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“Music on the Plains: Felix Vinatieri’s Forgotten Legacy”

By  
Nicholas Demuth

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program

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Department of History  
The University of South Dakota  
May 2019

The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed  
to examine the thesis of Nicholas Demuth  
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## ABSTRACT

Music on the Plains:  
Felix Vinatieri's Forgotten Legacy

Nicholas Demuth

Director: Bruce Kelley, Ph.D.

This paper examines the life, compositions, and accomplishments of Italian-born composer and musician Felix Vinatieri. Vinatieri is notable for his contribution to the American operatic tradition as well as for his role as bandmaster for George Armstrong Custer during the Black Hills Expedition of 1875. Despite his cultural importance, the few works about Vinatieri and their limited scope make a comprehensive study necessary. When taken as a whole, the content and quality of Vinatieri's compositions demonstrate he is a composer worth remembering and his music is still deserving of being played today.

**KEYWORDS:** Felix Vinatieri, Robert Marek, Custer, Military Bands

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## Introduction

Felix Vinatieri, born in 1834, was an Italian-born musician and composer who wrote music for bands and opera. Vinatieri graduated from the Naples *Conservatorio di Music san Pietro a Majella* and was the director of the Queen's Guard of *Spagnis* by the age of twenty.<sup>1</sup> The Queen's Guard was an Italian military band, setting a precedent for Vinatieri's later career. Vinatieri immigrated to the United States with his sister in 1859 and subsequently enlisted in the Union Army on 1 August, 1861 at the outset of the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> After his military service, he retired to Yankton, South Dakota, where he taught music and composed. In 1873, Vinatieri reenlisted in the military as the bandleader for Lieutenant Colonel Custer and the Seventh Cavalry. During the Battle of Little Big Horn Vinatieri and the band members were spared, as Custer had ordered the band to remain with the supply ship, *The Far West*. After his discharge in 1876, Vinatieri returned to Yankton to live out his days.<sup>3</sup> He succumbed to pneumonia on 5 December.<sup>4</sup> To this day Vinatieri remains a fascinating figure of local cultural importance and national renown.

Despite his importance to the history and culture of South Dakota, the amount of critical research into Felix Vinatieri is limited. There exists only two dissertations about his life and works and Vinatieri is mentioned only in passing in other sources. The most recent work examining Vinatieri is the 2015 dissertation by Ryan Landis, *Opera on the Prairie: A Biographical and Musical Analysis of Felix Vinatieri and "The American*

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<sup>1</sup> James Gay, *The Wind Music of Felix Vinatieri, Dakota Territory Bandmaster*, (University of Northern Colorado, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Died, Obituary of Felix Vinatieri," *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, 9 December 1891, 1.

*Volunteer*.<sup>5</sup> Landis's work focuses more on Vinatieri's operas than on his service as a military bandmaster or on his status as an Italian immigrant musician. Vinatieri is also the subject of the 1982 dissertation, *The Wind Music of Felix Vinatieri, Dakota Territory Bandmaster*, by James R. Gay. Gay's work focuses on the analysis, composition, and reconstruction of Vinatieri's scores rather than on Vinatieri's role as a musician and bandmaster, and barely touches on his operatic works.<sup>6</sup> Bruce Gleason briefly mentions Vinatieri in his book *Sound the Trumpet, Beat the Drums: Horse Mounted Bands of the U.S. Army 1820-1940* in the chapter on the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.<sup>7</sup> When examining the entirety of Vinatieri's works, it becomes apparent that he was a composer and musician of note who was ahead of his time and deserves more recognition on a national as well as local South Dakotan level.

None of the scholarly works study Vinatieri's catalogue as a whole, in that they do not include both his wind music and his operas. Rather, each studies a single genre of Vinatieri's compositions and barely mentions the other parts. However, part of the reason that Vinatieri was a notable figure was his variety of quality compositions, as well as his participation and relationship with the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. It is only when all of Vinatieri's accomplishments are taken into account that he can be appreciated as a figure of local and national cultural importance.

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan Landis, *Opera on the Prairie: A Biographical and Musical Analysis of Felix Vinatieri and "The American Volunteer"* (PhD diss. University of Alabama, 2015)

<sup>6</sup> James Gay, *The Wind Music of Felix Vinatieri*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Gleason, *Sound the Trumpet, Beat the Drums: Horse Mounted Bands of the U.S. Army 1820-1940*. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 61-78.

## Vinatieri and the Civil War

The pre-war 19<sup>th</sup> century United States that Vinatieri encountered when he arrived from Italy was a musical one. Music, no matter what form it took, permeated life. Antebellum America was experiencing a boom in the consumption of music at all levels of society. Americans were writing more music that targeted American audiences during the years leading up to the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> Composing giants such as Stephen Foster and George Root were both active before and during the Civil War. Stephen Foster was particularly prolific. Known as “The Father of American Music” he wrote songs that are still widely known today, including “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” and “Beautiful Dreamer.”<sup>9</sup> Immigrants fueled much of the music of the day. Band leader and composer Patrick Gilmore, a significant figure in 19<sup>th</sup> century American music, was himself an immigrant from Ireland.<sup>10</sup> Vinatieri was part of an important trend in American history.

