

"The Queen of Song"

Newspaper Reviews of Jenny Lind's American Tour with P. T. Barnum

September 1850 – July 1851

Sources drawn from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress*

Introduction

P. T. Barnum's 1850–51 American tour with Swedish soprano Jenny Lind was one of the most spectacular entertainment events in nineteenth-century American history. Barnum had never heard Lind sing when he contracted her for a guaranteed fee of \$150,000 plus expenses — an audacious wager on reputation alone. He built the tour's anticipation through relentless newspaper publicity in the months before her arrival, and by the time Lind's ship docked in New York harbor on September 1, 1850, tens of thousands of New Yorkers turned out to greet her.

The tour ran roughly ninety-three concerts across the eastern seaboard and the South, taking Lind and her ensemble — conductor Julius Benedict, baritone Giovanni Belletti, and later tenor Lorenzo Salvi — through New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, Havana, New Orleans, Nashville, Louisville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and dozens of other cities before concluding in mid-1851. The reviews gathered here, drawn from *Chronicling America's* digitized newspaper collections, trace that arc from the electrifying first night at Castle Garden through the city of New Orleans — where her ticket auctions set records outside New York — to a Hartford concert disrupted by a near-riot over ticket sales.

These contemporary accounts document not just the music but the broader cultural phenomenon: the auction economics of Barnum's ticketing strategy, the class dynamics that kept wealthy New Yorkers away from a venue frequented by the 'canaille,' the religious and moral dimensions that provincial reviewers layered onto Lind's performances, and the raw disorder that celebrity on this scale could produce.

I. New York City — The First Concert

Castle Garden, September 11, 1850 · As reprinted in the *North-Carolinian* (Fayetteville, N.C.), September 21, 1850 · Original: *New York Morning Star*, September 12, 1850

*Context: Castle Garden — a former fort converted into a concert amphitheater on the tip of Manhattan — held around eight thousand spectators. Barnum auctioned premium tickets in the days before the concert, generating enormous press coverage. The first ticket went to hat merchant John N. Genin for \$225, a sum that earned him national publicity. The review below, from the *New York Morning Star*, was reprinted across the country within a week.*

"Jenny Lind's First Concert"

The largest audience ever assembled within the walls of any edifice in America last night ratified with the wildest enthusiasm the claim of the northern Nightingale to the title of the Queen of Song.

Every arrangement was perfect. There was no crowding, no confusion; and we found ourselves seated in the vast amphitheatre at Castle Garden, a unit of the immense aggregate, without having experienced any more inconvenience than we should encounter in entering a private drawing room.

The overture to 'Oberon' was admirably executed, and Belletti sung the fine aria allotted to him splendidly. As the applause which it called forth subsided, Mlle. Lind was led forward to the front of the stage by Benedict. Her appearance was a signal for such an outburst of feeling as never before was witnessed in this country. The entire audience arose, and greeted the fair Swede with a perfect tempest of cheers.

As we looked across the parquette, and glanced around the encircling balcony, nothing was to be seen but fluttering handkerchiefs and a sea of upturned faces. Suddenly the tumult was hushed, and amidst the most profound silence, the songstress commenced the 'Casta Diva.' It was given in a manner that is wholly indescribable — at least by us. Sweetness, power, expression, in their full perfection, were blended in the intonations of Mlle. Lind's most miraculous organ. To say that her voice was heard in every part of the immense area is to say nothing. Its volume reached the periphery of the circle unspent and undiminished.

But the grand triumph of the Nightingale was in the 'Echo Song.' It was the most extraordinary exhibition of the power and flexibility of the human voice that ever was heard on this side of the Atlantic. It was almost impossible to believe that song and echo were produced by one set of vocal organs. The richest melody that ever issued — as we verily believe — from any human throat was caught up the instant that it floated out upon the air, and repeated, as if by some ventriloquial process, in the far distance, softened and mellowed in tone and cadence.

It had settled her rank as a vocalist in this country. Not a whisper of criticism could be uttered, and it was evident that the extravagant expectations of the people were more than realized.

Barnum announced from the stage that Lind had declared she would not receive one penny of the proceeds from this concert, but would devote every farthing to charitable purposes. The reaction was pandemonium — the audience rose from their seats, calling 'Hurrah for Jenny!' and 'Hurrah for Barnum!' before she slipped away to her carriage.

II. New York City — On Class and the Concert Ticket

Wilmington Journal (Wilmington, N.C.), October 18, 1850 · Reprinting a New York correspondent's letter

Context: By October, Barnum had lowered ticket prices from the auction's stratospheric heights to a fixed scale, making the concerts accessible to a much broader public. This shift prompted sharp commentary on the social dynamics of the audience — and on the conspicuous absence of New York's fashionable elite.

