



Anna Teresa Berger, Cornet Virtuoso

BETSY G. MILLER

In 1889 when she played her cornet before delighted London audiences, Anna Teresa Berger was advertised as the “finest lady performer in the world.”¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, she was well-known in the United States as part of the Berger family performers. Before the end of the century, she had established an international reputation as a cornet soloist. She was a student of Arbuckle and Jules Levy, but her name has all but disappeared from the history books. Glenn Bridges in his *Pioneers in Brass*, that excellent starting point for a study of brass players of the past, only gives Anna Berger fleeting mention as having been a prominent cornetist.²

Born on May 16, 1853, in Baltimore,³ Anna was the daughter of Henry Berger, immigrant builder of church organs. Henry Berger was enough of a musician that he was able to train his children on a variety of instruments and form them into a talented troupe. They gave their first concert at York, Pennsylvania, April 7, 1862, for the benefit of sick and wounded Union soldiers.⁴

Anna began her musical career with the family as a violinist, but she apparently switched to the cornet almost immediately. Her obituary notice in the *Jackson Citizen Patriot* says she began the study of the cornet at the age of ten, and her first teacher was the famous cornetist, Arbuckle. The Berger children performed with the McFarland Dramatic Company in 1863, and in 1864 they joined the Carter Zouave Troupe. This latter organization consisted of 20 children who performed as a band and did various vaudeville sketches.⁵ It was while the Bergers were with Carter that Anna's brother, Fred Berger, met Sol Smith Russell, a talented comedian and actor.⁶ This was to be a lifelong friendship, and years later Fred Berger became Russell's very successful theatrical manager.

The letters of Sol Smith Russell addressed to Fred Berger, which are contained in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia, give a fascinating look at the early career of Russell and his initial friendship with the Bergers.

A traveling performer of the mid-1800s was to a large extent at the mercy of theater and troupe managers. At one point, Russell was left penniless and stranded in a town in which the Bergers happened to be playing. Fred Berger loaned him \$2.00 to tide him over.⁷ Russell remained loyal to this friend who so readily helped him in the early days.

The close friendship of the two men is revealed by Russell's letters, and eventually Sol married Louisa Berger, sister to Anna and Fred. In his correspondence, Sol frequently asked about Anna Berger and her performing. In a letter dated January 15, 1868, he expressed his concern about the hardship of life on the road for her:

I wish she [Anna Berger] would marry some Rich old cuss that she might Retire from her Profession and stop Blowing that confounded cornett. I Declare it makes me shiver when I think of her Play-

ing so much for fred she is to Delicate to play and Blow that horn you try and let her go to York and live with aunty about one year and she can be fed on good wholesome food and she could go to School and could Practice on her violin all the time and I will warrent in one year she will come from home a fine stout hearty girl for I think that is where the trouble lies annie is Exposed to much to being up nights and Eating to many sweet meats and this kind of living don't atall agree with her Delicate constitution take my advise and let her have a good Rest and let her go to school if you Posibly can.⁸



Anna Berger as a young woman.
(Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson, MI)

◀ Anna Teresa Berger, London, 1889. Anna was presented with a gold medal for her appearances in the Covent Garden Promenade Concerts. (Courtesy of Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson, MI)



Anna Berger Lynch and her children: Leigh Lynch, Jr., age 14; Dorothy Lynch, age 6; Eugene Field Lynch age 3; William Lynch, age 1. (Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson MI)



Sol Smith Russell in his greatest role as Noah Vale in *A Poor Relation*. Russell toured with the Berger family for many years. (Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson, MI)

Sol's spelling and punctuation in the quote above have been left in his distinctive style. They are a good example of what happened to young performers who often were on the road long before their formal schooling could be completed. The world renowned violinist, Camilla Urso, did not learn to read until she was ten years old. She had begun performing at the age of six.⁹ It should be noted that at the time Sol's letter to Fred was written, Anna Berger was only 14 years old. Apparently her schooling also suffered in her drive to perform.

