

Editor's Note: This is the second of a three-part series examining the story of MTNA Founder Theodore Presser's colorful early career.

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fter devoting his winter break of 1876 to hosting the first MTNA convention, Theodore Presser continued his energetic leadership of music on the Ohio Wesleyan campus in the New Year. There were numerous musical performances throughout the winter, including a guest appearance by the Boston Philharmonic Club. He also volunteered his time in leading "four or five months" of rehearsals of choruses from Hermann Saroni's operetta *The Twin Sisters* for a performance in February. In March it was announced that he had ordered pictures of Haydn, Mozart and other musicians from Berlin to decorate the walls of the reception room. He played at the year-end programs of the two literary societies as well as at commencement in June to close out the school year.



Figure 1: Theodore Presser in 1876, at the time of the founding of MTNA. Source: Theodore Presser Foundation.

To attract good crowds to his various events during the year, Presser worked closely with the advertising staff of the student newspaper, as attested by this notice in the February 17, 1877, issue: "We desire to thank Prof. Presser for his kindness in looking after the interests of the Local Editors. If those people who desire to make their entertainments successful, would only consult us, we can insure [sic] them a full house for a very small charge." This was a lesson Presser never forgot, and years later when the circulation of *The Etude* flagged during its first year he responded by doubling his advertising budget.

An essay in the *College Transcript* entitled "Literature and Music," which appeared in March 1877, may have been Presser's first published article. The essay enumerated historical figures and living contemporaries who were conversant in both music and the written word. His conclusion was that this pairing of skills was common from Homer to Luther, but that since Luther's time music had become more distinct, making it impossible to master both fields. He waxed poetic in his conclusion:

While music continues to beautify and intensify the sentiment to be conveyed by words, it will still elevate itself into a distinct existence. It has cut itself loose from the fetters of literature and entered a domain of its own, there to express the emotion of the human heart in a language that seems to spring from emotion itself.

"The tide of music's golden sea Is setting toward eternity."<sup>2</sup>

The ambitious young man's gratifying experience with the MTNA Convention inspired him to host another convention in the summer of 1877, a six-week "Normal Music School" that began on July 3. A normal school was an institute designed to train high school graduates to become teachers. Among today's colleges and universities that began as normal schools are Millersville University, Bowling Green State University, Rhode Island College and San Jose State University. By contrast, Normal Music Schools were usually convened temporarily, with the advantage that they could employ well-known teachers who taught at other schools during the regular academic year. For his 1877 "Normal" in Delaware, Presser drew on his MTNA acquaintances along with other midwestern teachers.

The Normal was a brilliant coup for Presser and the college. Not only did he increase his network of indebted colleagues at other schools, but he also earned the appreciation of the townspeople. The local newspapers were laudatory of the event because it included public concerts on Friday evenings for 25 cents. Ranging from solo literature for piano, organ and voice to Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* in the final concert, the programs were designed to appeal to general audiences and provided a substantial boost to the cultural life of the city. The only complaints centered on the erudite organ selections of W. S. B. Mathews of Chicago, which were deemed to be above the heads of most listeners. Though Presser's name was not mentioned, this review in the *Delaware Gazette* may be considered an endorsement of his organizational skill:

It is always gratifying to pronounce any deserving enterprise a success.—And of nothing could it be said more truly than the Normal. The large number of pupils from abroad (many of whom are fine performers and teachers of note), as well as the leading musicians of our own city, are universal in their approbation of the management of the school and the high character of the instruction offered.... Those who are conversant with such matters say that such opportunity for studying and hearing good music has never before been offered in any similar school. We are heartily glad that Delaware has this Normal among the institutions of which she well may be and is justly proud.<sup>3</sup>

Presser's administrative skill would be tested during the following year because of significant changes that happened at Ohio Wesleyan that summer. Previously two separate institutions, the Ohio Wesleyan Female College merged with Ohio Wesleyan University to form one consolidated

AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER 2

institution. The 1877–78 Catalog assured parents that female students, whose classes, rehearsals and dormitory rooms were all located in Monnett Hall, would gain "all the advantages of co-education, and at the same time preserve…all those of a distinctly separate Ladies' College," but the university's history recounts that the transition was a difficult one that took years to accomplish. 5 Presser would now be working with both male and female students.