"Jenny Lind and the Aristocracy"

A correspondent writing from New York refers to the fact that a certain class there, who assume to be superior to the rest, have not yet attended the concerts of the Swedish Nightingale. He says:

"The aristocratic and exclusive portion have not, as a class, yet heard Jenny Lind. A few of this extreme end of 'upper-ten-dom' were seen at the first concert at Castle Garden, but since then the low price of tickets — rendering the attendance of the bourgeois and upper ten of the canaille an easy matter, thus creating an atmosphere in which delicate people who live in palaces and glass houses could not exist — Alas, for the aristocracy of wealth! Compelled to forego the glory of being the first in this country to 'patronise merit and goodness,' it is obliged to sequester itself in up-town cases to escape contamination by contact with common people, who have thus far appreciated and admired the gentle vocalist. What a commentary is this on the ostentatious musical taste which has heretofore supported the Opera House at Astor Place! Nobody doubts that these deluded people would attend Jenny's concerts, if they were really possessed of the vaunted admiration and appreciation of artistes and music — and their absence proves the truth of the popular belief in that respect."

Well, let no feeling of irritation trouble us on this account. These people must be different from the rest of the world, or they would be most wretched. As their sources of positive enjoyment are, in the very nature of things, limited, let us not quarrel with them about a few negative pleasures like that referred to above.

The 'Astor Place' reference cuts sharply: the Astor Place Opera House had been the site of the deadly Astor Place Riot of 1849, which exposed deep class fissures in New York cultural life. The correspondent pointedly contrasts that elite-coded venue with Barnum's democratized pricing at Castle Garden.

III. New Orleans — Arrival and Ticket Auction

The Daily Crescent (New Orleans, La.), February 10–11, 1851

Context: The tour arrived in New Orleans in early February 1851 for what would become an extended run — at least ten numbered concerts. New Orleans was the largest city in the South and a major cultural center. Barnum replicated his New York ticket auction strategy, and the results exceeded expectations outside New York.

"Sale of Tickets for Jenny Lind's First Concert" — February 10, 1851

The tickets for Jenny Lind's first concert were sold at auction on Saturday last at the Armory Hall, and the occasion was one of considerable interest and excitement. The large hall was filled with our citizens, and considerable interest was manifested on the subject of the first ticket. The bidding for this important article was rapid and spirited, the principal competitors being our friend D'Arcy, the hatter, and Dr. Fryer. The former, however, with his usual sagacity and enterprise was determined to have it, and it was finally struck off to him at \$240. When his name and bid were announced, the audience gave him a hearty and general cheer. Mr. D'Arcy selected No. 70 in the parquette as his seat.

The seats in the dress circle averaged about \$17, and the sofas about \$10. The pit seats, 479 in number, at \$3 for the regular price, were sold at an average premium of \$2. The entire proceeds are estimated to be over \$20,000 — the largest receipts for any concert out of New York. The money taken at the doors has been given to his honor the Mayor for the purposes of charity.

To Advertisers: The city is now thronged with strangers, most of whom have come to see Jenny Lind and spend their money. This is the time for advertisements.

"The Concert Last Night" — February 11, 1851

The Jenny Lind concert of last night was undoubtedly the most brilliant assembly ever collected within the walls of the St. Charles. We shall not attempt, at this moment, while intoxicated by her melody, to enter into a critique.

It must have been immediately after hearing Jenny Lind's Echo Song, that the author of the *Festue* wrote the fine extravaganza of 'A Rainbow of Sweet Sounds.' Miss Lind would not be deemed beautiful, if her features were to be examined closely, but the most beautiful smile which ever played over a human face is worth all the dull perfections we ever had the good fortune to see — a smile which nature teaches you comes from a heart noble and generous as ever beat in mortal frame.

There is one fact remarkable in her singing — the entire absence of all effort — the sweet voice flows without violence — no distortion, no swelling of the throat, no redness — but every note seems to be sent forth with the utmost ease, as if it gave her pleasure. The evenness of her notes, perhaps, more than anything else, pleased us; from the piano to the fortissimo, we recognized the same pure, clear tone, without the slightest diminution of quality.

We were disposed to feel disappointed that she seemed to lack that quality of voice which irresistibly excites, touches the secret hidden passion; but as we became familiar with her style, we discovered that though not actually carried away, we were more deeply moved than we had at first thought her capable of moving us.

The admiration of the brilliant audience only once or twice interrupted her, but at the end of each song the applause was tremendous. Her songs were all Italian, except the last — the Herdsman's Song, which she sang in Swedish. It may sound like heresy to the frequenters of the opera, but we preferred to hear this wild mountain song to the finest of the Italian.