At the time of this Russell-Berger correspondence, the Bergers were touring with the Peak family. This family had made its fame as bell ringers. In earlier years, P.T. Barnum had imported a company of Swiss Bell Ringers. The company had disbanded precipitously, and the bells were stored in a basement in St. Louis. William Peak, Senior, who had already formed his family into a touring musical troupe, recognized the novel appeal of the bells, and purchased them. He toured them successfully for many years, and eventually his son William, Junior, also formed a troupe of bell ringers. It was this latter group to which the Bergers belonged. Initially, Fred, Louisa, Anna, and Henry composed the Berger family performers. When they became old enough, Bernie and Etta joined their siblings. Each child could play a variety of instruments.¹⁰

Henry Berger, Anna's father, died in the 1860s. It appears this made it necessary for the Bergers to travel full-time to support themselves. In the early

years, their mother traveled with them, but she did not perform herself.¹¹ For a time, the Bergers and Sol Smith Russell were performing together for the Peaks, but eventually the Bergers and Russell formed their own troupe which was quite successful.

In the early 1870s the Bergers and Russell performed throughout the U.S. They are mentioned several times in New York in George C. D. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*. On January 5, 1873, *The Daily Picayune* of New Orleans previewed the performance of the Berger Family Bell Ringers with Russell by quoting from a California paper where they had made a recent appearance, so obviously the Bergers were known from coast to coast. The favorable review which followed the New Orleans concert mentioned that Anna Berger performed a cornet solo on a gold cornet that had been presented to her in 1871 by friends in New York.¹²

After the week in New Orleans, the Bergers traveled to Havana. An article in the *Jackson Citizen Patriot* (Jackson, MI) noted that audiences showered money on the stage when the Bergers performed. A benefit for Anna in Havana grossed \$3,860.¹³ This would have been a very large sum in the 1870s. A further description of Anna's benefit in Havana was given in *The Columbia Register*:

"Miss Anna Teresa Berger, the fair cornetist of the Berger Family Troupe, was recently the recipient of a complimentary benefit in Havana, Cuba.... When she appeared before the footlights, white doves with silken ribbons round their necks, to which were attached poetic tributes, were sent flying towards her from the boxes, and she received many valuable presents, consisting of jewelry, fans, lace handkerchiefs, etc., which were thrown to her from her numerous admirers in that city. The occasion was honored by the presence of the Captain General of Cuba, the governor of Havana, and the principal military and civil authorities of the island, including the elite of Havana society."¹⁴

In the 1875-76 season, the Bergers were appearing as the Berger Family's Ladies' Orchestra. Anna's cornet playing was a major attraction.¹⁵ Sol Smith Russell was still with them at this point, but eventually he became a noted actor and humorist in his own right. He kept Fred Berger as his manager and had a long and lucrative career. Fred Berger also prospered and later was well known in theatrical circles in Washington, D.C., as the manager of the Belasco Theatre and Columbia Players.¹⁶ The Berger family made its farewell appearance on the stage on May 8, 1880, in Troy, New York.¹⁷

By the time the Berger troupe disbanded, Anna Berger's talent with the cornet was well developed.



Anna Teresa Berger, 1876, New York. In the 1875-76 season, the Bergers were appearing as the Berger Family Ladies' Orchestra. (Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson MI)

In conjunction with other performers, she did several benefits in New York City, including one at Union Square Theatre for the Poe memorial. The *New York Times* of December 9, 1881, states that her cornet solo was "warmly applauded."¹⁸ It was about this time she married Leigh S. Lynch, who was treasurer of the Union Square Theatre for many years.¹⁹ Anna began to appear on the vaudeville circuits and to do concert work as well as appearing with some of the well-known bands of this country as a cornet soloist.²⁰ She performed in at least two concerts as a soloist with Rudolf Bial's Orchestra at the Metropolitan Casino in New York City. After the first of these, the *New York Mirror* exclaimed, "Miss Berger played a cornet solo exquisitely. There is no manner of doubt that this lady is by far the best female cornet player that ever blew sweet music out of 'sounding brass.' Her execution is equal to that of the greatest masters of the instrument, and her tone is wonderful for a woman."²¹ After the second performance, the *Mirror* described Anna's playing of the cornet as brilliant.²²

