Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 6

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Recommended Citation
Crone, Catherine (2012) "Schools for the Banjo: A Primary Source Study of Nineteenth-Century Banjo Manuals," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/notabene/vol5/iss1/6

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This article is available in Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/notabene/vol5/iss1/6

Schools for the Banjo: A Primary Source Study of Nineteenth-Century Banjo Manuals

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During the latter half of the nineteenth century, banjo players and teachers strove to bring their instrument to a wider audience. Prior to, the banjo had been played primarily by African Americans and by the minstrels who parodied them. This began to change as a number of players sought to make the banjo a more respectable instrument by performing European art music and by presenting it to members of the white upper class, particularly to women, as an instrument of study. This article will examine a number of banjo manuals published between the middle of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. These manuals provide insight into the changing musical and cultural position of the American banjo throughout the later nineteenth century via their increasing emphasis on a guitar-like playing style, the music they provide the learner, and their increasingly elevated portrayal of the banjo.

The examination of the manuals presented in this paper clearly reveals that authors made a collective effort to promote the banjo as respectable and worthy of study to bourgeois Americans. Karen Linn has demonstrated that these efforts were not thoroughly successful: many bourgeois

members of society did indeed take up the banjo, but considered it sentimental, emotional, or exotic as opposed to serious and refined.[1] This paper, however, shows that many nineteenth-century banjo players and teachers took their instrument seriously and wanted other Americans to do the same.

Though previous books and articles on the nineteenth-century banjo reference the more significant manuals of the time, none focus on the manuals themselves. Instead, they focus on topics such as the evolution of the physical instrument,[2] connections between American and English banjo traditions,[3] the role of women in the classical banjo tradition,[4] and the banjo in American popular culture.[5] The research used in this article builds on this scholarship by focusing on the manuals as primary sources, specifically by examining *Hamilton College's Robert Fraker Collection of 19th Century Banjo Instruction Manuals*. This collection contains a wide array of manuals that were published between 1851 and 1902 (see Appendix 1).

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1. Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*, Music in American Life (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991). See chapter 1, pp. 5-39.

2. Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

3. Robert B. Winans and Elias J. Kaufman, "Minstrel and Classic Banjo: American and English Connections," *American Music* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1-30, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3052489 (accessed December 24, 2011).

4. Sarah Meredith, "With a Banjo on Her Knee: Gender, Race, Class, and the American Classical Banjo Tradition, 1880-1915" (PhD diss., Florida State University School of Music, 2003).

5. Linn, *Half-Barbaric Twang.*

In the early nineteenth century, white Americans associated the banjo with Africans and African-Americans. West African slaves brought the banjo to the United States via the West Indies in the eighteenth century.[6] White musicians, such as Joel Walker Sweeney (1810?-1860), began to play the instrument in America during the early nineteenth century. Most of these musicians used blackface (blackening their faces with burnt cork when performing) purportedly to imitate the slaves whom they had heard and seen playing.[7] Beginning in the 1840s, blackface performers and comedians joined together for duets, trios, or still larger ensembles. Out of this trend emerged the minstrel show, which was introduced by the Virginia Minstrels and their performances in the winter of 1843.[8] Minstrelsy was a satirical performance comprised of an entire evening of music, dances, and skits by blackface actors who focused their parody on Southern slaves.[9] The standard minstrel show ensemble consisting of

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6. Dena J. Epstein, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," *Ethnomusicology* 19, no. 3 (1975): 359-60.

7. Blackface was not uncommon in performing arts of the time. For example, the actor playing the title role in Shakespeare's *Othello* would have worn blackface. *Jonathan in England: or, John Bull at Home* by James Henry Hackett and *The Forest Rose: or, American Farmers* by Samuel Woolworth were two other popular plays of the time which included actors in blackface. See Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World,* Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16, table 1; 20; 22.

8. Bob Carlin, *The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 63.

9. As the minstrel show evolved, the list of targets grew to include Northern black dandies, preachers, women, and ethnic groups such as the Irish.

fiddle, bones (a folk percussion instrument), banjo, and tambourine emerged out of this trend.[10]

Banjo playing was an integral aspect of the minstrel shows, and the "stroke" playing style of these minstrel banjoists was presumably modeled after the traditional African way of playing similar stringed instruments. Similar to the modern clawhammer playing technique, stroke style makes use of a downward stroking of the right hand, the fingers curled and the index finger protruding slightly. The back of the index fingernail strikes one of the four longer strings to sound the melody while the thumb rebounds on the short fifth string to create a drone. Stroke style was the prevalent method of playing banjo in the mid-nineteenth century, and the earliest banjo manuals, if they discussed playing technique, focused on stroke style.