The Daily Crescent's listing column documents at least ten Jenny Lind concerts at the St. Charles — 'Jenny Lind's Eighth Concert' appears on February 21, and 'Jenny Lind's Tenth Concert' on March 3. The tour lingered in New Orleans far longer than in most Northern cities, testament both to the demand and to the logistical challenge of moving the company further South.

IV. Hartford — A Concert Disrupted

New-England Religious Herald (Hartford, Conn.), July 12, 1851

Context: By mid-1851, Lind and Barnum had parted ways — she had bought out her contract in June, preferring to manage her own affairs with her fiancé (soon husband) Otto Goldschmidt. She continued

touring independently. The Hartford concert, given in a Congregational church rather than a large hall, ended in disorder when ticketing grievances sparked a crowd disturbance outside.

"Jenny Lind in Hartford"

In common with the rest of the citizens we had earnestly desired that Jenny Lind, the peerless Queen of Song, should visit Hartford before her return to Europe, knowing that in no city was there a larger proportionate number to appreciate her genius and skill.

The concert was given in the Fourth Congregational Church, which, although less spacious than some others, was selected as best adapted to musical sound, and as being so admirably planned as not to have a poor seat in the house. The number of tickets issued was about twelve hundred, which were all taken up in a few hours after the sale commenced, although the prices were set at three and four dollars — an enormous price for a concert without an orchestral accompaniment. Two or three times as many might have been sold could accommodation have been afforded.

The exercises commenced at the early hour of seven, to allow of Miss Lind's return to Springfield the same night. The audience was one of great intelligence, wealth, fashion, etc. of course, and made a brilliant display in the beautiful edifice. The roofs of the surrounding buildings were covered with seats which were crowded with occupants at a dollar apiece!

Then appeared the incomparable Jenny, amid bursts of applause, and sang Handel's sublime composition, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' from the Oratorio of the Messiah. We thought that full justice was done to the words and music, in the circumstances just mentioned, and the sentiment of the inspired language came home with power to the heart through the pure tones of that matchless voice.

Miss Lind then gave, amid much interruption from the noise without, a German Cavatina, 'Und ob die Wolke.' At this point, the noise of the rabble who had gathered in front and at the sides of the church became so great that the exercises were completely interrupted. After a few minutes Miss Lind sent word that she greatly regretted the disturbance, but would sing her remaining pieces as well as she could, trusting to the kind allowance of the audience. She then sang rapidly and with much timidity three pieces — the 'Bird Song,' 'Home, Sweet Home,' and the 'Echo Song' — but was very imperfectly heard amid the shouting without and the breaking of an occasional pane of glass. There was much confusion in the house and several ladies fainted.

The concert was brought precipitately to an end, and Miss Lind was obliged to escape from the multitude who waited to stare at her, by passing through a window of the small room in the rear and reaching Trumbull Street through the adjacent garden.

There was never a more disgraceful scene in Hartford, nor can it be defended or even palliated in any way. What was the pretext for the disturbance? That the agent who sold the tickets for the seats had disposed of a large number privately before the public sale, thus acting with partiality and unfairness to the disappointment of a great number. Suppose this be conceded — does it begin to be an excuse for the outrage which was committed? Does one wrong act justify another? May the peace of the city be illegally disturbed by measures of retaliation? Was there any justice in destroying the pleasure of those who had fairly obtained and paid for their tickets?

The paper noted that Otto Goldschmidt — Lind's new husband, here listed as accompanist — 'performed a piece on the Grand Piano, which, though well executed, did not make much impression on the audience, who gave moderate applause.' The crowd outside was specifically protesting that

tickets had been sold privately before the public sale opened — the same Barnum-style auction dynamics that had generated enthusiastic headlines in New York here produced fury in Hartford when the process was perceived as corrupt.

A Note on the Sources

All four items above were retrieved from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, a project of the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities that has digitized millions of pages from papers published between 1770 and 1963. The OCR text from nineteenth-century newspapers is imperfect — typefaces, paper quality, and printing conditions all introduce errors — and the transcriptions here have been lightly regularized for legibility while preserving the substance and voice of each original.

Together these four accounts trace the arc of the tour from its triumphal opening (the Castle Garden review), through its social and economic dynamics (the Wilmington correspondent on class), to the logistics of bringing a spectacle of this scale to a city newly primed for it (New Orleans), and finally to the moment when crowd enthusiasm tipped into disorder (Hartford). Barnum's genius lay not just in identifying Jenny Lind's talent but in transforming each city's reception into a civic event — an achievement these newspapers both reflected and helped produce.

Sources: Chronicling America / Library of Congress