Even more important was a change in Presser's contract, reflected in a hand-written agreement preserved in the OWU archives. Presser was given "the entire charge of the musical department of the said College under the direction of the President," including the right to hire teachers and pay their salaries. He was required to pay the Board \$200 a term, and he received \$1,000 above expenses. Any additional profits were to be divided two-thirds to the Board and one-third to Presser. The contract was in effect for one year from June 27, 1877. This remarkable agreement attests to both Presser's ambition and the trust the college placed in him.

Presser wasted no time in making changes to the music program. He replaced the vocal teacher with a European-trained singer from Boston and employed a talented senior to assist him in piano instruction and accompanying. He expanded the course offerings by creating two mixed choruses. The number of students swelled, in part because of the consolidation of the two schools. By October, the student paper reported on his changes, using some enigmatic italics that may have been significant to readers:

The musical department of O. W. U. is under the management of Prof. Presser, who, with his *usual* energy, is prosecuting his work. He calls to his aid Miss Lizzie A. Boynton, of Boston, vocalist, and Miss Maria Harter, of Delaware, assistant pianist. Miss Boynton comes highly recommended, having acquired her musical culture in Milan, Italy. This department is truly in a flourishing condition, embracing nearly fifty students who take private lessons, and having such an *efficient* corps of teachers. Prof. Presser has, also, lately formed two vocal classes, composed of both sexes.... Both are largely attended.<sup>7</sup>

The first concert of the Choral Society in December confirmed the wisdom of Presser's changes. Miss Boynton was greeted warmly by the audience and by the student newspaper, which added, "The highest commendation is due Prof. Presser for the untiring energy that he displayed in the preparation of this entertainment."

As the year progressed, the student paper attested to the enthusiasm that Presser brought to his expanded duties: "In conversation with Professor Presser we find that he

has really a holy enthusiasm concerning his Choral class. This Choral class is to the Professor what the Southern policy is to President [Rutherford B.] Hayes,—his own creature, to which he points with pride." At the concert in March 1878 the choir consisted of 22 women and 18 men, who sang selections by Mozart, Rossini and Mendelssohn successfully. This event saw the public inauguration of a new grand piano in Monnett Chapel, which Presser had previously introduced to his students in a private concert. According to *The Delaware Gazette*: "The final 'Good Night' by the Choral Class sent home through that beautiful moonlight night as well pleased an audience as ever went from that Hall that knows so well how to get up nice entertainments." 10

During spring break at the end of March 1878, Presser hosted a four-day "singer's convention" featuring George F. Root (1820–1895) of Chicago, who had taken such an active part in the MTNA Convention. One of the pioneers of group vocal instruction in the United States, Root had led countless choral workshops throughout the country, often using his own collections of hymns and secular songs. In addition to the popular songs mentioned above, he was the composer of two of the most popular American secular cantatas, *The Flower Queen* (1852) and *The Haymakers* (1857). Root's reputation awed the residents of Delaware, as the *Herald* reported: "One seems to live longer, musically, in one day, attending the exercises of Dr. Root, than a decade without this influence and instruction."

The high-level guest artists enhanced and elevated the musical life of the campus, but for students, this was only part of their experience. A brief note in the student paper of April 20 shows that the spring weather had motivated some undergraduate hijinks: "All who heard the hand-organ serenade at Monnett last Tuesday evening were delighted with the effort, except Prof. Presser. Perhaps he objected on account of the absence of the usual accompaniment—monkey." In an effort to lure students into the rehearsal room during the spring term, Presser waived the fees for the choral class.

By the time of the grand concluding organ and vocal concert on June 25, 1878, Presser's choir had grown to 26 women and 28 men. They performed difficult works by Mozart, Mendelssohn, Rossini and Schumann, but not well. The reviewer of the *Gazette* did not mince words: "The choruses, with the exception of the Gloria, which went off very well, were poorly rendered, there appearing to be no sympathy between conductor and chorus, no one seeming to know just when to commence. The intonation in [Rossini's] Carnovale was especially bad." The guest artist for the concert was organist George E. Whiting, one of Presser's former teachers at the New

26 APRIL/MAY 2017

England Conservatory. His excellent playing and fame as a performer were duly noted, but his rude behavior to the local performers and to the audience was decried in the *Gazette* review and in a snarky article in the student paper.

