

Bibliographic Note:
Truth in this Fiction

The main characters in this novel are fictional. There is no archive of their letters, and yet *The Glass Harmonica* draws deeply from historical records. This bibliographic note describes the non-fiction foundations of the novel, as well as some specific threads of accuracy. In the end though, this is a work of imagination.

The truth about the glass harmonica, or ‘armonica’

Nearly forgotten today, the glass harmonica arguably deserves the label of first pop-music phenomenon. Invented by Benjamin Franklin in 1761, the instrument had the advantages of vaguely dangerous sounds and great PR: a blind woman virtuoso musician toured the concert halls of Europe with it, Mozart composed for it and Franz Mesmer mesmerized his patients with it.¹ Audiences fainted at the eerie music of the glasses, and news of the listeners’ ‘celestial ravishment’ spread widely.² One had to be careful with *ravishment* in those days, as today. Its effects seemed so powerful that some German towns banned the instrument.³ Before 1802, nearing the end of its heyday, the fictitious German Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler looked back with some irony at the fad, including the sexual undertones.

*For any young lady of breeding it would have been most ill advised, as soon as the glasses were even touched, not to fall into a tolerably convincing swoon; she would have risked becoming an immediate object of indifference to any young man of refinement, however long he had courted her with amorous glances. Even ladies of more mature age fancied themselves transported back ten or fifteen years by all the pangs of blessed rapture ...*⁴

The instrument’s notoriety grew in part because the most well-known players were women, which was unusual enough in a time that discouraged, if not disbarred, women from the early ranks

of professional musicianship. Playing the glasses proved fraught with dangers for these women.⁵ Doctors hospitalized some players, including the renowned Marianne Davies, for hysteria.⁶ While some speculate that lead poisoning from the glasses caused the women to go mad, science appears not to bear out this theory. Much more likely is the broader historical interpretation that doctors diagnosed any woman who broke the social rules as suffering from ‘hysteria’. The doctors employed a language of pathology as part of a larger cultural pattern of disciplining free-thinking women.

The strange effect of the glass harmonica does have some scientific basis. Because the hertz range of the sound is uncommon, the brain doesn’t quite know where to place the source of the sound.⁷ Contemporaries of the period debated the effects of the instrument.⁸ Karl Leopold Röllig’s treatise, mentioned in chapter four, exists (though I did invent Röllig’s trip to Paris.). He’s the one who cast the instrument as so powerful, you had to take the music in small doses to survive the impact.

Not only these soft ‘airwaves’ which fill your ears can have serious consequences but also the percussion and the constant straining of the cups with already fragile nerves on your fingers can cause illnesses which can –sometimes – even end fatally.⁹

The instrument’s few decades of fame, ending around 1820, dovetailed with the beginning of the invention of the celebrity, which is why I allowed myself the conceit of creating Chjara Garland as America’s first popular music celebrity. While people in ancient and early modern civilizations achieved fame, it was only with the expansion of printing and also the increase of literacy among common people that celebrity, as we know it today, began its engine of stardom.¹⁰ For the first time, people began to read news accounts with intimate details about the individuals they admired.

In addition to the invention of celebrity, music enjoyed special powers during the fever of new nationalism. In the 18th century, the French worked hard to get their musical heritage recognized, competing with the Germans in particular. The revolutionary Jean Baptiste LeClerc went so far as to suggest that the law should

circumscribe good and bad French music, and a special magistrate would guide people toward the ‘right music’. The nationalistic aims to which music was harnessed flowed naturally out of a discourse that empowered music to lead the soul and improve the body’s health.¹¹

Undoubtedly, the vaguely naughty air that clung to the instrument helped to promote its popularity. Mesmer was the lightning rod for these implications. The character of the German choirmaster Kreisler gave voice to these thoughts: ‘Of the use made of the instruments by Mesmer I prefer not to think!’

My personal interest ignited in part from glimpsing, out of the corner of my eye, these historical figures winking at me from behind the distance of the years. Like them, I have long had the hunch that sensuality might lead to virtue instead of vice, which is the question that (the fictional) Marguerite poses with the help of (the real) Joseph-Louis Roger’s out-of-print text.¹² I believe that music and other sources of joy or ecstasy can overcome warlike ways of being in this world. In fact, the inspiration for the entire book drew from the moment when I took an accordion into my arms for the first time. The feel of the bellows breathing against my chest changed me. And a trip to the Salt Lake Library in search of accordion recordings tumbled me accidentally into a bin of glass harmonica CDs, a happenstance that sent me down a rabbit hole these last nearly eight years.