One of the most common ways of enjoying music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was through dance. Immigrants brought many of their dances with them to the U.S. Popular dances of the day, including the waltz and the polka, originated in Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> Even at the height of the war, dancing was still a way for people to escape the cruel realities of war

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce Kelley, “Music and the Attainment of Culture in the American Civil War Era,” Transcript of a Presentation for the College Music Society, Great Plains Chapter Annual Conference (March 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Deane L. Root, “The ‘Mythtury’ of Stephen C. Foster or Why His True Story Remains Untold,” (lecture transcript at the American Music Center Research Conference). *American Music Research Center Journal* no. 23 (March, 1990): 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> “Noted Bandmaster Gone” *New York Times*, 25 September 1892, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1892/09/25/104146208.pdf>,

<sup>11</sup> Frances Rust, *Dance in Society: An Analysis of the Relationship between the Social Dance and Society in England from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*. (London: Routledge, 2010), 72.

and life.<sup>12</sup> A wide variety of dances were popular in the years leading up to and after the Civil War, including The Lancers, polkas, and gallops. First and foremost was the Lancers, which had premiered in 1817 and became immediately popular. The Lancers is a variant of the Quadrille, a square dance that four couples performed.<sup>13</sup> Gallops and polkas were also prevalent starting around the 1840's. The gallop is a quick dance in 2/4 time that has been called "perhaps the simplest dance there has ever been."<sup>14</sup> The polka is a close partner dance in a fast 2/4 time of Bohemian origin that first became popular in the mid-1840s.<sup>15</sup> Both the polka and gallop dances would remain popular at all social levels throughout the war and well after its conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

A burgeoning middle class fueled a significant increase in music consumption. The middle class possessed both the financial resources and the leisure time that were needed to support music as a hobby and as a method of entertainment. For people with both purchasing power and leisure time, music was a fairly popular choice of hobby to pursue, as owning a piano was a sign that one was prosperous and cultured. One contemporary critic wrote in *Dwight's Journal of Music*, "One may scarcely ask now-a-days: Who is musical? But: Who is not? In the so-called higher or more cultivated circles, music has long passed for an indispensable part of culture; every family demands it ... without particular regard to love or talent ...."<sup>17</sup> *Dwight's Journal of Music* demonstrates

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<sup>12</sup> Allison Thompson, "Dancing on the Eve of Battle: Some Views about Dance during the American Civil War," *Country Dance and Song*, no. 21 (March, 1991), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Rust, *Dance in Society*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Dancing on the Eve of Battle*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> A.B. Marx, "The Present State of Music," *Dwight's Journal of Music*, Vol. 25, no. 17. (11 November 1865): 129-130.

the fact that music permeated all levels of society, and that everyone desired to pursue music as a method of entertainment.

A few years after Vinatieri's arrival in the U.S., the Civil War began. Vinatieri enlisted in the 16<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Band as a musician on 1 August 1861, which was seven days after the First Battle of Bull Run. It is possible that Vinatieri enlisted after hearing news of the battle. By September of 1861 Vinatieri had been promoted to the position of Bandleader.<sup>18</sup>

Vinatieri was discharged for disability from the army on 23 July 1862. The rest of the regimental bands were mustered out weeks later on 9 August as a result of General Order no. 91, which called for the mustering out of all regimental musicians. James Gay believes that it is possible that Vinatieri knew about General Order No. 91, which required that all members of regimental bands who enlisted as musicians were to be immediately mustered out of service.<sup>19</sup> According to Gay, it is likely that through his duties as a musician and bandleader, Vinatieri would have gotten to know General Samuel Heintzelman. Supposedly Vinatieri would have heard about the order through Heintzelman and requested to be discharged for disability as that would have earned him better pay.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Corinne E. Vinatieri Heatherly, "Felix Villet Vinatieri - Custer's Bandmaster." In *13<sup>th</sup> Dakota History Conference: April 9, 10, 11, 1981 Papers*. Edited by H. W. Blakely, The Karl E. Mundt Historical & Educational Foundation Series, No. 9 (Madison, S.D.: Dakota State College, 1982.): 797, 798. Heatherly was the granddaughter of Felix Vinatieri and presented a short biography of him at the 1981 Dakota History Conference.