A week later, it was announced that both Presser and Lizzie Boynton had resigned their positions at OWU. They were replaced by organist Jesse W. Parker and a popular local singer from Marion, Ohio, Mrs. Alice J. Osborne. Both of these musicians had been featured prominently in Presser's concerts throughout the past year, and their performances had been reviewed very favorably, sometimes at the expense of the current faculty. The contrast between Osborne and Boynton—a classic singer's duel—may have been reflective of Presser's troubles. The *Gazette* reviewer explicitly contrasted the rivals in describing a March 1878 concert:

We have only space to notice briefly the performances of Mrs. Osborne of Marion, and Miss Boynton, of the Female College. Both of these ladies are great favorites with Delaware audiences, and were met on this occasion with rapturous applause, being encored to the echo at each performance. There was a beautiful contrast in the singing of these ladies—one the beauty of *soul* and *simplicity*, the other the beauty of the highest art and culture of this power of song. We can only say both *won*. Miss Boynton spent some years in Europe where she had the best musical opportunities.<sup>14</sup>

Although this review declared a draw between the two rivals, the contrast between them highlights the situation in Presser's second year at OWU. Despite his auspicious start, it seems that Presser's efforts to bring eastern culture to this midwestern town stretched the patience of his audience. He had featured distinguished guest artists, he had hosted national conventions and he had challenged his students to attain the highest level of musical culture they could achieve. In doing so, the enthusiastic young teacher had overreached, and he found himself once again without a job.

He was not without plans, however, as noted in the article announcing his resignation: "Prof. Presser, Teacher of Music, goes to Europe for a year to prosecute his studies in the specialty to which he is devoted." Presser somehow made his way to Leipzig, Germany, where he applied for a passport at the U.S. Consulate on August 23, 1878. The passport was issued five days later, and Presser was free to remain in the country. On October 5, 1878, Theodore Presser's name was entered as student number 2,899 in the registration book of the Leipzig Conservatory, the illustrious institution that had been founded by Felix Mendelssohn in 1843 and was rapidly becoming the destination of choice for serious American music students (Figure 2).

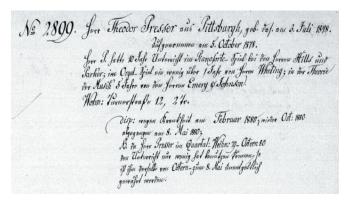


Figure 2: Entry for Theodore Presser in the Inskriptionsakten [registration book] of the Leipzig Conservatory. Source: Hochschule für Musik und Theater "Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy" Leipzig, Bibliothek/Archiv, A, I.1, 2899.

The period after the Civil War brought rapid economic growth in the United States, while the period after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 witnessed similar economic expansion in the German Empire. As a consequence, thousands of American music students took the opportunity to further their studies in the land of Bach and Beethoven. The Leipzig Conservatory was extremely popular among English-speaking students, and by 1890 more than half of the student body at the school would consist of foreigners. The graph in Figure 3 demonstrates that in 1878 Presser was part of a rising tide of Americans enrolling at the conservatory.<sup>17</sup>

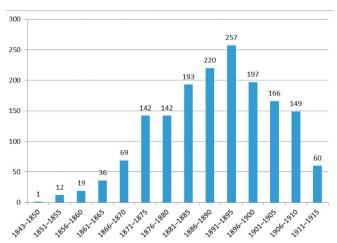


Figure 3: Enrollment trends of American students at the Leipzig Conservatory. Source: Bomberger, E. Douglas. "The German Musical Training of American Students, 1850–1900." PhD dissertation, University of Maryland-College Park, 1991. p. 56.

A factor in Presser's decision was his friend Chadwick, who had begun his studies in Leipzig a year earlier. Chadwick had managed to save enough money from his

AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER 27

teaching position at Olivet to move to Europe, where he stayed for more than two years. He and Presser were as different in personality and work habits as could be imagined, and Chadwick's private memoirs give some humorous illustrations of their differences. Shortly after Presser arrived, Chadwick was forced to vacate his housing for two weeks, so he moved in with his newly arrived friend for a short while. The apartment where Presser stayed was substandard in every way, from the inadequate food to the lack of clean linens. Although Presser accepted this without complaining, Chadwick was of a different mindset. He described his response thus:

Presser was too meek to kick but I was not and in about two days there was a row that could have been heard for miles. Presser came in in the midst of it and remarked with much enthusiasm "I knew it! I knew it would come!" But it resulted in some improvement and I was not sorry I could command a few cuss words in the Saxon dialect.<sup>18</sup>