The first method book for banjo was authored and published by Elias Howe, Jr. (1820-1895) in 1848 and then re-published in 1851 by Oliver Ditson.[11] For this book, *The Complete Preceptor for the Banjo*, Howe employed the pseudonym of Gumbo Chaff, which presumably brought to mind the blackface character Gombo Chaff ("Gumbo Chaff" is a slight variance), which was one of the characters played by actor and solo comedian Thomas Dartmouth Rice.[12] Sarah Meredith suggests that Howe's pseudonym lent "authenticity" to the tutor,[13] whose repertoire consists entirely of minstrel

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10. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 116.

11. Gura and Bollman, *America's Instrument*, 266n55.

12. Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, 52; 53, illustration 11. Blackface comedians such as Rice would often perform in a circus or during the entr'actes of a play. Nathan 52.

13. Meredith, "With a Banjo," 36.

song melodies. Preceding the repertoire, Howe offers cursory instruction on holding and tuning the banjo, but the lack of instruction in music theory or actual playing techniques for the banjo suggests that *The Complete Preceptor* was more a compendium of minstrel music for musicians already familiar with playing the banjo than an actual instruction book. In contrast, *Briggs' Banjo Instructor*, published in 1855, offers enough information on music rudiments and instruction on playing the banjo that a novice could likely learn the instrument.

Though stroke style was the most widespread playing style of the time, *Briggs' Banjo Instructor* makes brief reference to a new playing style, guitar style, which would become extremely popular in the following decades. Briggs' prefacing instructions include directions for the then-prevalent stroke style, but the comments which precede "Annie Lawrie" [*sic*] note that the performer may play it in the usual method fingering (i.e., in stroke style) or with a fingering style like that used for the guitar.[14] The latter method of playing came to be aptly called guitar style for its guitaristic idiom. Stroke style was often called "banjo style" for similar reasons. Since the guitar had European origins and the banjo had African origins, nineteenth-century Americans considered the guitar, in a sense, culturally superior to the banjo.[15] Associating the banjo more closely with the guitar would then bring it closer to a respectable status.

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14. *Briggs' Banjo Instructor,* 31, https://www.banjofactory.com/uploads/Briggs__Banjo_Instructor.pdf (accessed March 27, 2012).

15. Linn, *Half-Barbaric Twang,* 8, 10.

Though Buckley made only passing mention of guitar style, later authors and manuals would place more emphasis on this style as it became a more popular style of playing. Written ten years after Buckley's book, the *New and Complete Method for the Banjo with or without a Master* (1865) by Frank Converse (1837-1903) is the first manual to fully describe guitar style. Converse does not place his description of guitar style in the introduction as he does the description of banjo style, but instead places it in the middle of the book after a lengthy section of music that is meant to be played in banjo style. The placement of the material within this book clearly indicates that Converse, at that time, considered the guitar style of playing as an alternative to banjo style and that is was to be learned after the reader was thoroughly familiar with the banjo style. The increasing importance of guitar style is evidenced by James Buckley's 1868 manual, published three years after Converse's book. Buckley (1830-1872), a banjo player and teacher, considered both playing styles necessary for a student of banjo, declaring in the manual's preface that "to perform well upon this instrument, one should be able to both pick and to strike, like guitar players."[16] By the 1870s, banjo players such as Septimus Winner (1827-1902) and George C. Dobson (1842-1890) even described guitar style, now also called "picking," before the stroke style in their manuals.[17] By the next decade, Winner and S. S. Stewart

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16. *Buckley's Banjo Guide: Containing the Elementary Principles of Music, together with New, Easy, and Progressive Exercises....* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1868), 2, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,134 (accessed December 19, 2011).

17. *Winner's New School for the Banjo: Arranged as a Self-Instructor: Containing the Rudiments of Music, and Complete Directions for Performing in the Various Positions....* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1872), 22,

(1855-1898), among others, recommended learning stroke style only after mastering picking style, since the former was used only sparingly for marches.[18] And so, in less than twenty years the guitar style had become the preferred style of playing. The banjo, when played in guitar style, seemed more closely associated with classical music and European heritage than with minstrel shows and African origins.

The introduction of a guitar-like playing style was a key element of what Karen Linn calls the "elevation" movement.[19] Guitar style, imitating the idiom of a European instrument and thus being well suited to playing European music, increased the banjo's respectability in the eyes of nineteenth-century white Americans by connecting it to European culture. Proponents of the banjo sought to weaken the banjo's association with blacks and with the early minstrel show, the latter which attracted a rowdy, working-class audience. They marketed the banjo to a more upper-class audience and strengthened European associations with the banjo.

