of someone long gone, and largely forgotten.

But it has been worth it. Worth all the work. I’ve enjoyed it enormously. I know my colleagues have enjoyed it, and are still enjoying it. And I hope those of you who read the stories of Lydia, Willie, and Alice, of Dave, Harry, and Tom, will enjoy them too. And that you will remember these people. Because I really do reckon that they deserve better than to be forgotten.



## *Chapter 1*

# Overture: “My Brother’s Violin”

The summer following the opening of *Reilly and the Four Hundred*, the greatest success to emerge from the collaboration between composer David Braham and his son-in-law Edward Harrigan, the authors were scheduled to be interviewed by the *New York Herald* at Braham’s town house at 75 West 131st Street in Harlem. Inside the house, to the accompaniment of a banjo and a piano, three of Braham’s eight children were singing “Maggie Murphy’s Home,” the runaway hit from the score, while Braham sat on the front stoop, waiting for his son-in-law and the interviewer to arrive, nodding his head in time to the music and merrily smoking a cigar. The black and red tennis cap he always wore made him look more like a character out of a 1920s musical comedy than a major figure in the American musical theater. The *Spirit of the Times* (August 19, 1882) had dubbed him “the American Offenbach,” claiming he could make all of New York City “keep time” to his music.

The comparison of Braham to the famous composer of French musical comedies was more than simple hyperbolic publicity. Both composers began their careers writing music for satirical burlesques; both



arranged and orchestrated all of the songs and incidental music in their productions; both employed popular dance styles in their musical comedy scores; both traded on existing musical forms from both the popular and classical traditions; both wrote for specific performers, designing their musical ideas to hide the limitations of the one and exploit the potential of another; and, because of their phenomenal popularity, both became the archetype (consciously or otherwise) for the musical theater they created. Associations with Mozart (with whom Braham shared an unusual fecundity of musical ideas and a facility for orchestration) and with Sir Arthur Sullivan (because Harrigan and Braham were considered America's answer to Gilbert and Sullivan during the *HMS Pinafore* craze in 1879) came and went, but David Braham would ever be linked with Offenbach. Though he never publicly mentioned the connection, the subtle and witty inclusion of phrases from one or another of Offenbach's melodies in his overtures and incidental music suggests that, at the very least, Braham was not adverse to the tag.

Harrigan and the interviewer finally arrived and were ushered into the house, swept away immediately by the waves of music emanating from the old upright piano in the parlor. David's wife, Annie, rushed in from the kitchen to greet her husband's guests, and the four adults began a lively conversation, unconsciously shouting over the voices of the children singing—another musical comedy scene.

Braham lead the way to his "office," where his desk was crowded with sheet music and Harrigan's play manuscripts, and the walls were covered with music manuscript paper half-littered with notes and scratches. That's the way he arranged music, he explained. He would compose a line of the violin part, then do the same line for flute, clarinet, cornet, and all the other instruments. Sometimes he would not even write down the notes. He would simply play the part on his violin, and his son, George, would copy it down: quick and efficient. The interviewer appeared surprised and impressed. Harrigan, used to his father-in-law's working habits, was not, thinking that if Braham could read his son-in-law's handwriting—something few other people could decipher—Braham could certainly orchestrate music on the wall!

The men found themselves seated in comfortable chairs, worn with wear, but cozy nonetheless. Suddenly the children stopped singing, and the house was still. The office was filled with a quiet expectation like the kind experienced in the theater after the opening number when the audience is waiting for the plot to get under way. And so the story begins.

David Braham was born in February 1834 in the parish of St. George's, Middlesex, then a prosperous middle-class neighborhood in the East End of London. His father, Joseph John Braham, was born in Rochester, Kent, in 1801 and had gone to London in his teens to apprentice in the watch making profession under Thomas Cook, in whose business the elder Braham would remain for the rest of his professional career. His future and trade secure, Joseph turned to domestic matters and swiftly charmed and married Elizabeth Ann Mary Atkinson, a dressmaker. Typical of the artisans of the period, the couple took residence adjacent to Cook's shop at 565 Grosvenor Place, at the intersection of Commercial Road.

