

William Henry Fry Biography

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Biography

William Henry Fry (1813-1864) was the first American to compose a publicly performed grand opera, a critic, and an early champion of American composers.

William Henry Fry was born in Philadelphia on Aug. 10, 1813, son of the publisher of the *Philadelphia National Gazette*. He is said to have learned to play the piano by listening to instructions given his elder brother. He began formal study of harmony and counterpoint early in the 1830s with a Paris Conservatory graduate in Philadelphia. In 1836 Fry became secretary of the Philharmonic Society (organized 3 years earlier) and began his career as a music critic, reviewing concerts and writing articles for his father's newspaper.

In 1841 Fry completed *Aurelia the Vestal*, an opera he had worked on some 4 years. When attempts to have it produced failed, he turned his attention to *Leonora*, which was to become his best-known work. This opera, with a libretto adapted from a play by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, had its world premiere on June 4, 1845, in Philadelphia. It ran for 12 performances and was well enough regarded by the Seguin Opera Company to warrant a four-performance revival the next year.

Fry himself did not witness the revival, since he had departed for Europe as regular correspondent for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the *New York Tribune* early in 1846. He remained abroad, mostly in Paris, for more than 6 years, returning to America in 1862 as political and general editor, as well as music critic, of the *New York Tribune*.

In New York, Fry gave a remarkable series of lectures on music; in the last he bitterly attacked Americans for their indifference to their own composers, emphasizing the need to encourage homegrown creators.

A high point in Fry's career came in 1853, when Louis Antoine Jullien's orchestra played three of his symphonies: *A Day in the Country*, *The Breaking Heart*, and *Santa Claus*. At his farewell benefit of May 31, 1854, Jullien performed yet another, *Childe Harold*. Fry's most notable orchestral achievement was perhaps the overture to *Macbeth*, completed in 1862.

A considerably revised version of *Leonora* with Italian text was presented at the Academy of Music in New York in 1858 with indifferent success. Another opera, *Notre Dame de Paris*, was produced in Philadelphia in 1864. Fry also composed a *Stabat Mater*, a Mass, and shorter compositions. He died in Santa Cruz, West Indies, on Dec. 21, 1864.