In 1889, Anna was engaged by Freeman Thomas to appear as a solo cornetist at the Covent Garden Promenade Concerts in London. These concerts were



Anna Teresa Berger, Boston, undated.
(Courtesy of Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson, MI)

designed to have a popular appeal, and a variety of well-known musical artists appeared in them. Signor Arditi conducted the orchestra. Anna first appeared on August 17 playing *Russian Fantasia* by Jules Levy. By the end of the month, she appeared nightly and was a featured part of the performance. She continued in these performances through September, and Freeman Thomas presented her with a gold medal. Although her last performance for the season was advertised on September 28, within two weeks Anna was again a star attraction in these concerts until their close for the season on November 4.²³

Anna appeared on the cover of *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News of London* in the issue of October 26, 1889. The accompanying article stated, "...the brilliancy of her execution and the fine quality of her tone have been no less remarkable than the taste and expression with which she performs cantabile passages."²⁴

The songs played by Anna Berger during these concerts included several by Jules Levy: *Polka Mazurka*, *Maud Valse*, *Young America*, and *The Levyathan Polka*. She also performed *Anna Polka* by Legendre, *Teresa Waltz* by L. Boos, *Then You'll Remember Me* (Balfe), *Lizzie Polka* (Hartmann), *Folie de Bergere* (F. Innis), *Waiting* (H. Millard), *Zerlina Polka*, *Promenade Polka*, and *Lee's Duet for Two Cornets*.²⁵

It should be noted that a hometown newspaper stated that Anna Berger studied with Jules Levy.²⁶ This seems likely by the number of Levy's pieces that she played in London. Also, her newspaper billing during these London concerts was similar to Levy's concert advertising in its extravagant praise. Levy was sometimes advertised as the "greatest living cornet virtuoso."²⁷ Anna was advertised by the *London Daily Telegraph* as "acknowledged to be the finest lady performer in the world."²⁸

Unfortunately, the details of other performances by Anna Berger are sketchy. In 1891 she toured with the Blumenberg Concert Club.²⁹ In the 1892-93 theatrical season, she had formed her own concert company which was listed with the Fred Pelham Literary and Musical Agency as touring with the English humorist, Walter Pelham. Nothing further is known about this tour beyond the fact it was "doing well."³⁰ Walter Pelham had toured successfully and at length in 1883 with the cornetist Walter Emerson, so perhaps it was felt his comic impersonations would make a good balance for Anna's cornet performances. Walter Pelham's son Fred had served as business manager for an 1886 tour by cornetist Walter Emerson³¹ and was to later manage a tour by Jules Levy,³² so he seemed to have some ability in working with cornetists.

Anna Berger also had a busy life as wife and mother. She had five children, Nani, Leigh, Dorothy, Eugene, and William. Her husband Leigh Lynch was involved with the theater and performance in a variety of ways. At one point he guided two National League baseball clubs on world tours.³³ Their son Leigh pitched for the New York Giants for a time.³⁴

Although there was not a discussion at any point of the prejudice that Anna Teresa Berger faced as a female cornetist, it was obvious in many of the clippings about her. As previously noted, her friend Sol Smith Russell expressed the wish she would quit playing the cornet and return to the violin. Odell in his *Annals of the New York Stage* could not resist saying, "...Anna T. Berger did that unfeminine thing - she played on the cornet."³⁵ The *London Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* at the same time that it praised her playing also expressed this opinion about performance with the cornet, "As musicians are aware, this instrument is not difficult to learn...."³⁶ Even the *New York Mirror* after its high praise of her January 1, 1882, performance qualified its remarks by saying, "...her tone is wonderful for a woman." Nevertheless, there is no question she was one of those who opened the doors for other female brass players who came after her. Her popularity in New York and London before large audiences and in repeat performances make it obvious she was a remarkable and respected cornetist. She died February 25, 1925.