In the early 1820s, at about the time of the Brahams' marriage, St. George's had become a haven for merchants and traders at the height of their prosperity. The area around Wellclose Square, with its manicured gardens and well-appointed houses and carriages, was the most fashionable place to live, and not only because that was where the Danish ambassador held court. Centrally located, across from the parish church, Wellclose Square was the place where the rich could flaunt the merchandise carefully crafted for them by the tradesmen of Commercial Road, the thoroughfare that separated St. George's from nearby Whitechapel and its predominantly Jewish neighborhoods. Based on what is believed to have been the genesis of the Braham name, Joseph Braham's choice of locales was anything but accidental. According to Braham family tradition, members of an Orthodox German Jewish family named Abraham migrated to England in the mid-eighteenth century, dropping the initial "A" of the name in the spirit of assimilation. A letter to the *New York Herald* dated June 13, 1923, and bearing the headline "Dave Braham a Jew" attempted to reinforce the story. Without providing any corroborative evidence, the author, John J. MacIntyre of Port Richmond, argued: "[It] may interest readers of your attractive letter columns to learn that David Braham, composer of the music of the famous Harrigan and Hart songs, was a Jew. His real name was Abraham. By dropping the 'A' he made 'Braham.'" Although it is doubtful that Joseph held on to many of the Orthodox beliefs of his ancestors, he was profoundly ecumenical in his ethical and commercial philosophies and raised his children to be tolerant and appreciative of ethnic differences—traits that would eventually come to fruition in his son David's work in New York City.

David's exposure to ecumenism was not limited to his father's lec-

tures at home but extended well into his grammar-school education. Many of the schools operating in Middlesex during the second quarter of the nineteenth century were experimental, non-denominational schools, aiming to solve the “religious question” by avoiding sectarianism and promoting liberalism. The British Union School established by Joseph Fletcher in 1816 on Farmer Street, Shadwell, was one such school. Designed to serve the areas of Wapping, St. George’s, Middlesex, Limehouse, Shadwell, and Radcliff, the school registered 550 boys and girls of various religious beliefs on its rolls by 1819. By 1845, nearly half the population under sixteen years of age attended schools preaching varying degrees of liberalism.

But it was not the ethics of a grammar-school education that spurred the interest of the young Braham boy, nor the obligatory lessons in reading, writing, and doing sums. What David enjoyed most was what many other children viewed as a waste of time: clapping and singing, an elementary musical education. So proficient had David become at reading notes and marking rhythms that he began creating his own melodies, and by the time he was a teenager, he announced that his ambition was to become a professional harpist. It is unknown whether young David engaged in formal training beyond the simple performance skills he acquired at school, but certainly he was adept enough on the harp to entertain the monied merchants of Wellclose Square, and to be invited to perform at the country estates of their friends.

It was on the way to the first of these “engagements” in the English countryside that David Braham experienced a career (if not life)-changing event. About to board a crowded coach hastening to his destination, Braham was informed by the driver that he was permitted to ride in the vehicle but his cumbersome instrument was not. Momentarily daunted by the loss of the engagement, David remembered that, as a lad, he often used to pick out tunes on his older brother Joseph’s fiddle. Greater was Braham’s ambition to be a musician than specifically to be a harpist, and he switched to the much more practical (and portable) violin for the remainder of his life.

By the time he was eighteen, David Braham had acquired an almost virtuosic mastery of the violin; still, he had no ambition to tour as a professional artist, preferring the more popular venues of the music hall, theater, and salon to the concert hall. Perhaps he felt he lacked the “formal” training necessary for the concert stage. Perhaps his own musical tastes drew him more to parlor songs and theater music than to symphonies

and concertos; theater memorabilia dating back to the days of the Royalty and Brunswick Theatres located at Wellclose Square in the 1820s still could be found in the households of St. George's as late as 1845. Ever since the celebrated English vocalist and composer John Braham (who bore no relation to David except in family name) debuted as Cupid at the Royalty in 1787, the community was bitten by the theater bug, and David Braham may have been among its happy victims. Perhaps he preferred the role of accompanist rather than soloist. Perhaps he was warned by his father about the difficulties of earning a living as a serious musician. Whatever the reason, Braham chose to live the life of a part-time performer, like many of the tradesmen and merchants in St. George's, and devote his daylight hours to practicing a trade.

