

Music and the Making of a New South, by Gavin James Campbell

By: Benjamin Filene

[Filene, B.](#) *Music and the Making of a New South*, by Gavin James Campbell, *Journal of Southern History* 71.2 (May 2005): 474-475.

Made available courtesy of the Southern Historical Association: <http://sha.uga.edu/>.

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the Southern Historical Association. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.*****

Abstract:

Filene reviews *Music and the Making of a New South* by Gavin James Campbell.

Keywords: book reviews | American history | southern American history | music

Article:

Music and the Making of a New South. By Gavin James Campbell. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, c. 2004. Pp. xvi, 222. Paper, \$19.95, ISBN 0-8078-5517-0; cloth, \$55.00, ISBN 0-8078-2846-7.)

Gavin James Campbell places music center stage in the American South's struggle to understand and reinvent itself in the early twentieth century. He shows that when southerners argued about whether it was appropriate to smoke (or snore) in the opera, whether spirituals were better in the good ol' days, and whether a classical violinist had any business playing "Turkey in the Straw," they were really wrestling with core issues about manliness, the color line, and class.

Southerners' musical triumphs and failures, Campbell demonstrates, were hopelessly intertwined with their fears and uncertainties.

Campbell focuses on three main events on New South Atlanta's cultural calendar: the New York Metropolitan Opera Company's annual weeklong summer season, the Colored Music Festival, and the Georgia Old-Time Fiddler's Convention. Campbell devotes an extended chapter to each, deftly tracing how different societal factions gave their own inflections to each of these musical events. White males patronized opera week, for example, to flex their financial muscles in a time of concerns about "feminization"; women saw opera as a tool for civic uplift and a safe realm in which to challenge the confines of domesticity; and white men and women alike systematically denied blacks access to the opera and the high culture it represented. In response, black elites launched the Colored Music Festival. It showcased the skills of black composers and musicians and implicitly challenged the color line by transforming spirituals into intricate classical arrangements in the "white" style—except that whites refused to hear them that way: "Melodies of

Old South Are Heard at Negro Festival," the headlines read (p. 94). Finally, fiddling contest performers mocked opera's highbrow pretensions and lampooned Atlanta's elite, yet working-class and elite whites alike embraced mountain music as an emblem of racial purity and traditional gender roles.

Campbell narrows and widens the view, moving between events in the concert hall, reactions around town, and larger forces at work in the region and nation. Only rarely does the music itself surface in these pages. One gets little sense of how Atlantans heard the music or how performers adjusted their art for their audiences. Drawing extensively on local newspapers, Campbell concentrates on popular reactions to the performers themselves and to the concerts as social spectacles.

Occasionally, Campbell gets a bit turned about in all the crosscurrents. It can be hard for a reader to track who stands on what side of the various cultural fissures. But this confusion reinforces Campbell's larger point: there were multiple "New Souths" in the early twentieth century as various factions hustled to make their mark and ease their minds in a tumultuous time. What they shared was a set of anxieties about race, gender, and class. Gavin Campbell's book is a lively and astute exploration of how southerners coped with fundamental tensions and how even their musical "diversions" were fraught with meaning.