Before we turn to the historical accuracies behind Henry’s business interests, a few more threads of accuracy between the real music history and my invented one: A hidden performer did play the glass harmonica at the ‘ghost shows’ in the catacombs of Paris. The ghost-show scene in chapter three plays on the history of Etienne-Gaspard Roberts (who was also called Robertson) and his *Phantasmagoria*. Roberts helped create the technology of the first ‘moving’ pictures, though I have changed Roberts’s name to allow myself some flexibility with the details.¹³

Part Two’s singing schools did sweep through New England in the 1700s, driven by Puritan elders’ insistence on getting people to sing the ‘right’ way. Their intentions went awry in amusing ways, including that by early 1800, they tried to change the melodies to ancient European tunes to stop the young men and women from singing scripture to bawdy tunes.¹⁴

Part Four's Bostonian snob, the fictional Ross Corbett who disdains the first American pop music of the glass harmonica, accurately represents the point of view of music lovers of the period who invented what we know of today as 'classical' music. They began the tradition of listening again and again to the then-current European composers.¹⁵

The sex shop on cartwheels: the truth behind Henry's business

The political revolutions of the late 18th century coincided with an expanding sense of freedom, including sexual freedom. By some estimates, one in three New England brides was pregnant. Richard Godbeer chronicles how young people took advantage of an increasingly permissive atmosphere in his *Sexual Revolution in Early America*.¹⁶

I have invented Henry's business, which catered to these new freedoms. The modern pornography business hadn't yet come into being, including the word 'pornography' itself, which dates to mid 19th century.¹⁷ Change was underway, however, before photography and mass-market printing transformed the secret world. Before the American Revolution and the separation from England, printing presses were few and tightly controlled. After about 1790, book peddlers on the new roads and expanding transportation networks dramatically increased the availability of books considered salacious, including the novel *The Coquette*, which some libraries banned and ministers railed against. Literacy skyrocketed, and people turned their backs on the prescriptive, early 'self-help' publications of the past, such as Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*.¹⁸ While I invented the 'Johnny Appleseed' of erotic literature, people were getting their hands on *Fanny Hill* somehow, as evidence of it being printed has survived.¹⁹

In a broader sense, historians suggest that between the founding of the United States and the Comstock Act regulating obscenity in 1873, the old 'secret museum' paradigm of elite appreciation of obscene art moved toward the mass-market business we know today.²⁰ The story about the discovery of sexually explicit frescos during the excavation of Pompeii is factual, and there were secret societies of intellectuals in Paris. I invented the lecture, however. The race to create pornographic movies instead of mere text, drawings and objects may very well have

been set back by Robertson's famed secrecy over his phantoscope technology.

The erotic objects including the scrimshaw buttons carved with scenes from Pompeii frescos are only partly traceable in the historical record. The Museum of Eroticism in Paris showcases some of the variety of sailors' erotic carvings of the period. The 'Nantucket husbands,' or love daggers as Chjara prefers to call them, are rumored to exist, though as yet I have heard of no surviving examples.

I also invented Henry's showboat, but itinerant musicians and showmen were all the rage in the early U.S. Republic, and the first steamboats began to appear about when I put Henry's ship onto the Hudson. Also, Harlequins intrigued Americans in the early years of the 19th century.²¹ I have found no reference to any sex shop on cartwheels, but how else, I might ask, did rural people get their hands on these things at this time?

Other historical truths

As one might expect in an historical novel, many of the events in the book are true to the period. Masquerades did draw many hundreds if not thousands, though these events declined after The Terror, and costuming did include the he-whores, the Evites, and the lower/upper classes' cross-dressing.²² The second elephant ever to grace American shores did visit towns in New England around this time, and farmers did set bonfires in the middle of the night to see the great animal without paying any fee to the animal-exhibition promoters.²³ Wax figures, such as the Mohawk 'king' Henrik, were popular entertainments.²⁴ Portsmouth did burn to the ground at Christmas 1802.²⁵ Philip Dray describes the electricity demonstrations with the Leyden jar in *Stealing God's Thunder*, and I've drawn the details of Marguerite's surgery from James S. Olson's *Bathsheba's Breast: Women, Cancer, & History*. The *Philanthropist*, or the 'Boatload of Knowledge', did depart Pittsburgh loaded with intellectuals in 1826.²⁶ My favorite overviews of the period are Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* and Joyce Appleby's *Inheriting the Revolution*.