According to the 1851 British Census, David Braham's "trade" was that of a "Brass turner," fashioning, among other things, the brass tubing for trombones, cornets, and horns in conjunction with the firm of Rudall, Rose, Carte and Co., the oldest manufacturers of brass instrument in Britain and winners of a prize medal at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. The years between 1851 and 1854 passed quickly and enjoyably for David Braham, making instruments during the day, making music at night. But the happy surroundings of St. George's had begun to change, and David began to itch for a new environment. The prospect of work on the docks of London brought throngs of unskilled laborers into the community. By the 1840s, the low rate of pay and the impermanence of employment brought great poverty to the district, a misery intensified by the outbreak of cholera in 1849. Brother Joseph's infant son John narrowly escaped becoming a victim to the first epidemic, but many other children were not as fortunate.

In 1854, Braham's mother became another victim of the cholera epidemic that ravaged St. George's through 1855. Faced with the loss of his favorite parent and the diminishing possibilities of a working-class lifestyle, David began to consider immigrating to America. Joseph had departed for New York City a few years earlier, hoping to find a better life, and David determined the time was right for him to do the same. In April 1856, violin in hand, David Braham boarded the *Empire State* at Liverpool and set sail for the New World, where he arrived on April 28.

New York in 1856 was everything that David Braham had hoped for. Not only was it the musical and theatrical center of America where a musician of talent could earn an honest living, it also was a place of endless variety, a cultural melting pot able to stir young Braham's musi-

cal imagination. On May 5, the French Ravel troupe was performing the acrobatic spectacle *Mazulm* at Niblo's Garden; on May 7, Henrietta Behrend made her debut in Italian opera in *Norma* at the Academy of Music; on May 12, the Franklin Museum opened at 127 Grand Street, with living statuary (twenty-seven of Mme. Warton's models, billed as the "finest artistic living females"); May 16 ushered in *Er muss auf's Land; oder, der Ball im Methodisten-Hause* at the Stadt Theater; on May 20, a Family of Mountaineer Singers (Béarnais) appeared at the Tabernacle for three performances; on May 24, Dion Boucicault and Agnes Robertson appeared in Boucicault's new play, *Violet; or, The Life of an Actress* at Burton's Chambers St. Theatre; and on May 26, English soprano Louisa Pyne could be heard concertizing at Niblo's Saloon.

Braham's work as a musician in the theater orchestras and bands of London was merely a prelude to the nights of subbing in various orchestra pits throughout the city until he could acquire some permanent position. His self-effacing, pleasantly cooperative nature, combined with his meticulous sight-reading skills and near-virtuosic ability on the violin, made him a great favorite with musicians, conductors, and patrons—a reputation that would follow him for nearly fifty years. Playing in pit orchestras also had a profound effect on Braham's future as a composer and arranger. He knew about brass instruments from having constructed them back home in England. Now he became more aware of performers' needs: how to minimize mistakes (or "clams," as bad notes are often termed by pit musicians) and maximize orchestral color in ensembles of varying sizes. Moreover, the different styles of music that were now available to him stirred his creative imagination. Braham's early compositions in England had been merely imitative childhood exercises; he needed the musical melting pot of the big city to stimulate him to create a sound that was his alone.

In the summer of 1857, sporting his characteristic mustache, the redheaded, bespectacled David Braham accepted a position as violinist in the orchestra accompanying Matt Peel's Campbell's Minstrels, a company of blackface "Ethiopian delineators" preparing for an East Coast tour to begin in late August. Included in the company were the "Irish Minstrel" Matt Peel; end man George Washington ("Pony") Moore; comic dancer Mert Sexton; English jig dancer Tommy Peel; guitarist, vocalist, and pantomimist A. M. Hernandez; violinist and orchestra leader John B. Donniker; banjoist Frank B. Converse; and harpist and tenor Raffaele Abecco. It was a serendipitous opportunity for Braham

because the tour promised him a decent wage at the very time New York City was experiencing a major financial crisis—the “Panic of 1857”—caused by the failure of the New York branch of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company. Throughout the fall, banks failed, businesses closed, attendance at theaters and concerts dropped significantly, and thousands of New Yorkers ended up unemployed and homeless.