The increasing popularity of guitar style expanded the banjo's musical repertoire to have greater variety and include more European repertoire. Stroke style is best suited to

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http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,3092 (accessed December 19, 2011); *George C. Dobson's New School for the Banjo: Also, Method for Playing the Banjo at Sight, without Study* (Boston: White, Smith, 1877), 21-22, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,1351 (accessed December 19, 2011).

18. *Winner's American Banjoist: A New, Concise and Practical Method, in which the Instructions Are So Simply Treated and Clearly Expressed....* (N.p.: W. F. Shaw, 1882), 8, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,2871 (accessed December 19, 2011); *Stewart's Universal Banjo Instructor: A Book for the Million* (Philadelphia: S. S. Stewart, 1882), 2, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,2804 (accessed December 19, 2011).

19. Linn, *Half-Barbaric Twang*, 6.

melodies with a rhythmic drone, while guitar style better allows for arpeggiated accompaniments and music with less rhythmic drive.[20] Since the guitar style is better suited to arpeggiated accompaniments, the majority of the instrumental banjo repertoire in the tutors after the guitar style was introduced consists of dances and instrumental arrangements of popular songs with such accompaniments. The idiom of stroke style is best suited to music in duple meter, whereas guitar style does not have these kinds of metrical limitations. Therefore, triple meter dances, such as the waltz, appeared in manuals more often as guitar style became more popular. Compilers also included arrangements of pre-existing European music such as waltzes by "Waltz King" Johann Strauss II and excerpts from operas and operettas by composers as such Giuseppe Verdi, Franz von Suppé, and Arthur Sullivan. This resulted in banjo players and instructors increasing the European associations with the banjo with not only playing style, but also with the repertoire played. In the late 1880s, the number of these European arrangements lessened. In their place compilers tended to include original compositions for the banjo, usually in the guitar-style idiom, indicating that the banjo was worthy of having music created specifically for it rather than only adapting popular songs and classical repertoire.

> Introducing the banjo to women was an important part of the elevation movement. As banjoist Albert Baur observed: The advance of the banjo began when it was taken up by the ladies, and by them introduced into the home

20. Linn, *Half-Barbaric Twang*, 17.

> circle. Before that it was heard most frequently in bar-rooms and out of the way places, with an occasional glimpse of it on the minstrel stage, coupled with a grotesque impersonation of a plantation negro.[21]

Comedic actress Charlotte "Lotta" Crabtree (1847-1924), piqued the interest of New York women in the banjo when she played the instrument onstage in roles such as the Marchioness in John Brougham's *Little Nell and the Marchioness*, a musical and theatrical adaptation of Charles Dickens's novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*.[22] This interest spread among American women, encouraged by banjo manufacturers who advertised banjos that were made on a smaller scale and by banjo players who gave lessons to young women.

Many of the tutors also include pieces for voice with banjo accompaniment, presumably for the banjo student to sing and play at the same time. The songs are all fairly similar. A typical song has a short introduction for the banjo, which then plays diatonic chords while the player sings a melody with sentimental or humorous lyrics. Beginning in the 1880s, however, banjo tutors included songs with lyrics in a dialect that crudely imitated the speech of African-Americans. Such

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21. Albert Baur, "Reminiscences of a Banjo Player, Seventh Letter," *S. S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal* 8, no. 6 (February-March, 1892): 5, Sibley Music Library, http://hdl.handle.net/1802/2586 (accessed July 29, 2011).

22. Irene Forsyth Comer, "Lotta Crabtree and John Brougham: Collaborating Pioneers in the Development of American Musical Comedy," in *Musical Theatre in America: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the Musical Theatre in America*, ed. Glenn Loney (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984), 99.

songs had existed in the United States for decades, beginning with "Back Side of Albany Stands Lake Champlain" by Michael Hawkins, first performed in 1815.[23] Sarah Meredith observes that songs in an African-American dialect for voice and piano were published starting in the 1830s and that bourgeois white women presumably performed these songs, as many piano players were female.[24] It is therefore strange that songs in black dialect are conspicuously absent from earlier banjo tutors, only to appear toward the end of the century, especially since minstrel tunes appear in instrumental form in some of the earlier tutors. Without the dialect and ribaldry of the lyrics, however, the minstrel songs were much less objectionable and omitting them allowed the tutor authors to include popular tunes without offending the student's sensibilities or lowering the status of the banjo. By the 1880s, the banjo's reputation had been sufficiently established as a respectable instrument. Minstrel shows had shifted their focus away from blacks, addressing a wider variety of topics and presenting themselves as family entertainment. Authors, therefore, probably began to feel much more comfortable including songs with that dialect.