<sup>19</sup> Gay, *Wind Music of Felix Vinatieri*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Gay's theory, though, is in direct contradiction to Vinatieri's obituary, which states that "he was mustered out of the service, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of July, 1862, much broken down in health, and afflicted with maladies which were his companion all the remainder of his life."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, he reenlisted in 1867 and was stationed at Fort Sully in Dakota Territory. The northern plains would have a lasting impact on Vinatieri as he would settle in the area and find inspiration in the vast and beautiful landscape to compose several pieces.<sup>22</sup>

### Vinatieri and Custer

After Vinatieri was discharged from his second enlistment in 1870, he settled in Yankton where he began composing, giving lessons, and started a band.<sup>23</sup> He met and married Anna Frances Fejfar, herself an immigrant from Czechoslovakia, in 1871.<sup>24</sup> The reaction to Vinatieri's arrival demonstrates just how hungry the public was for quality music on the plains. The drive to consume music and culture was not just a trend of the cities. An article in the *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan* states that,

The citizens of Yankton are hardly awake to the fact that we actually have a Brass Band among us... A band possessing instruments that cannot be surpassed if equaled in the Northwest, and its members making rapid, and rather surprising progress in playing under the direction of Mr. Felix Vinatiere... It is said by persons competent to judge that this gentleman possess remarkable qualities as an instructor, and the members themselves are quite enthusiastic over him as a musician and composer. Our people must not only see to it that he remains here,

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<sup>21</sup> "Died, Obituary of Felix Vinatieri," *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, (9 December, 1891): 1.

<sup>22</sup> Corinne E. Vinatieri Heatherly, "Felix Villet Vinatieri - Custer's Bandmaster." In *13<sup>th</sup> Dakota History Conference: April 9, 10, 11, 1981 Papers*. Edited by H. W. Blakely, The Karl E. Mundt Historical & Educational Foundation Series; No. 9. (Madison, S.D.: Dakota State College, 1982.): 797, 798. Heatherly was the granddaughter of Felix Vinatieri and presented a short biography of him at the 1981 Dakota History Conference.

<sup>23</sup> "There Are Several New Buildings in Course of Erection in Different Portions of Yankton," *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, 8 November 1871, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 796.

but must encourage the band association in its efforts.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that the people of Yankton recognized that they had a world class musician working for them and that they recognized the prestige that having a quality band brought to their frontier town.

Vinatieri would also frequently accept engagements for playing in various travelling circuses upon his discharge from the military. Most notably, the musician travelled with the Ringling Brothers Circus Band, which exposed him to music from around the country. While travelling, he continued to compose music. Vinatieri composed one of his favorite pieces - "A Summer in Texas" - while playing with the Ringling Brothers Circus at the Dallas State Fair in 1886.<sup>26</sup>

It was during Vinatieri's tenure in Yankton that he met George Custer and enlisted in the army for a third time in 1873. The two met at a ball hosted for Custer and his men as he passed through the area. Elizabeth Custer described the ball in *Boots and Saddles*, "All classes and conditions came to the ball, for Yankton was not yet large enough to be divided into cliques; besides, the rough and hazardous life these people had shared endeared them to one another."<sup>27</sup>

Custer was so taken with Vinatieri's music and conducting at the ball that he asked the director to lead the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry's musicians. Custer thought that the music was "sophisticated for a wilderness town."<sup>28</sup> Custer's wife noted, that "The general loved

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<sup>25</sup> "Our Band," *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, 11 January 1871, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 800-801.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Bacon Custer, *"Boots and Saddles"; Or, Life in Dakota with General Custer* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1904), 30.

<sup>28</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 798.

music, and had so correct an ear that he often sang or whistled the airs of an opera after hearing them once” and that “Music so charmed him that when we have been in the States, listening to an oratorio the Thomas orchestra, or a recital of any kind, he has begged me not to be hurt if he did not speak during the rendering.”<sup>29</sup>

Custer’s love of music may have influenced how he utilized military bands under his command, as he had a history of using them creatively. In the Civil War Custer had his band lead his troops into battle on several occasions, as well having them provide diversions and distractions. Neither of these uses was the standard practice.<sup>30</sup>

Vinatieri served as the band leader for the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry under Custer. Vinatieri was stationed at Fort Lincoln for the majority of that time and accompanied Custer on his 1874 expedition to the Black Hills.<sup>31</sup> Upon their first arrival at Fort Lincoln Vinatieri and the band played “Home, Sweet Home” and “Garryowen.”<sup>32</sup> The purposes of the Black Hills Expedition were to look for a location for a fort, look for a route to the Southwest, and to find gold.<sup>33</sup>

Multiple sources took note of the band’s exploits on the expedition. George Bird Grinnell was a geologist who was also on the Black Hills Expedition, and he took note of the quality of the band, writing that as the expedition left Fort Abraham Lincoln “a band of sixteen men mounted on white horses preceded it, playing *Garry Owen* [sic], Custer’s favorite air. To start into a supposedly hostile Indian country accompanied by a brass

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<sup>29</sup> Custer, *Boots and Saddles* 216-217.

<sup>30</sup> Gleason, “U.S. Mounted Bands and Cavalry Field Musicians,” 112.

<sup>31</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 800.

<sup>32</sup> Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, 97.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

band was a novel experience to some.”<sup>34</sup> James Calhoun, a soldier on the expedition, wrote that in addition to “Garryowen,” the band played the piece “the girl I left behind me.”<sup>35</sup> Calhoun’s account of the expedition describes multiple examples of the band performing its duties.