When the panic struck, Campbell’s Minstrels were in New Haven, Connecticut, playing to large crowds. From New Haven they traveled to Albany, New York, and on to Cleveland, Ohio, where the *New York Clipper* (October 3, 1857) reported consistently crowded houses at the Melodeon Hall, where they performed on September 23 and 24. Mert Sexton’s peculiar style of dancing was singled out as being particularly effective in Cleveland, from which the minstrels headed south for New Orleans by way of Cincinnati. The company found New Orleans audiences especially amenable to its brand of jokes, songs, dances, and satirical sketches, and remained in Louisiana until the New Year. During this leg of the tour, Braham’s musicianship won him the respect of John Donniker, the company’s celebrated minstrel fiddler, and the friendship of tambourinist “Pony” Moore (“Mr. Tambo”), who would later, at the helm of the English “Moore and Burgess Minstrels,” popularize several of Braham and Harrigan’s songs in London.

In January 1858 Campbell’s Minstrels began working their way up North with stops in Memphis, Tennessee, and Savannah, Georgia, where the *New York Clipper* (February 13, 1858) reported excellent business. From Savannah, the minstrels moved to Augusta, Georgia, where their popularity apparently caused a lack of attendance at a performance by a more serious company led by a “Mr. Marchant.” The situation prompted this news item in the *Evening Dispatch* (February 5, 1858):

In consequence of the Campbell Minstrels, *there was no audience at [Mr. Marchant’s] theatre last night.* The splendid bill—“School for Scandal,” “Marseilles Hymn,” and the farce of “Slasher and Crasher,”—will be offered again Monday night. It is a standing reproach to the liberality and taste of lovers of amusement in a city like this, that such a company as Mr. Marchant’s should play to empty benches night after night, as they have done so often for two weeks, while other amusements of far less merit will fill a hall in inclement weather. Tell it not in Gath or elsewhere—but it is so. We mean to cast no reflection on the Campbells—they are deservedly

popular—but simply to express surprise and regret that while there are so many admirers of that class of amusement, there are so few among us who appreciate the drama.

Before leaving Augusta for Goldsboro, North Carolina, and Norfolk, Virginia, Matt Peel was reported to have made some kind of “arrangement” with Mr. Marchand to enable both companies to complete their engagements in that city.

By March 23, 1858, Campbell’s Minstrels had reached the Maryland Institute where good houses were reported. In addition to praising the comic antics of Peel and Moore and the singular jig dancing of Master Tom Peel, reviewers singled out the instrumental performances as the high point of the evening. Although David Braham had yet to see his name in print, he was connected to a popular success that was soon to open in New York City. Following two performances at the Music Hall in Brooklyn on April 9 and 10, Matt Peel’s Campbell’s Minstrels opened at 444 Broadway on April 12 for an extended run.

In New York City, as well as on the road, the minstrel show was divided into three parts. In the first part, the curtain rose on a rousing company number, after which the performers seated themselves in a semicircle, the “interlocutor” presiding in the center, and the comedians Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones (named for the instruments they played) seated at opposite ends (hence the name “end men”). The comic antics of the end men were interrupted by serious romantic songs performed by a lyric tenor balladeer, and the segment concluded with another ensemble number that, in the case of Peel’s Campbell company, was invariably the celebrated “Anvil Chorus” from Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*. The second part of the performance was an “Olio,” a kind of variety show in which the members of the company took solo turns performing their individual specialties. The program for May 2, 1859, lists “Fantasia-Clarionette,” “Heel and Toe Exercise,” “Cornet Solo,” “Banjo Peculiarities,” “Negro Eccentricities,” and the “Highland Fling” among the variety performances. The evening’s performance ended with a farce, typically satirizing the fashions of the day or other popular entertainments, followed by the walk-around, a spectacular production-number finale. Though Braham’s creative contribution to the Campbells’ shows was limited to his participation in the ten-piece orchestra that accompanied the performance, the experience would have a considerable impact on his later career. From it he learned about comic timing; musical variety; the way to build produc-

tion numbers both vocally and instrumentally; and, most importantly, ways to make serious music palatable to a popular audience. It would be his integration of European musical idioms with a folklike popular style that created the characteristic musical style of Harrigan and Hart and developed the template for the musical comedy “sound” of the twentieth century.