Fortunately, Anna Teresa Berger Lynch was dearly loved in her home town of Jackson, Michigan. Today there is a plaque on the wall of the public library dedicated to her memory. It states:

Though she played before Emperors and Queens of Europe and before the silent Sphinx of Egypt, as before the plain people of her native land, prince and peasant were to her alike. This was her home; here she lived her gentle modest life; sympathetic, charitable, lovable to all, and to commemorate her genius and life work, the people of Jackson affectionately dedicate this tablet to perpetuate her memory.³⁷

Footnotes

I wish to express my thanks to Nancy A. Buckland, reference librarian of the Jackson District Library; David F. Moore, manuscript specialist, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia; and Maura H. Overland of the Ella Sharp Museum of Jackson, Michigan, for their invaluable assistance.

- 1 Advertisement, *Daily Telegraph* (London) 29 August 1889, p. 4.
- 2 Glenn D. Bridges, *Pioneers in Brass*, Rev. 1968, p. 48c.
- 3 Obituary, *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, "Mrs. Lynch, Musician of Note, is Dead." Jackson, Michigan. February 26, 1925.
- 4 M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management* (New York, 1912), p. 4.
- 5 Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*, p. 5.
- 6 An outline of Sol Smith Russell's early career written by his wife Alice Adams Russell, folder 3, p. 20, Sol Smith Russell Papers, 1848-1902, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia, University of Columbia, Missouri.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 8 Letters from Russell to Fred Berger and family, folder 21, letter dated January 15, 1868, Sol Smith Russell Papers, 1848-1902, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia.
- 9 Charles Barnard, *Camilla: a Tale of a Violin* (Boston: A. K. Loring, 1874), p. 87.
- 10 Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*, pp. 3-5.
- 11 Obituary, *Jackson Citizen Patriot*.
- 12 "Amusements," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, Tuesday morning, January 8, 1873, p. 2.
- 13 "When Bergers Were Biggest in Music," *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, November 24, 1968, p. 44.
- 14 "The Berger Family," *The Columbia Register*. Columbia, South Carolina. January 27, 1878, n. p.
- 15 George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*

- (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-49), vol. 10, p. 75.
- 16 "Fred G. Berger Dies in Virginia at 77," *New York Times*, May 18, 1929, p. 19.
- 17 "When Bergers Were Biggest in Music," *Jackson Citizen Patriot*.
- 18 "Union Square Theatre," *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 1881, p. 5.
- 19 "Obituary," *Saturday Evening Star*. Jackson, Michigan. July 23, 1904.
- 20 Obituary, *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, "Mrs. Lynch, Musician of Note, is Dead," February 26, 1925.
- 21 *New York Mirror*, January 7, 1882, p. 2.
- 22 *New York Mirror*, January 14, 1882, p. 10.
- 23 Information regarding these concerts was obtained by reading daily advertisements in *The Daily Telegraph*. London. August 17-November 4, 1889.
- 24 "Our Illustrations, Mlle. Anna Teresa Berger," *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, October 26, 1889, p. 182.
- 25 See footnote 23.
- 26 Obituary, *Jackson Citizen Patriot*.
- 27 *Boston Globe*, December 19, 1886, p. 11.
- 28 *London Daily Telegraph*, August 29, 1889, p. 4.
- 29 *The State*. Columbia, South Carolina. November 24, 1891, p. 4, col. 4., and "At the Opera House," *The Camden Chronicle*. Camden, South Carolina. November 27, 1891, n. p.
- 30 *Talent*, June, 1892, p. 6.
- 31 *Columbia Register*, concert advertisement, March 18, 1886, n.p.
- 32 *Talent*, vol. 4, no. 5, November, 1893, p. 16.
- 33 "When Bergers Were Biggest in Music," *Jackson Citizen Patriot*.
- 34 Obituary, "Leigh B. Lynch," *New York Times*, March 27, 1945, p. 19, col. 3.
- 35 George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-49), vol. 11, p. 439.
- 36 "Our Illustrations, Mlle. Anna Teresa Berger," *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*.
- 37 This plaque is located in Jackson District Library, 244 West Michigan Avenue, Jackson, Michigan.

1998 ITG Conference

May 27-30

**University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky USA**