Although the band was described as a source of merriment on the journey, the band also had grim duties.<sup>36</sup> Most notably, the band played the funeral music for soldiers who died on the expedition, with Calhoun writing that “The Band played the dead march and the funeral procession moved to a little knoll just below the bluffs where a grave had been dug, and the last remains of these two soldiers were buried with military honors.”<sup>37</sup> The playing of “Garryowen” by the band heralded the return of the expedition to Fort Lincoln. Elizabeth Custer, who was at the fort at the time, wrote that “The instruments of the band were jammed and tarnished, but the still produced enough music for us to recognize the old tune of ‘Garryowen,’ to which the regiment always returned.”<sup>38</sup>

Felix Vinatieri’s duties as a military musician would have been varied, as musicians were responsible for a host of chores. The main duty of a regimental band was playing at concerts and functions at the behest and discretion of their commanding officer. Normally, such performances would include playing at parades, balls, dances, twilight concerts, hospitals, funerals, executions, ceremonial functions, and even at

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<sup>34</sup> George Bird Grinnell, *Two Great Scouts and Their Pawnee Battalion; the Experiences of Frank J. North and Luther H. North, Pioneers in the Great West, 1856-1882, and Their Defence of the Building of the Union Pacific Railroad* (University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 240.

<sup>35</sup> James Calhoun, and Lawrence A. Frost. *With Custer in '74 : James Calhoun's Diary of the Black Hills Expedition* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, 193.

private civilian events in order to earn extra income.<sup>39</sup> Boosting troop morale was a job of the military bands, and an inherent result of the band's performances. Soldiers frequently remarked that the music the band played was able to inspire, comfort, and entertain them.<sup>40</sup> A soldier with the 24<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment remarked in 1862: "Every night about sun down Gilmore gives us a splendid concert, playing selections from the operas and some very pretty marches, quicksteps, waltzes and the like, most of which are composed by himself."<sup>41</sup> It is likely that Vinatieri also played many of his own compositions as well, in much the same way that Patrick Gilmore did.

In addition to their musical duties, regimental bands had responsibilities during battle. Typically bandsmen would not have been expected to play during combat or while under fire except in rare situations. Most recorded instances of bands playing under fire, save a select few, were result of the band being in the wrong place at the wrong time.<sup>42</sup> During and immediately after combat most regimental bandsmen commonly served as stretcher bearers and assisted the surgeons in tending to the wounded.<sup>43</sup>

Musical training and skill among the members of the band varied. Members of the band had very little musical training except for the skills they had when they enlisted. Often times, the only musicians to receive training were signalers like drummers and

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<sup>39</sup> Kenneth E. Olson, *Music and Musket: Bands and Bandsmen of the American Civil War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 163, 187.

<sup>40</sup> John Davis Billings, *Hard Tack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Boston, MA: George M Smith &, 2001), 69-70.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from "John" to Fannie L. Partridge, 19 April 1962, manuscript, Chicago Historical Society. As quoted from Bell Irvin Wiley's *The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union*, 1st Ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), 158.

<sup>42</sup> Gleason, *Sound the Trumpet, Beat the Drums*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Richard C. Spicer, "New Hampshire Bands in Civil War South Carolina." In *Bugle Resounding: Music and Musicians of the Civil War Era*, edited by Bruce C. Kelley and Mark A. Snell (University of Missouri Press, 2004), 96.

buglers. Most of the time buglers and drummers could barely read music and were forced to learn on the fly.<sup>44</sup> Being classically trained at a European conservatory, Vinatieri probably would have been among one of the most skilled enlisted musicians. It is no wonder then that with his training and previous experience directing governmental bands in Italy he was promoted to the position of bandleader so quickly after enlisting.<sup>45</sup> In fact, most of the training that musicians in the military would have received would have been for those in mounted cavalry bands. Even then that training would have gone only as far as learning how to ride a horse while playing an instrument.<sup>46</sup>

Multiple accounts of Vinatieri and his 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry band exist in newspaper reports of the expedition. One account states: “when the band plays, the music dances on the mountain tops, dives into the caves, and rushes through the valleys and is returned again by the charming echoes.”<sup>47</sup> Many of the newspaper accounts of the expedition have been compiled into a work, *Prelude to Glory*. Within that compilation exists a reproduced report Vinatieri wrote, wherein he praised the beauty of the Black Hills and the Dakota Territory in general.<sup>48</sup> It is likely that it was on this expedition when Vinatieri composed

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<sup>44</sup> Bruce P. Gleason, "U.S. Mounted Bands and Cavalry Field Musicians in the Union Army during the Civil War-Background, Duties, and Training," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 27, no. 2 (2006): 102-19.

<sup>45</sup> Gay, *Wind Music of Felix Vinatieri*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Gleason, "U.S. Mounted Bands and Cavalry Field Musicians," 116-118

<sup>47</sup> N. H. Knappen, *Bismarck Tribune*, 19 August 1874, as cited in Herbert Krause and Gary D. Olson, *Prelude to Glory: A Newspaper Accounting of Custer's 1874 Expedition to the Black Hills* (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Brevet Press, 1974), 23.