Peel’s Campbell’s Minstrels closed for a short time in the middle of July but reopened on August 30 under the management of Mr. Sniffen, who retained most of the original company but began adding performers from other minstrel companies. On October 24, 1858, the *New York Clipper* announced that internal problems within the organization had led Peel to sever his relationship with Sniffen and to organize a new touring company. Although many of the members of Peel’s original company left with him, “Pony” Moore and David Braham remained in New York with Sniffen’s company, to which Cool White (after a five-year absence in New York City) was added on November 15. On December 27, 1858, the company began to be advertised as “Sniffen’s Campbell’s Minstrels” with an ensemble that included the popular Cool White, Ben Cotton, and “Pony” Moore, but with the New Year, Sniffen’s troupe was almost entirely reorganized. On January 3, 1859, the “new arrangement” went into effect with the following company: Billy Birch, bones; E. Bowers, Shakespearean jester and “middle man”; “Pony” Moore, “tother end” and tambourinist; John B. Donniker, “fiddle man”; B. Golden, clog dancer; J. B. Herman, the “golden-mouthed ballad singer”; Raffaele Abecco, harpist and tenor; A. M. Hernandez, pantomimist; Ben Cotton, eccentric dancer; R. M. Carroll, jig and fancy dancer; and Master Charles, fancy dancer. “Pony” Moore found the new company at odds with his efforts and left New York on February 12, 1859, to rejoin Matt Peel’s touring troupe where he would remain until Matt Peel’s death on May 4, 1859. Braham remained with the New York Company until March, when the minstrels left 444 Broadway.

Braham next became the leader of the string section of Robinson’s Military Band, one of many popular instrumental ensembles concertizing in and around New York City. Bands had always been a staple of civic holiday festivities, and as military and paramilitary groups began to proliferate around the United States, so did the bands that accompanied them. During the summer months, military bands performed in tandem with concerts of operatic and sacred music at Jones’s Wood and Clifton Park. During this phase of his New World apprenticeship, Braham



refined his understanding of orchestral writing and learned new ways of blending serious and popular musical elements for the continued pleasure of an audience comprised of many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. His participation in Robinson's Military Band also developed an association with the New York City Volunteer Fire Department that in later years would be ironically fortuitous. On October 17, 1859, the Third Grand Triennial Parade of the New York City Volunteer Fire Department took place, starting at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fifth Street and ending at Union Park. Braham and Robinson's Band led the Guardian Engine Company #29 and the Index Hose Company #32 in the seventh of eleven divisions of the parade.

During his tenure as a bandmaster, Braham continued to be a familiar face in all of the pit orchestras in New York City. During this period David Braham fell in love with Annie Hanley, the teenage daughter of an Irish army officer. Braham met the girl through her brother, Martin, who had joined the Ravel family of acrobats and pantomimists at age fifteen, serving them first as an apprentice pantomime and later as manager of the company. The explosively talented Ravels had been a staple at Niblo's Garden well before Braham had arrived in the United States. When Braham started performing regularly in Niblo's orchestra, he was befriended by the teenage Hanley, whose mother had immigrated with her four children to the United States in 1846 when Martin was barely over two years old and Annie was said to be only an infant of three months. Given the lack of surviving records, Annie Hanley's early years are a matter of conjecture. Family tradition suggests that she was born in the barracks at Nenagh, where her father, William, was stationed, but there are great discrepancies in the year of her birth. The New York Census for 1900 gives Annie Hanley's birth date as April 1846 and the place of birth as New York City, while the 1890 "Police Census" for Manhattan suggests that she was born as early as 1840. Annie Braham's obituary in the *New York Times* gives her age as seventy-nine as of October 1920, placing her birth date in 1841.

