



# Musical Treasure Chest #8

Thank you for the nice feedback I have received on these Musical Treasure Chests. I enjoy writing them and am glad that you enjoy reading them as well. These musings on my favorite pieces and musical experiences and adventures have proved a fun and meaningful journey for me. And some of you have requested that I write about specific programs, so I thought in this Musical Treasure Chest I would comply with one asking about *The Poor Soldier*.

While working on my Master's degree I spent a lot of time at the New York State Library Special Collections looking at musical archives and the papers of old prominent Albany families. I got to know many of the librarians well and one in particular, **Paul Mercer**, became a good friend and mentor. Paul knew a great deal about the music holdings in the Collections and was always looking out for material that would be of interest to me. His input was invaluable. In 2007 he suggested that I become a Cunningham Research Fellow there, which gave me a stipend for utilizing the Special Collections and then publishing or in some way publicly sharing my research. I jumped at the chance. I wanted to examine music in early Albany in the first few decades of the 1800s. As the new capital of New York State (1797) and the home of many important politicians and businessmen, I believed that I would find a thriving artistic life.

My first job was to scour the early newspapers for advertisements of concerts and musical theater performances. I was not disappointed, finding numerous mentions of theatrical presentations with music (concert activity with purely instrumental music that was so popular in Europe was, however, not a part of Albany's early years). Entertainment expectations were much different in that time, with presentations lasting many hours and consisting of much more hodge-podge fare. Albany was the regular destination for professional theater troupes looking to escape the heat (and yellow fever epidemics) in New York City during the summer months, and they presented to Albany audiences a wide variety of whatever was currently popular in England. Many of the evenings included music as a major component and often there were complete "operas" (more like the musicals of today with spoken dialogue). One, titled *The Poor Soldier*, was performed frequently.

I became intrigued with this work. I saw that it was performed in Albany in 1808 and then again throughout the 1810s. One day while I was actually downstairs in the regular portion of the library I stumbled (in the stacks) onto the original 1808 libretto from *The Poor Soldier*. My discovery allowed me to read the plot of the opera and look at its music. The story was good and comic and a great representation of theater of the period. The music was tuneful--drawn from popular Irish and Scottish songs and transformed into a somewhat higher artistic level by composer William Shield. But what fascinated me most was that *The Poor Soldier* was George

Washington's favorite opera. First performed in November of 1783 while British troops were still evacuating from New York City, the opera is about a group of Irish soldiers returning home to their village after defeat in the American Revolution. The plot focuses on the honor of one of the soldiers (Patrick), who had saved his captain's life and now must compete with him for the hand of his beloved Norah. As I read about the opera and its incredible popularity in America, an idea began to germinate, since part of my fellowship stipulated some type of public dissemination of my research, why not offer a staging of this piece. If I used the 1808 libretto, it would be duplicating what Albany audiences had watched and be a wonderful piece of historic recreation.

To mount this type of production, which was beyond the scope of what Musicians of Ma'alwyck could do alone, I needed to form a new production company, and I turned to my colleagues at Schenectady County Community College. Enlisting **Brett Wery** (who orchestrated the score and provided musical direction), **Sandra Boynton** (who did the stage direction and costumes and enlisted her great cadre of friends in the local theatrical world to provide lighting and set design and building and all the aspects of backstage help that we needed) and the administration of the college, we embarked on an amazing eight month journey to three sold out performances and an open dress rehearsal of this charming comic opera. Knowing what I do now about what is needed to pull off a production of this scale, I am not sure I would have attempted it. But somehow through my sheer enthusiasm, commitment and naivety, I jumped into it. Our team, which we called the *New Old American Company* (based on the original touring troupe to Albany), worked diligently to make all the aspects of production come together.

Musicians of Ma'alwyck had been able in our 2003 *Alfred* production to use Glimmerglass Opera Young American Artists and in the intervening years we had done a number of special programs continuing to use these outstandingly talented young singers. When I approached Glimmerglass about perhaps allowing us to use several for *The Poor Soldier*, they signed on. In addition to the Young Artists we also featured **Emalie Savoy** (who grew up in Duanesburg, attended SCCC, then Juilliard, and now sings at the MET) and **Beverly O'Regan Thiele**, who had been a main stage artist at Glimmerglass. The cast was rounded out by **Byron Nilsson**, **Brian Massman** and **Brian Sheldon**. I have put in links below to articles in the local papers about the production.

<https://blog.timesunion.com/localarts/poor-soldier-sccc-12409/6894/>

[https://dailygazette.com/article/2009/01/18/0118\\_Soldier](https://dailygazette.com/article/2009/01/18/0118_Soldier)

In addition to the actual performance, we took the production to several off site locations, and we had many ancillary events including an exhibition of military uniforms and ephemera from the Revolutionary War courtesy of the New York State Museum, lectures on colonial theater and colonial food, an incredible colonial meal and a recreation of George Washington's favorite porter (thank you, **George de Piro!!**).

Eleven years have passed since that incredible eight months of frenetic energy and the successful performances. I cannot believe it. What a special high point that was for Musicians of Ma'alwyck. I am fiercely proud of what we did and the work the team put in on every level. It's experiences such as this that remind me why I am a musician.

There are no recordings or YouTubes of that production of *The Poor Soldier*. What I can give you are some links to a version we did for a special program in 2012 and a link to other pieces by composer William Shield.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OVf0Uv-tk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8CbOhRTyp4>