<sup>48</sup> Felix Vinatieri, *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 8 September 1874, as cited in Herbert Krause and Gary D. Olson, *Prelude to Glory: A Newspaper Accounting of Custer's 1874 Expedition to the Black Hills* (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Brevet Press, 1974), 143-144.

his works titled “Sound From the Black Hills Polka” and “Black Hills Picknick Quick Step.”<sup>49</sup>

Vinatieri was still under Custer’s command in 1876 when the Battle of Little Big Horn occurred. When Custer left Fort Lincoln to campaign for what became the last time, Elizabeth Custer wrote that:

When our band struck up ‘The Girl I Left Behind me,’ the most despairing hour seemed to have come. All the sad-faced wives of the officers who had forced themselves to their doors to try and wave a courageous farewell, and smile bravely to keep the ones they loved from knowing the anguish of their breaking hearts, gave up the struggle at the sound of the music. The first notes made them disappear to fight out alone their trouble, and seek to place their hands in that of their Heavenly Father.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly Vinatieri and his band had a significant impact on the men they served with and his music helped provide a backdrop for one of the most infamous events in American history. It was only due to the fact that the cavalry needed the horses of the band that Vinatieri and the band were spared the same fate that Custer met at the Battle of Little Big Horn.<sup>51</sup> Because they had been ordered to remain on the supply boat *The Far West*, the band was pressed into service as corpsmen and nurses, transporting and tending to the wounded.<sup>52</sup> Six months after the battle Vinatieri was discharged and he returned home to Yankton where he would continue composing music, working as a musician and giving lessons.<sup>53</sup> Vinatieri’s playing experience, travel, and his role as bandmaster to one of the

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<sup>49</sup> The New Custer Brass Band, *Custer’s Last Band: The Original Music of Felix Vinatieri*, Produced by the National Music Museum, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, 203

<sup>51</sup> Gleason, *Sound the Trumpet, Beat the Drums*, 77.

<sup>52</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 799.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 800.

most problematic personalities to come out of the Civil War in and of itself would make him worthy of remembrance and recognition. However, his role as Custer's bandmaster is only one small part of the reason that Vinatieri deserves to have his music played and remembered - his music that captured the spirit of the West itself speaks to another reason.

### Vinatieri's Compositions

As one of the first composers in the American West, Vinatieri's music was literally and figuratively 'pioneering.' James Gay, who primarily studied Vinatieri's wind music, concluded as much, comparing Vinatieri's music favorably with his contemporaries.<sup>54</sup> Vinatieri's many compositions cover a variety of lengths, tempos, and complexity that compare favorably with his contemporaries. Gay even notes that the inclusion of strings to the scores give the pieces "a more fluid, perhaps sophisticated, sound."<sup>55</sup> In particular, Gay praises Vinatieri's piece "March General Custer, Last Indian Campagne" for being harmonically ahead of its American counterparts. Gay writes: "This march represents a unique combination of Italian opera melody and dramatic harmonic richness, while maintain the straightforward, functional formality of the American military march."<sup>56</sup> Gay believed that Vinatieri's music was noteworthy because of his ability to combine the harmonies and themes of his native Italian music and training with his experiences and the demands of American military music.<sup>57</sup> The difficulty of his compositions is consistent with that of the repertoire of high school and community

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<sup>54</sup> Gay, *The Wind Music of Felix Vinatieri*, 96-100.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

bands of today, so there is no reason that Vinatieri's pieces cannot be revived and played today.

Wind music was not all that Vinatieri aspired to compose. In his obituary it was revealed that it had been "the goal of his ambition" to write operas.<sup>58</sup> In addition to composing numerous marches, waltzes, polkas, and other dances, his catalogue included two operas believed to be the very first composed west of the Mississippi: "The American Volunteer" and "The Barber of the Regiment."<sup>59</sup> "The American Volunteer" was Vinatieri's last and favorite opera, which he described as a comedic burlesque in operatic style. As such, it is regarded as one of the first American comic operas.<sup>60</sup> Finished in 1891, the opera had a host of plot devices common to operas and burlesque shows, including mistaken identities, Faustian-like pacts with the Devil, tragic deaths, and other farcical tropes.<sup>61</sup> The opera was originally to be premiered at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, but Felix Vinatieri's death in 1891 waylaid those plans.<sup>62</sup>

The *libretto* begins at the outset of the War for Independence. Lord Leighton offers Rosa, a woman of Mexican descent, a large sum of money in order to marry her daughter Minnie. However, Minnie's lover Tom hears of the plot and the two elope. In retaliation Leighton disguises himself as George Washington and tricks Tom into joining the Continental Army.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Died, Obituary of Felix Vinatieri," *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, 9 December 1891, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 802.

<sup>60</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 801, 803.

<sup>61</sup> Landis, *Opera on the Prairie*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 802.

<sup>63</sup> Landis, *Opera on the Praire*, 30.