As part of the elevation movement, authors increased the number of technical exercises and scales in their books, emphasizing the banjo as an instrument deserving of serious study. James Buckley's *Banjo Guide*, published in 1868, gives only two scales and a few short exercises before presenting regular pieces. In contrast, Septimus Winner's *Ideal Method*

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23. Russell Sanjek, *From 1790 to 1909,* vol. 2 of *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 161.

24. Meredith, "With a Banjo," 65-66.

from 1882 lists ten major and three minor scales as well as common chords for each scale. It also includes a number of exercises, including exercises in different types of accompaniments, before the regular pieces are presented. In the author's note of his 1889 tutor *Practical Instructor for the Banjo*, George Lansing admonishes the reader by stating that "the exercises should be practiced daily, and not merely run over…"[25] The tutor then continues to present a large number of scales, chords, and exercises in everything from tremolo to playing in octaves.

Furthermore, authors of banjo tutors attempted to have people take the banjo as seriously as they would a more traditional, respected instrument such as the piano or violin. Some of them explicitly connected the banjo to other instruments. The cover of *Winner's Eureka Method for the Banjo* features drawings of a number of instruments, implicitly connecting the banjo to its cousins the mandolin and guitar, but also to the piano, violin, clarinet, trumpet, and organ.[26] Frank Converse inserted the banjo into another's quote about pianists and violinists:

> "The Gymnast," says Prof. Rector V. Smith, Proctor of the Royal Gymnasium, "exercises his limbs through preparatory exercises. How, therefore, is it possible for the player of the Piano, or Violin (Banjo

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25. *Lansing's Practical Instructor for Banjo: Containing Correct Rules, Explanations and Exercises for Learning This Popular Instrument* (Boston: L. B. Gatcomb, 1889), 2, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,1804 (accessed December 19, 2011).

26. *Winner's Eureka Method for the Banjo: Latest and Best of All Instructors* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1892), cover, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,2954 (accessed December 19, 2011).

> may be included.—*Author*) to dispense with this gymnastic preparation of the joints and fingers?"[27]

George Dobson compared the banjo, when played in plucking style, to the violin and contrasted it with stroke style and fiddling. [28] His argument was that both the violin and banjo were inherently respectable instruments yet could be played in less-respectable contexts (such as the minstrel show). In the preface to the same book, he connected the banjo to the piano, observing:

> There is far more extensive disparity between the old box and strings, or the primeval gourd of the plantation negro of a half a century ago and the present perfected banjo, than there is between the crude spinet of the old masters of music and the massive concert grand piano of today.[29]

Associating the banjo with European instruments was another aspect of the elevation movement. In addition to playing in a guitar-like style and playing European music on the banjo, men such as Winner, Converse, and Dobson

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27. Frank Converse, *The Banjo Made Easy: A Quick Road to Proficiency* (New York: Hamilton S. Gordon, 1893), iii, http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,820 (accessed December 19, 2011).

28. *Geo. C. Dobson's World's Banjo Guide: Fully Explaining the Rudiments of Music—With Cuts and Diagrams Illustrating the Fingering, Positions, etc...* (Boston: White-Smith Music, 1890), 20 (labeled "[9]"), http://elib.hamilton.edu/u?/spe-ban,1651 (accessed December 19, 2011).

29. Dobson, *World's Banjo Guide*, 5.

compared the banjo to European instruments in order to increase the banjo's perceived respectability.

When the nineteenth century began, the banjo was an instrument played in the southern region of America by African slaves. By mid-century, the banjo was well-known throughout the country due to its prevalence in minstrel shows. Over the next half a decade, however, many American banjoists changed their approach to their instrument. They played a wider variety of music in a new European-inspired playing style and marketed it as an instrument comparable with such musical fixtures as the piano and violin. The examination of banjo manuals from the second half of the nineteenth century that this article presents clearly reveals that, though aspects of the music changed over the years—as did the way the banjo was played—the efforts of the manuals' authors was to promote the banjo in America as increasingly respectable and worthy of study. Though others have demonstrated that these efforts were not entirely successful, for a short time during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the banjo did attain recognition in popular culture. Most colleges had banjo clubs and many cities contained banjo orchestras composed of banjo manufactured in various sizes. However, the popularity of the five-string banjo decreased when jazz became popular and four-string banjos were used as rhythm instruments in jazz ensembles. The five-string banjo became popular once again after World War II thanks to players such as Earl Scruggs and Pete Seeger, but was now associated with folk music and bluegrass. That association is still strong today, but groups such as the American Banjo Fraternity continue to promote what they call "classic banjo," the music and playing style from a century

ago, when banjoists played their instruments like a guitar and promoted it as a serious, sophisticated instrument.