Chadwick also recalled the difference in their work habits in a commemoration written after Presser's death in 1925:

We went to many concerts and rehearsals together, although he would never allow them to interfere with his pianoforte practice. He had a little card at the side of his piano on which his occupation for the day was spaced out, hour by hour, and he did not often allow his schedule to be interfered with. He lectured me faithfully for not adopting this method, as well as on other subjects, and as I seldom practiced if I could go to a rehearsal or a concert, he often said to me, "Chadwick, you cannot pick up music on the fly," in which of course he was entirely mistaken.<sup>19</sup>

The picture of Presser that emerges is one of self-discipline to the point of stubbornness and a strong commitment to his personal priorities. Chadwick's spontaneous and carefree personality prepared him well for his career as a composer; Presser's disciplined work ethic prepared him for his later career in business. Chadwick noted, though, that when Presser joined him and a group of friends for a holiday of hiking during the summer of 1879, he was "the life of the party." His high spirits almost caused them to be evicted from the inn where they were staying, and the other boys responded by hanging Theodore out of the window by his heels.<sup>20</sup>

In January 1879, *The College Transcript* published a letter from Presser to the students of OWU describing the University of Leipzig. Although he was not personally enrolled in that institution, he described its advantages for students who might be considering a course of European study. He focused primarily on the ways that the university

was different from an American university, including low tuition, lax class attendance and the absence of required chapel. In addition, he highlighted such colorful aspects of German university life as student societies, the popularity of dueling and the prevalence of beer at rehearsals, to the delight of the student editors.<sup>21</sup>

Leipzig was known for its unhealthful climate, and in his second year, Presser had an extended bout of illness. The surviving evidence does not indicate the nature of his illness or whether—as had happened in his youth—overwork was a contributing factor. The registration book states that he withdrew from February to Easter [March 28] in 1880, missing so much of the semester's instruction that he was not charged tuition for the period from Easter to his final departure on May 8. He arrived in the port of New York aboard the steamship Helvetia on June 14, 1880.

The files of the Leipzig Conservatory are remarkably well preserved in the archives of its successor institution, the Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy Hochschule for Music and Theater. These files contain information on registration, graduation, performances and exams, but the most instructive document in Presser's file, kindly supplied by the archivist of the Hochschule, is his "Lehrer-Zeugniss" [teachers' report]. This document gives frank assessments of his work from each of his teachers, allowing us to get a good sense of how he compared with his classmates. When Presser began his studies at the conservatory, he was 30 years old, or twice the age of a typical enrollee. Though his registration information indicates that he had previously had 10 years of piano instruction and a year of organ, he was not an advanced pupil. His piano teacher Bruno Zwintscher wrote this frank assessment upon his departure: "Distinguished himself from the beginning through unusual diligence and earnest efforts, so that despite his mature age he has substantially improved his rather elementary playing and the terrible technique resulting from his stiff fingers, and is now in a position to play simple pieces by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven respectably."22 Comments by other teachers were briefer, but nearly all mention that he was "fleissig" [hardworking, diligent or industrious]. This quality was prized by German teachers, and despite very weak skills on arrival, Presser impressed his teachers by his diligence and improvement.

In recognition of his efforts, Presser was granted a "Directorial-Zeugniss" [special certificate from the director], even though he did not earn a degree at the conservatory. This document, written in cramped German Schrift and signed by his teachers, hung in a frame in Presser's office and is currently in the possession of the Presser Foundation. It is impressive in appearance, but it is doubtful that many of his visitors could read the fine print. It is a fitting tribute

28 APRIL/MAY 2017

to the founder of *The Etude* magazine, as it attests to his diligent efforts and substantial improvement despite his minimal background. Throughout his career as a publisher, Presser made the advancement of average students his highest priority, giving them a monthly dose of practical encouragement in the pages of his magazine.