Acts II and III continue after the war with an older Tom. Continuing the trope of mistaken identity, Rosa notices Tom and flirts with him. After revealing his identity, Rosa becomes enraged and accuses him of attacking her. With Tom condemned to hang for his supposed crimes, the Devil appears to offer him an escape. In a Faustian deal, the Devil gives Tom a magic chair that will bind anyone who sits in it until the chair's owner released them. Tom eventually is reunited with Minnie, but as soon he is, a tornado arrives and takes Tom to Hell.<sup>64</sup>

The fourth and final act begins with Tom and others in Hell. Tom tricks the Devil into sitting in the chair and refuses to release him until the Devil agrees to release all the victims of the tornado. The Devil agrees to release them back into the world wherever they want. Tom then notices a newspaper that is dated 1893. With the realization that one hundred years have passed, Tom requests that the Devil release them in Chicago so that they can attend the World's Fair. The opera ends with Tom, the captives, and the Devil all attending the World's Fair. The last lyrics of the Opera are "Love, money, and wine make the world shine."<sup>65</sup>

The opera is noteworthy not only because of the location it was composed in, but also because of its themes. The opera is surprisingly forward thinking for its time as it includes a marriage not only between different ethnic groups, but also between different socio-economic levels. Ryan Landis agrees, writing that "The operatic repertoire is filled with libretti whose lovers have crossed many divides, but racial differences is one that

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

had largely been unexplored” and that the inclusion of such a marriage “is among the work’s most innovative and forward-looking features.”<sup>66</sup> Vinatieri’s own life experiences may have influenced his inclusion of such a marriage in his opera. Vinatieri himself was a product of the explosive immigration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that kick-started unions of various ethnicities from all over the world and made America the “melting pot” that it is today. Vinatieri’s groundbreaking opera foreshadows the changing of the times in that regard

The opera is not only notable for its themes and content, but also for the quality of its music. Landis praises Vinatieri’s writing, saying that “His training at the University of Naples is visible within *The American Volunteer* in his ability to produce melodies that are singable and tuneful, and his use of melismatic passages of virtuosic nature or evocative of the great bel canto operas.”<sup>67</sup>

Vinatieri’s musical training is not the only noticeable aspect of his life present in the opera. Throughout the opera Vinatieri includes various types of dances, including the waltz and the quadrille, both of which were styles of dances for which he had previously written. More notably, perhaps, is the inclusion of military marches in the score, a style of music with which Vinatieri was very comfortable.<sup>68</sup> Vinatieri’s opera clearly demonstrates that he was adept at writing and putting together music from a diverse set of styles. Furthermore, the fact that the multitude of styles not only worked, but garnered

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 34.

critical acclaim signal that Vinatieri was certainly a skillful composer in all facets of his musical endeavors.

Although “The American Volunteer” never made it to its planned 1893 Chicago World’s Fair premier, it was still well received. An article in the *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan* dated 25 June 1891 stated that “with this opera he has produced something that will take popular fancy by storm and rank first among the comic operas of its day” and that “it is certainly in outline much more to be admired than the light operas that the American people are raving about today.”<sup>69</sup>

Doctor Laiten Weed, head of the Yankton College Music Department, presented Act I of the opera for the first time on 4 March 1961 at the college.<sup>70</sup> After seeing the performance, James Boeringer of the University of South Dakota (USD) Music Department wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which he declared: “The music is so ingratiating, propulsive and tuneful, and the plot so hilariously funny, that this writer finds it a pity that the town couldn’t back Mr. Weed more fully in his revival”<sup>71</sup> However, Boeringer would soon get his wish. Due to its’ initial success, the entire opera was put on later that year. On 8 July, 1961 “The American Volunteer,” one of the very first operas written west of the Mississippi, was finally premiered seventy years after it had been written.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “A Work in Music,” *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*, 25 June 1891, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 802.

<sup>71</sup> James Boeringer, “Custer’s Bandmaster’s Opera,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 1961, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Heatherly, *Felix Villiet Vinatieri*, 802.

When examining Felix Vinatieri's wind music, it is clear that he demonstrated prowess as a composer. The way Vinatieri combined harmonies and melodies from his native Italy with the style and demands of American military music alone made him a composer and bandleader worthy of recognition. The mixing of the two styles gives Vinatieri's music a distinct style that is uniquely a product of his life. His music, which the sights and sounds of the Dakota Territory inspired, aptly reflects the realities of life on the Plains. Vinatieri is also notable as a conductor and composer because of his service under George Custer and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Being the bandmaster for one of the most recognizable figures of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and participating in the both the Black Hills Expedition and the aftermath of the Battle of Little Big Horn make Vinatieri a notable cultural figure for more than just his compositional skill.

Robert Marek, Ph.D., worked as a faculty member for the music department at USD from 1957 until 1983.<sup>73</sup> It was probably during his time at there that Marek became interested in the life and music of Felix Vinatieri, going as far as to arrange several of his pieces and writing a proposal to catalog and prepare the music for publishing during his tenure at USD.