Appendix: List of Tutors in Chronological Order

Elias Howe [Gumbo Chaff, pseud.], *The Complete Preceptor for the Banjo: Containing All Necessary Instruction, with a Large Collection of Music Adapted to the Instrument....* (Boston, 1851).

Thomas F. Briggs, *Briggs' Banjo Instructor: Containing the Elementary Principles of Music, Together with Examples and Lessons... (*Boston, 1855).

Frank B. Converse, Frank B. Converse's Banjo Instructor, without a Master: Containing a Choice Collection of Banjo Solos, Jigs, Songs, Reels, Walk Arounds, etc... (New York, 1865).

James Buckley, *Buckley's Banjo Guide: Containing the Elementary Principles of Music, together with New, Easy, and Progressive Exercises...* (Boston, 1868).

Frank B. Converse, Frank B. Converse's New and Complete Method for the Banjo with or without a Master, later ed. (New York, 1869).

Frank B. Converse, *The Banjo, and How to Play It: Containing, in Addition to the Elementary Study, a Choice Collection of Polkas, Waltzes, Solos, Schottisches, Songs, Reels, Hornpipes, Jigs, etc...* (New York, 1872).

Septimus Winner, *Winner's New School for the Banjo: Arranged as a Self-Instructor: Containing the Rudiments of Music, and Complete Directions for Performing in the Various Positions...* (Boston, 1872).

Septimus Winner, *Winner's Primary School for the Banjo: A Thorough and Complete Course of Instruction for the Banjo, Written and Arranged for Self-Instruction as well as for Teachers' Use...* (Cleveland, 1874).

George C. Dobson, *George C. Dobson's New School for the Banjo: Also, Method for Playing the Banjo at Sight, without Study* (Boston, 1877).

George C. Dobson, Geo. C. Dobson's Simplified Method and Thorough School for the Banjo, Two Books in One, new and revised ed. (Boston, c1874 [1879?]).

Henry C. Dobson and G. Clifton Dobson, *Dobson's Universal Banjo Instructor: Containing a Complete Elementary Course, and a Great Variety of Reels, Jigs, Hornpipes...* (Boston, 1882).

S. S. Stewart, *Stewart's Universal Banjo Instructor: A Book for the Million* (Philadelphia, 1882).

Septimus Winner, Winner's American Banjoist: A New, Concise and Practical Method, in which the Instructions Are So Simply Treated and Clearly Expressed... (N.p., 1882).

Septimus Winner, *Ideal Method for the Banjo: Contains Simple and Clear Instructions, and a Large Number of Operatic and Other Popular Airs...* (Boston, 1882).

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Septimus Winner, *Winner's New American School for the Banjo: Comprising the Rudiments of Music, Scales and Exercises, and a Full Selection of the Most Popular Melodies of the Day...* (Boston, 1883).

*Gad Robinson, Gad Robinson's Banjo Instructor: Containing a Large Collection of Vocal and Instrumental Music... (*Boston, 1884).

N. P. B. Curtiss, *Curtiss' Acme Banjo Method: Containing the First Rudiments of Music, with a Perfect and Full Set of Diagrams...* (Boston, 1886).

Albert C. Fairbanks and William A. Cole, *The Progressive International Banjo Instructor* (Boston, 1886).

George C. Dobson, George C. Dobson's "Victor" Banjo Manual: Containing the Principles of Music, Examples, Studies, Gamuts, Diagrams and Cuts Illustrating the Positions... (Boston, 1887).

S. S. Stewart, *The Complete American Banjo School: Part First,* 36th ed. (Philadelphia, c1887).

George L. Lansing, *Lansing's Practical Instructor for Banjo: Containing Correct Rules, Explanations and Exercises for Learning This Popular Instrument* (Boston, 1889).

George C. Dobson, Geo. C. Dobson's World's Banjo Guide: Fully Explaining the Rudiments of Music—With Cuts and Diagrams Illustrating the Fingering, Positions, etc... (Boston, 1890).

A. D. Grover, *Grover's Progressive Method for the Banjo* (Boston, 1892).

Septimus Winner, Winner's Eureka Method for the Banjo: Latest and Best of All Instructors (Boston, 1892).

Frank B. Converse, The Banjo Made Easy: A Quick Road to Proficiency (New York, 1893).

Clarence L. Partee, *American Conservatory Banjo Method* (New York, 1895).

George L. Lansing, *The Witmark Progressive Banjo Method* (New York, 1902).

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