According to Adelaide Harrigan, Annie recalled living near Canal Street in the late 1840s with her mother, sister Mary, and brother Martin—the oldest son, Dennis Flanigan, from an earlier marriage, having moved to Chicago, where he lost his life in the fire of 1871. As young girls, Annie worked as a bookbinder and Mary worked at "chromos," hand-coloring printed copies of famous paintings. Mary eventually married a genial and solvent Irishman named Patrick Maguire in the livery

stable business whose able horsemanship won him the honor of driving the hearse carrying Lincoln's body in procession through New York City. Teenage Annie was much more impressed with David Braham's mild manner and striking good looks than his bank account, and after a brief courtship the couple were married in a private ceremony. Although no legible record of the marriage seems to exist in the records of Manhattan County, family tradition argues that the wedding took place late in 1859, after which David Braham began the search for professional employment commensurate with his duties as a husband and father.

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## *Chapter 2*

# **Act One: “Leader of the Orchestra”**

**A**fter his experiences with Campbell’s Minstrels and Robinson’s Military Band, David Braham felt ready to step into the role of orchestra leader. The fluid nature of minstrelsy taught him to be flexible, able to cover performers’ missed cues or sloppy entrances, while leading the string section of the band sharpened his skills as a conductor. He would not turn down pit performance work if it came his way, certainly; he had a family to support. But he knew he was qualified to conduct in New York City, and he felt certain that there was a place for his talents.

At the beginning of the 1859–60 season, New York City had nine theaters, nine places of variety entertainment, five concert saloons, three minstrel houses, two halls devoted to opera, and a menagerie and circus, all of which employed orchestras, if only to provide overtures and entr’acte entertainment. Many of the best positions were already taken: Thomas Baker was the musical director of Laura Keane’s Theatre; Edward Mollenhauer had the same position at the Winter Garden; Robert Stoepel wielded the baton at Wallack’s; and William Peterschen

and Henry Beissenhertz conducted the bands at the Old and New Bowery Theatres, respectively. Braham bided his time throughout the season, continuing to play in pit orchestras and writing specialty arrangements for celebrities on tour, not the least (though the shortest) of which was General Tom Thumb (Charles Stratton), Barnum's famous midget, in residence at the Hope Chapel in April 1860.

Just as Braham began to think he would have to wait until the next season to realize his goal, Robert Fox and John C. Curran took over Mozart Hall on 663 Broadway, rechristened it "Canterbury Music Hall," and hired "Dave" (as he will become known to others from this point on) Braham as leader of the orchestra. Ads announcing the June 21, 1860, opening of the new theater boasted that the Canterbury was the "largest, coolest and most magnificent hall in the city" capable of seating two thousand people, with the "largest and best company in the United States" and an "Orchestra of Fifteen talented Musicians, Under the Management and Direction of Mr. D. Braham, Whose ability is too well known to require any comment" (*New York Clipper*, June 16, 1860). Even though his debut as a New York City conductor was heralded by an overly hyperbolic fanfare, Braham quickly demonstrated that he was suited to the task of directing the music in a theater specializing in variety entertainment. A later advertisement in the *Clipper* (July 21, 1860) trumpeted that the theater's interior featured "large and elegantly designed chandeliers, of the most elaborate and costly workmanship, enriched with globes, brilliantly illuminated by gas, resemble massive pyramids of light, with 'inter-tissued robes of gold and pearl.'" Certainly Braham's first appointment as a musical director in New York City was at no mean establishment.

At this point it is important to stop and address just what musical directors did in the 1860s. Obviously they rehearsed and conducted the orchestra, often playing as part of the orchestra as well. It was not unusual for conductors to direct from the piano or the violin (as was Braham's preference). Musical directors also functioned as contractors, hiring and firing musicians, librarians, copyists, instrumental and vocal arrangers, orchestrators, and composers. They provided necessary continuity between variety acts, as well as supplying performers with new material and updating the old. Although typically, in today's musical theater, each of the above duties is assigned to a separate specialist, in David Braham's day musical directors were jacks-of-all-trades whose single program credit belied the true extent of their creativity. The *Clipper*