In a draft of an article that Marek wrote, he praised Vinatieri as being a versatile composer, writing that Vinatieri was "trained in the Italian operatic tradition and composed in the style of Bellini, Donizetti, and early Verdi... he knew his craft and was obviously a sensitive and practical musician," also saying that "The style of his marches

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<sup>73</sup> Biography of Robert Marek, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

would indicate that he was familiar with those written by Gilmore and possibly Sousa.”<sup>74</sup> However, Marek also noted discrepancies in his parts, noting that there were indications that Vinatieri copied music straight from concept to the parts, without putting a full score together which led to differences between the parts.<sup>75</sup>

Although Marek was unsure of the number of orchestral compositions that Vinatieri had, he believed that several of the purely orchestral movements from Vinatieri’s opera, “The American Volunteer” could be arranged into an orchestral suite. Marek even went as far as proposing which pieces could be included in the suite, suggesting the March from Act II, the Quadrille from Act II, the Waltz from Act IV, the Little Demon’s Dance from Act IV, and the Flute Solo from Act V.<sup>76</sup>

Marek was less optimistic about putting together choral music from Vinatieri’s works. While stating that it was a doable task, Marek noted that the only choral music that Vinatieri was known to have composed was from his operas.<sup>77</sup> Because Vinatieri wrote his own librettos, Marek notes that the texts for his operas were “frequently jumbled with awkward sentence structure, transposed phrases, clumsy vocabulary, and highly original spellings.”<sup>78</sup> While not insurmountable, there certainly were challenges that would make arranging Vinatieri’s choral works for performance a lengthy task.

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Marek, *Article Draft*, Robert Marek Collection Box 17, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota, 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

Included in Marek's papers is an eight page draft of a proposal asking the South Dakota Bicentennial Commission for funds to preserve the music of Felix Vinatieri. Marek's proposal outlines several goals and the means of accomplishing them. First, Marek hoped to publish a monograph of biological information and a review of Vinatieri's compositions that would be free to South Dakota libraries. Second, Marek wanted to publish a "Collected Edition" of Vinatieri's works in a way that would foster research and study.<sup>79</sup> Third, Marek proposed preparing a "Performing Edition" of Vinatieri's work that was a good overview of his catalog for modern ensembles to perform, as well as to make that collection available for sale or rental.<sup>80</sup>

Marek's proposal was split into three phases of varying lengths in which the work was to have been done. The first phase was the easiest to complete and simply consisted of sorting the music, cataloging instrumentation, and identifying worthy compositions.<sup>81</sup>

According to Marek, phase two would have been the more involved step. Marek proposed creating two editions of Vinatieri's music: a "Collected Edition" and a "Performing Edition."<sup>82</sup> The collected edition would have contained Vinatieri's works that had the most musical value. Preparation would have consisted of preparing full scores for pieces as well as piano and vocal scores for Vinatieri's operas. Marek sought to

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Marek, *Grant Proposal*, Robert Marek Collection Box 17, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota, 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

publish the collected edition in six volumes, containing Vinatieri's operas, marches, dances, and overtures.<sup>83</sup>

Phase two also would have involved creating the performance edition. Marek's stated goal for the performance edition was "to allow the performance of selected works by modern concertbands [sic], orchestras, and choral groups in South Dakota high schools and colleges."<sup>84</sup> However, Marek anticipated difficulties with preparing the performance edition, noting that there were no full scores for any of Vinatieri's marches. Only individual parts existed for various instruments. Furthermore, the instrumentation of Vinatieri's music reflects that of a military cavalry band and not a modern orchestra. Part of Marek's proposal included provisions for arranging Vinatieri's music for modern ensembles, both his band and orchestral music. This arranging would have consisted of scoring the pieces for modern school bands and filling out the pieces by correcting mistakes and variations in the parts.<sup>85</sup>

As for the monograph, Marek's proposal noted that it would consist of two parts. The first part was to be a simple overview of Vinatieri's life. The second part was to be a critical review of his compositions, including his style, influences, and scope, as well as a full catalog of all his compositions.<sup>86</sup>

It appears that the proposal was either not submitted or submitted and rejected, but there were no rejection letters in Marek's papers, nor was there a finalized copy of the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 6.

proposal. The fact that later in his life Marek would frequently only have three pieces by Vinatieri to loan out and play also indicates that a more thorough cataloging and arranging of Vinatieri's compositions did not take place. Although it ultimately seems as though the proposal was either rejected or was not submitted, the proposal makes it clear that Marek believed Vinatieri's music to be noteworthy and worth preserving as a part of South Dakotan culture. Writing in his proposal, Marek observed: "It is significant that Vinatieri was able to make a living as a South Dakota Musician. However his compositions would seem to be a more important contribution to the culture of South Dakota in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century than his residency in the state."<sup>87</sup> Marek believed that Vinatieri's compositions were even more important to his legacy than his cultural status as an important figure in Custer's expeditions.