In the fall of 1880, Theodore Presser began a new job at yet another female college: Hollins Institute in Botetourt Springs, not far from Roanoke, Virginia. This was his first venture south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and he grew to love the southern ambience. In later years, he and his wife often vacationed at southern resorts. Like Xenia College and Ohio Wesleyan Female College, this institution was for women only. The catalogs show that all of the members of the Board of Trustees were men, along with about half of the teaching faculty. Music was one of the largest departments, led by H. I. Pauli, professor of German and director of music, along with Presser teaching piano and theory, Julia Porcher teaching piano and singing, and Miss F. J. Douglas teaching vocal culture and singing. Of the 113 students enrolled during Presser's first year, 79 took piano lessons.23

The president of this institution was Charles L. Cocke, an influential educator and also the most important of Presser's early mentors. Cocke had arrived at Valley Union Seminary, as it was initially known, in 1846, when he and his wife were the owners of 16 slaves. He later established a school for enslaved persons and in 1851 transformed the Seminary into a women's college. In a long career that stretched to his death in 1901, Cocke was arguably the most important advocate for women's education in the South. Although he subscribed to the commonly held view that the primary goal of women's education was to prepare them for marriage, he also espoused a rigorous academic program with high standards of achievement. During the 1880s, his work bore fruit in expanded student enrollment and improved facilities. A notable feature of his personality and administrative style was extreme frugality. He did not accept a regular salary for his work, but continually loaned it to the Board of Trustees until they were so deep in debt that they were forced to deed the campus to him and his family in 1900. His daughter Matty Cocke succeeded him as president in 1901 and continued many of his policies and initiatives.24

Presser later recalled that he spent most of his free time in the company of Cocke during his three years on the faculty. Under his influence Presser greatly broadened his general education, and he also developed the moral and ethical code that would guide him in his business career. Cocke was a man of broad intellect and restless curiosity, but he was humble about his own learning. Essentially idealistic,

he worked for decades with only minimal result before his school flourished in the last two decades of the 19th century. As an administrator, he was said to be autocratic, and his biographer's description of this trait sounds remarkably similar to the words of Presser's employees about him decades later:

He knew his plans and hopes, he had bold confidence in his own judgment, and he possessed an indomitable will. He had to speak with decision and authority. All confessed his right to command and understood the certain penalties of faulty service or of disobedience. The harassments of interminable worries and of defeated hopes may at times have resulted in a look of sternness, or have given his manner a touch of unpleasing abruptness; but, withal, it was far from him to inflict intentional pain. Austerity of manner, incidentally of expression, was balanced by as kind a heart as ever beat.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Presser's niece Edith Shaffer wrote, "My uncle was a very unusual man, by that I mean that he was a combination of tyrant, romancer, and philosopher, with just enough human interest to lend a pleasant contrast." Most conspicuous in Cocke's personality—and later in Presser's—was a curious mixture of frugality and generosity. He did not pursue wealth, and he ran his own household and the college on a very tight budget. But for a cause that he believed worthwhile, he was willing to make personal sacrifices in order to contribute liberally. These were lessons that Presser observed and adopted as his own.

During his three years at Hollins, Presser was notorious for his lack of money. One of his students, Ella Ballard, had the good fortune to bring two horses with her to college. Since she could only ride one at a time, she often loaned the other one to Presser, who had no transportation of his own. Years later, when he was a wealthy music publisher and she was a music teacher in Oklahoma, he would send her a copy of all of the year's musical publications each December as a Christmas gift.<sup>27</sup> When Presser inaugurated the program to fund music buildings at selected schools, Hollins College was the first recipient. Presser saw the plans for the building, which is still in use, before his death in October 1925, but it was not completed until 1926. At its dedication, one of the old employees at the college commented, "Where he get all that money? He was powerful poor when he was here, 'cause he give away his money helpin' others. Whenever he had to have his pants mended he had to go to bed in his room until they came back. Never knew no one like Professor Presser."28

One of Presser's students at Hollins, Margaret Franklin, recalled his teaching many years later. Her recollections give a striking portrait of Presser the teacher:

AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER 2

At that piano, beside us, with heels hooked over the chair rounds, shoulders humped, head forward, sat Mr. Presser, an earnest, inspiring teacher. There was nothing romantic about him but he was a very unusual personality. His interest in music was so intense that the students were carried away by his enthusiasm and worked a great deal harder for that reason. His initiative was boundless and incessant and he was forever making plans for some kind of musical activity. His great idea was the *beauty* of music. No ugly tones were permitted. They had to be ferreted out and "beautified." ... The musical idea, the beauty and interest of a composition, came before the technical side. He was, however, careful to teach only what a pupil could master technically, with good finish.... His understanding of each pupil and his personal kindness were marked and constant. He knew that I had trouble with higher mathematics and therefore he persuaded the faculty into accepting a music diploma as one of the seven single diplomas we had to have for our degree. I gladly dropped math and took on extra piano practice. He taught harmony at the same lesson with piano, making us analyze what we had played in our piano compositions.29 ~

