

Henry Theophilus Finck (1854–1926)

By Richard Engeman

Music critic Henry T. Finck spent his childhood on an apple orchard near the Christian agricultural colony of Aurora, in the lower Willamette Valley. The first Oregonian to graduate from Harvard, Finck was a prolific writer and critic of contemporary music. He also wrote about horticulture, romantic love, travel, food, and his Oregon boyhood.

Born in Bethel, Missouri, on September 22, 1854, Henry Theophilus Finck was the fourth of five children born to Henry C. and Beate (Beatrice) Finck. His parents were immigrants from Germany who had met in Bethel and were married in St. Louis. Dr. Wilhelm Keil had founded Bethel Colony in 1844 as a communal, Christian agricultural settlement, and Finck came to Bethel as a seller of musical instruments. He remained to become the town's druggist, postmaster, and music teacher. While the elder Finck became a good friend of Keil's, he and his family were not members of the colony.

Henry C. Keil and a group of the colonists went west in 1855, finally settling at Aurora in 1856. Beatrice Finck died in Bethel in 1858, leaving her husband with five young children and prompting the family's relocation to Aurora in 1863. Henry C. purchased a house with an established apple orchard on the edge of Aurora and again pursued his trade as a druggist and merchant. He also gave music lessons and formed the Aurora Band, which quickly rose to regional fame.

Young Henry T. Finck played cello, piano, and percussion and engaged in a wide range of scholarly pursuits on his own, including Latin, Greek, and German as well as astronomy and geology. In his 1870 diary, he wrote of his ambition to attend Harvard University, and with the help of a local scholar, Christian W. Wolf, he passed the exams that admitted him in 1872. He later credited the income from his father's apple orchard with funding his education.

While at Harvard, Finck met a number of notable figures in American arts and letter, including William Dean Howells, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. After receiving a degree in philosophy in 1876, he traveled to Germany, where he met the composer Richard Wagner and attended the Wagner festival at Bayreuth. Howells published Finck's review of the performances in the *Atlantic*, which led to Finck's long career as a music critic.

In 1881, Finck was named the music editor and critic of the New York *Evening Post*, where he remained a champion of Wagner as well as of contemporary performers and new works. An ardent upholder of the romantic idiom, Finck's criticism was characterized by his enthusiasm for Romantic composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Dvorak, Mahler, and Percy Grainger, as well as for pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski, sopranos Emma Calvé and Geraldine Farrar, and tenor Enrico Caruso. Finck was also on the editorial staff of *The Nation* from 1877 until at least 1917. He married Abbie Helen Cushman of New York on October 7, 1890. He continued his reviewing for the *Evening Post* until retiring in 1924 to Bethel, Maine, to write his autobiography.

After Henry T. Finck was admitted to Harvard, the Finck family removed to Portland, where his older brother Edward achieved some note as a musician and composer. The Aurora Band persisted into the 1920s, long after the colony's demise, and the Finck family's influence in the town is still acknowledged at the Aurora Colony Historical Society.

Henry Theophilus Finck was the author of more than two dozen books, three of which include passages relating to his boyhood in Oregon. Although he did not live to see its publication, he completed his autobiography, *My Adventures in the Golden Age of Music*, shortly before his death in Rumford, Maine, on October 1, 1926.

Sources

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