One of the steps that Marek took to preserve Vinatieri's music and legacy was to arrange a small handful of his pieces for modern performance in 1975.<sup>88</sup> The pieces he arranged were the "4 July 1888," "Schottische," and the "Houston Polka."<sup>89</sup> It is likely that the 4 July 1888 piece was the first Marek arranged, as he used it in a concert almost a full year before the other two pieces appear in his papers. In a letter to Harvey Wickware dated 21 March 1975, Marek included the Vinatieri piece as a possible part of a concert the Black Hills Chamber Music Society would perform.<sup>90</sup> Evidently, Marek's arrangement was accepted. In a draft of an article that Marek wrote he mentioned that he

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>88</sup> Wind Ensemble Concert Program 31 March 1976, Robert Marek Collection, "Programs" Folder, Box #12, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Letter to Harvey Wickware 21 March 1975, Robert Marek Collection, "1975 Correspondences," Box 9, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

directed a wind ensemble in its performance of the march on 13 August 1975 for an American music themed concert as part of the Rapid City Summer Arts Festival.<sup>91</sup>

The USD Wind Ensemble debuted the two other pieces that Marek arranged, “Houston Polka” and “Schottische,” at the University of South Dakota’s Colton Recital Hall at a concert under the direction of Larry Mitchell, a professor at USD, on 31 March 1976.<sup>92</sup> The three pieces were the main three that Marek had arranged and he would program them throughout his life. In June of 1989 Marek wrote to Paul Hedge, director a music camp in South Dakota, and asked him if he would be interested in using three Vinatieri pieces in his Music Camp program as a way to celebrate the State Centennial. Further letters suggest that Marek sent scores and copies of parts to Hedge free of charge for use in his program.<sup>93</sup> Marek also loaned out the three Vinatieri pieces again in 1993 for the Music Marches West program at the Center for Western Studies in Sioux Falls. A letter from the Center for Western Studies thanks Marek for the music, stating that “We thank you so much for your kind loan of the music. We played your three arrangements of Vinatieri’s music. They were beautifully done and the manuscript was so easy to read. Musicians appreciate that type of thing.”<sup>94</sup> Marek was clearly concerned with making the pieces available for performance and in a form that was accessible for musicians.

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<sup>91</sup> Marek, *Article Draft*, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Program from 1976 Wind Ensemble Concert, Robert Marek Collection, “Vinatieri” folder Box 17, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

<sup>93</sup> Letters from Marek to Hedge dated 29 June 1989 and 13 July 1989, Robert Marek Collection, “Vinatieri” folder Box 17, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

<sup>94</sup> Letter from Leland Lillehaug to Marek, 22 June, 1993, Robert Marek Collection, “Vinatieri” folder, Box 17, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

Marek's reply to the letter is interesting. In it, he not only praises the quality of the performance, but also states that "The program deserves repetition. If you do a similar program next year please let me know. I have run across some copies I made of another piece or 2 that was in the collection I had available to me for a short time. I could try to reconstruct these pieces for you."<sup>95</sup> This reply is notable for a few reasons. First, it shows that Marek had more of Vinatieri's music than he could have arranged. Having more of Vinatieri's music arranged for modern ensembles could have helped his music spread and become more widely played, especially by local ensembles. Marek's frequent loaning of Vinatieri's music as well as his offer to reconstruct more of Vinatieri's music also demonstrates his passion for the Italian composer's music, especially because Marek was well into retirement and under no obligation to do any further work.

## Conclusion

Vinatieri's contributions to the opera world alone make him a figure worthy of study. Composing the first operas west of the Mississippi is a huge cultural achievement for not only the American West, but for America as a whole. The themes of the "The American Volunteer" were of a serious and important nature, presented in a way that made the opera ahead of its time. Had "The American Volunteer" been able to be performed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair perhaps it could have launched Vinatieri's career to new heights. After all, who would not want to see an opera the bandleader of George Custer had composed? Especially considering that the composition includes one

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<sup>95</sup> Letter from Marek to Lillehaug 3 August, 1993, Robert Marek Collection, "Vinatieri" folder, Box #17, Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections, The University of South Dakota.

of the rare appearances of George Washington in an opera. Had Vinatieri been able to attend he would have shared the stage with several famous musicians of the time, including Dvořák and John Philip Sousa.<sup>96</sup> It is not a stretch of the imagination at all to think that Vinatieri could have become a household name after performing at the fair. After all, many musicians who performed at the fair went on to become famous because of their appearance, including Scott Joplin and Joseph Douglas, the later of whom would receive wide recognition and even a transcontinental touring deal as a result of his performance at the Chicago World's Fair.<sup>97</sup>

It is not just Vinatieri's wind music or operatic inclinations that make him a name worthy of recognition, but rather all of those endeavors combined. He was an Italian immigrant who fought in the Civil War and reenlisted several times. The way he blended the music of his native Italy with his experiences in the military make for a diverse repertoire of music worthy of being heard and remembered today.

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<sup>96</sup>“Timeline of Dvořák in America,” Dvořák American Heritage Association, accessed 3 November 2018, [www.dvoraknyc.org/dvorak-in-america/](http://www.dvoraknyc.org/dvorak-in-america/)

<sup>97</sup> Caldwell Titcomb, "Black String Musicians: Ascending the Scale," *Black Music Research Journal*, 10, no. 1 (1990): 107.

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