#### Notes

- 1. The College Transcript 11/9 (February 17, 1877): 11.
- 2. T. P., "Literature and Music," *The College Transcript* 11/11 (March 17, 1877): 3–4.
- 3. "Normal Music School," *The Delaware Gazette*, July 19, 1877, p. 4.
- 4. "Observations on Ladies' Department, in *Catalogue of Ohio Wesleyan University, for 1877–78* (Delaware: Ohio Wesleyan University, 1878), p. 37.
- 5. This process is described in Henry Clyde Hubbart, "Union—1877," Chapter 5 of *Ohio Wesleyan's First Hundred Years* (Delaware, OH: Ohio Wesleyan University, 1943), pp. 59–67.
- 6. "Agreement," June 27, 1877. I am grateful to Emily Gattozzi, Curator of the OWU Historical Collection, for locating this document and the articles in *The College Transcript*.
  - 7. *The College Transcript* 12/1 (October 6, 1877): 11.
- 8. "Locals," *The College Transcript* 12/6 (December 15, 1877): 10.
- 9. "Locals," *The College Transcript* 12/8 (January 26, 1878): 11. Hayes' policy of dismantling Reconstruction in the South, which opened the door for the return of discriminatory policies undermining advances for African-Americans, was underway at this time. It has since been recognized as one of the most damaging presidential initiatives in American history.

- 10. "The University Concert," *The Delaware Gazette*, March 21, 1878, p. 4.
- 11. "Local News," *The Delaware Herald*, March 29, 1878, p. 3.
- 12. "Locals," *The College Transcript* 12/13 (April 20, 1878): 11.
- 13. "The Organ Concert," *The Delaware Gazette*, June 29, 1878, p. 4.
- 14. "The University Concert," *The Delaware Gazette*, March 21, 1878, p. 4.
  - 15. Resignations," The Delaware Gazette, July 4, 1878, p. 4.
- 16. A copy of the application may be found in *U.S. Passport Applications*, 1795–1925, www.ancestry.com, accessed May 14, 2015.
- 17. E. Douglas Bomberger, "Leipzig: Conservatory and Conservatism," Chapter 2 of "The German musical training of American students, 1850–1900" (PhD diss., University of Maryland-College Park, 1991), pp. 40–81.
- 18. George Whitefield Chadwick, *Memoirs*, 1877–1880, George W. Chadwick collection, New England Conservatory Archives, Boston, MA.
- 19. "Tributes from Eminent Men and Women to Theodore Presser: George W. Chadwick," *The Etude* 44/1 (January 1926): 10.
- 20. George Whitefield Chadwick, *Memoirs*, 1877–1880, Spaulding Library, New England Conservatory.
- 21. Theodore Presser, "The University at Leipzig," *The College Transcript* 13/8 (January 25, 1879): 116–17; and "Personal Mention" on p. 125 of the same issue.
- 22. Hochschule für Musik und Theater "Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy" Leipzig, Bibliothek/Archiv, A, I.3, Nr. 2899; translated by the author.
- 23. Thirty-eighth Annual Catalog of the Officers and Students of Hollins Institute, Botetourt Springs, VA, 1880–'81 (Richmond: West, Johnston & Co., 1881), p. 23.
- 24. W. R. L. Smith, *Charles Lewis Cocke: Founder of Hollins College* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1921).
  - 25. Smith, Charles Lewis Cocke, p. 134.
- 26. Edith M. Shaffer, "Memoirs of Theodore Presser," unpublished typescript dated 1936 in the files of the Presser Foundation, p. 1.
- 27. E-mail from Frank Emerson, grandson of Ella Ballard Corr, November 21, 1997. Hollins University archives folder F-3a: Faculty: Theodore Presser.
- 28. Quoted in Cooke, "Theodore Presser (1848–1925): A Centenary Biography Part Four," *The Etude* 66/10 (October 1948): 587
- 29. Margaret Upshur Quinby Franklin, "Theodore Presser as a Teacher," *The Etude* 62/11 (November 1944): 619, 667.

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30 APRIL/MAY 2017