- 1 Current musicians provide much of the history of the glass harmonica on which I depended. See especially William Zeitler's website, www.glassharmonica.com
- 2 American poet Nathaniel Evans used the term 'celestial ravishment' in a poem praising the glass armonica to Benjamin Franklin: www.theotherpages.org/poems/evans02.html
See also www.crystalias.com/content/history.html
- 3 See the Franklin Institute's brief survey of the instrument's history at: www.fi.edu/learn/sci-tech/armonica. One of the current players of the instrument, Thomas Bloch, elaborates on why the German police banned the instrument: 'Among the reasons put forward: the sounds made by the instrument frighten animals, cause premature deliveries, shoot down the strongest man within one hour (according to a medical dictionary published in 1804) and drive the interpreters to madness ...' www.thomasbloch.net/en_glassharmonica
- 4 Kreisler is the creation of composer-writer E.T.A Hoffman. These lines are quoted by Zeitler at www.glassharmonica.com/armonica/armonica_germany.php. Zeitler draws on *Musical Quarterly* (1991) 75 (2): 219-224.
- 5 For an excellent discussion of the particular historical affinity between women and the glass harmonica, see Heather Hadlock's 'Sonorous Bodies: Women and the Glass Harmonica,' in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 2000, vol 53, no. 3.
- 6 See www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Marianne_Davies.
- 7 I am not qualified to evaluate the debates on the lead theory. I conclude from other secondary sources that lead could not have leached into the water used by the harmonica players. See www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Glass_harmonica.
- 8 The medical establishment of France interrogated Mesmer's claims for his treatment method. In the course of this investigation, the doctors debated the glass harmonica's effects with contributions by Benjamin Franklin. See www.uh.edu/engines/epi710.html.
- 9 Zeitler has reproduced Röllig's key thoughts at: www.glassharmonica.com/armonica/roellig.php.
- 10 A summary of this history of celebrity can be found at www.randomhistory.com/1-50/010celeb.html. The article cites Jake Halpern's *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007) and Maureen Orth's *The Importance of Being Famous: Behind the Scenes of the Celebrity-Industrial Complex* (New York: H. Holt, 2004).
- 11 See Peter Huray and James Day, eds., *Music and Aesthetics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, pgs 108 and 117 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- 12 See Joseph-Louis Roger's *Traite des effets de la musique sur le corps humain*, translated from Latin to French by Etienne Sainte-Marie, 1803; first published in 1758 as *Tentamen de vi soni et musices in corpus humanum*.
- 13 I have relied on several excellent histories, such as Terry Castle's *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford University Press, 1995). In Castle, I found not only splendid details of the Etienne Robertson's ghost show but a larger kinship. 'I have aimed,' wrote Castle, 'at precisely this sort of light-bringing; at the enlightenment that is really only the apprehension of a greater, more far-flung, bewilderment.'
- 14 For the New England music scene, I depended on a number of secondary and primary sources, in particular: Michael Broyles *Music of the Highest Class: Elitism and Populism in Antebellum Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Stephen Marini et al, ed., *Norumbega Harmony: Historic and Contemporary Hymn Tunes* (University of Mississippi Press, 2003); Peter Benes, *New England Music: The Public Sphere, 1600-1900* (The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings, 1996; Boston University Scholarly Publications, 1998).

- 15 See Broyles, *ibid.*
- 16 See especially chapter 7, 'Under the Watch' The Metamorphosis of Sexual Regulation in Eighteenth-Century New England, in Richard Godbeer's, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
- 17 See the *Oxford English Dictionary* for a brief history of the word 'pornography.'
- 18 See Cathy N. Davidson's introduction to *The Coquette* (Oxford Paperbacks edition 1987) for an excellent survey of both the novel's importance and the context of exploding literacy.
- 19 Richard J. Wolfe offers a brief summary of the contentious debates around the clandestine publishing history of *Fanny Hill* in *Marbled Paper*, pgs 95–99, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). See also the American Antiquarian Society's list of 'risqué literature published in America before 1877,' compiled by Marcus A. McCorison: www.bibsocamer.org/BibSite/McCorison/Risque.pdf.
- 20 See Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography* (NY: Zone Books, 1996) and Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (University of California Press, 1987).
- 21 See Peter Benes, 'The American Death of Harlequin: Musical Pantomimes in Boston before 1815,' In *New England Music: The Public Sphere, 1600–1900*, pgs 30–47 (op. cit.).
- 22 See Castle, op. cit.
- 23 See Peter Benes, ed., *Itinerancy in New England and New York*, (The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings, 1984, Boston University Scholarly Publications, 1986).
- 24 See Eric Hinderaker's *The Two Hendricks: Unraveling a Mohawk Mystery* (Harvard University Press, 2010).
- 25 I'm indebted to the generous staff at Portsmouth Athenaeum for helping me find newspaper accounts of the fire. See also Charles W. Brewster's *Rambles Around Portsmouth*, originally published in 1869.
- 26 See Philip Dray, *Stealing God's Thunder: Benjamin Franklin's Lightning Rod and the Invention of America* (NY: Random House, 2005); James S. Olson's *Bathsheba's Breast: Women, Cancer, & History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Donald E. Pitzer's, 'The Original Boatload of Knowledge Down the Ohio River: William McClure and Robert Owen's Transfer of Science and Education to the Midwest, 1825–1826,' *Ohio Journal of Science* vol. 89, no. 5, pgs 128–42; Godbeer, op. cit.; and Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001).