



William Henry Fry
(1813-1864)

An American Classic

William Henry Fry was one of the first American “classical” composers. In the early days of our country, most classical musicians were “imported” from Europe. Cities like Paris and Vienna were vibrant cultural centers, having great orchestras, opera houses and concert halls. American musicians would often travel to Europe to study at one of the many music conservatories. It took America a while to “catch up” with Europe!

Music was always important to Americans, even in colonial times. The first book published in America was *The Bay Psalm Book* (1640). As early as 1757, public concerts in Philadelphia (admission then, one dollar) had such notables as George Washington in the audience. Orchestra concerts featured music of Corelli and C.P.E Bach—the “modern music” of the day. Piano building was a flourishing industry in many cities.

By the mid-1800s, larger cities were building their own centers for classical music. In 1842, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was formed. In 1857, Peabody Conservatory opened its doors in Baltimore, becoming the nation’s first conservatory of music. In 1881, the newly formed Boston Symphony performed in Boston Music Hall (the nation’s oldest concert hall). In 1891, Carnegie Hall was inaugurated with a series of concerts. Tchaikovsky came from Russia to be one of the guest conductors.

Born in Philadelphia, William Fry was the first American-born composer to write a symphony—also the first to compose an opera (*Leonora*). His *Niagara Symphony* was composed in 1854 for a P.T. Barnum “Monster Concert.” But the concert got cancelled and the *Niagara Symphony* was never performed until August 1999, when this recording was made. In the music, Fry attempts to describe the panoramic view and colossal sounds of the mighty Niagara Falls. Fry calls for eleven timpani to be used in the orchestra to create the rumbling sounds of a waterfall. Rapid scales describe the cascading waters.

Listen to the music, imagining the sights and sounds of Niagara Falls—one of the world’s natural wonders!

History Project:

Name a symphony orchestra near you. _____

When was it formed? _____

Do any famous musicians live near you? Name them: _____

Ask your grandparents or an older person in your community to describe the “music scene,” when they grew up.
