

## George, The Ghost of Music Hall

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*"We all walk on a quaking bog of corpses."  
- from "The Persecution and Assassination of Jean  
Paul Marat"*

When I was in high school a friend of mine and I practiced English accents for "Pygmalion" (he was Higgins to my Pickering) by pretending to be English tourists, complete with old Burberry trench coats, proper tweed headgear, furred umbrellas and walking tour maps. Using our plummy club accents, modest disguises and a cheerful "Pardon, sir, would you be so kind as to assist us", we began our masquerade as visiting English architecture students from Essex University, claiming that we hoped to visit what we had only studied in books, the grand architectural creations of Victorian Cincinnati. With this cover story and copies of architectural prints from the Public Library we got complete access and private tours of Music Hall, City Hall, Ivorydale and several distinguished religious edifices including Saint Peter in Chains and Wise Temple. Being genuinely interested, we always made it a point to go where almost no one had gone in the old buildings, climbing up into the filthy old tower at City Hall, scaling drafty staircases into the high bell tower at St. Peter in Chains above the vaulted ceilings and, the spookiest exploit of all, descending into the deep stone basements below Music Hall. We took a boyish delight in our ability to pass normal boundaries and kept good notes as students from England should do.

While going down into the unlighted vaults far below Music Hall's stage, I was told a strange bit of information: when Music Hall was having an addition built nearly a hundred years ago, the new foundations required that trenches be excavated. Those trenches were found to be packed with human bones. The ancient watchman told me that Music Hall was built on an old Indian graveyard, a story I then thought he made up to scare young English explorers about to go down into the dark.

About twenty years later, in 1988, I heard a tale that brought back the old memories of a building built on the dead, told by another watchman at Music Hall at midnight.

As I was leaving the symphony very late one night after a green room meeting with the evening's virtuoso, I found myself in the deserted and dark front foyer, alone except for a night watchman locking up the doors. Struck by the echoing Phantom of the Opera-like desertion of the cavernous building, on a whim I asked him if he ever ran into any ghosts around the old place late at night. I listened while he told me that after many years of nothing but quiet, he had for the first time run into sort of a ghost.

"Wait here", he said, "and I'll bring you up what I wrote about it." Nerves of steel fading rapidly in the dark hall, I thought it prudent to follow him down stairs to the

management office. There he carefully unlocked a case to produce a hand-written report of what seemed to him a very frightening encounter with what he firmly believed to be a ghost, although the encounter was entirely appropriate to Music Hall as, instead of seeing ghosts, he heard them, or at least their ghostly music. In workmanlike fashion he had carefully logged the event, listed witnesses and reported it to management in the signed affidavit I now possess.

I'll tell the man's tale briefly in excerpts from his own detailed report:

"It was a pleasant evening Sunday Feb 22nd 1987...About 12:30 A.M. the three women (caterers) & I proceeded to the first floor on the elevator with Etta running the elevator. When we started down the shaft Anne and Etta asked me if I heard music. I said no ...When we reached the 1st floor, they asked me again...I said yes...they asked me what tune it was. I replied "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." Not loud but beautiful and voluminous, continual, similar to a music box and coming from underneath. After loading their truck, I re-entered the elevator and closed the doors. The music was still there and I'm starting to tingle now... I opened the rear of the elevator entered the adjoining hall, no sound... & no sound in the halls... Returning to the elevator to proceed to Corbett Tower and close it, the music was as beautiful as ever, but I'm getting more bewildered...I paused to listen again...going to the corner...the shaft is open...the music was still playing distinctly, but as in a distance...I stood there about five minutes but I was a goner...getting home, I was very confused...for two nights I slept fitfully. The experience is now all positive and will be forever I now believe. I pray more intensely, don't fear death & am glad to have had this profound experience. John Engel Afterthought: For nearly two weeks I could not approach elevator shaft on 1<sup>st</sup> floor without my whole body tingling."

As I read the unusual account, I realized I had actually been there in that very elevator earlier in the evening of ghostly music as part of the brokerage firm sponsoring the event.

Strangely enough, there was more to this story to follow. A few months later I saw the watchman again at Music Hall and he pulled me aside as I was leaving. He told me again how he was afraid that management would "think he was crazy" after reporting the ghostly music, but instead, his boss took him completely seriously and investigated, telling him that in a symphony bulletin from 1978, which I myself have copied, reference is made to how in 1927 an elaborate coffin was uncovered during renovations. A 1928 Jubilee bulletin states that when "a workman was digging a connecting tunnel from the north wing to the auditorium, he exposed three graves, the sides of which fell out. The coffins were apparently made of expensive material and were held together with real copper nails. A headstone found at one of the graves reads as follows: Sacred to the memory of George Pollock, Native of Scotland, Who Died Oct. 29, 1831. Age 51 Years." Lest the story end there, the 1927 bulletin continues "The remains were given fitting burial in the pit of the new elevator shaft."

There was that haunted elevator shaft again. I had already heard another strange story of the elevator shaft - in the renovations for the Corbett Tower in 1972, workmen installing a new elevator found beneath the footings of the old shaft the carefully arranged skeletons of not just three but many people, who were left where they were found and immediately reburied a bit lower down. I remembered the old tales of piles of bones under the foundations and wondered whether poor old George Pollock, reburied under the elevator, would ever find rest under Music Hall.

Curiously enough, I later came across reprints of two 1890's articles from The Enquirer that brought a second chill. In the first, The Enquirer noted that the Cincinnati Board of Administration was soon annexing Clifton, Avondale, Riverside, Linwood and Westwood. Among the advantages of joining the big city, Cincinnati enticed the new areas to annex with services like "care of the out-door poor" and "burial of pauper dead", probably the source of many of the bodies I was told were under Music Hall when I was playing tourist, although it's likely that city dead were going elsewhere by 1895. In another old Enquirer article appeared the report that the old First Presbyterian burial ground, Cincinnati's earliest cemetery, around Fourth and Fifth between Walnut and Main was excavated and the bodies moved to a new burial ground near where Washington Park now stands, across the street from an orphan asylum. That "orphan asylum" was previously Ohio's first state mental hospital, the bleak Commercial and Lunatic Hospital, opened on Jan. 26, 1824 to house the worst cases in the state including deranged murderers. In 1838 it was renamed the Commercial Hospital of Cincinnati and the "lunatics" were shipped to Columbus. Its pathetic dead seem to have been buried with the poor nearby and it was torn down for the 3 brick buildings of 1878-1879 called Music Hall, grand replacements for the wooden Saengerfest Hall which had been built on municipal land, probably atop yet more bones.

The potter's field graveyard at Plum and Elm clearly is shown in 1819 and 1831 city maps, a history of burials going back nearly to Ft. Washington times. Some of these bones, I am told by local historians, were later dug up and reburied in the Baltimore Pike Cemetery and in a municipal "potter's field" off Guerley Road in Price Hill. Interestingly, the legend of an Indian burial ground may have some credence as well, as many Indian mounds were apparently leveled in the early expansion of the city and superstitious settlers may well have put unknown dead in such a place, rather than in their own private and very denominational churchyards. According to the City, Washington Park itself is comprised of 3 original parcels of land, bought by the city in 1855, 1860 and 1863, the first two originally yet other cemeteries. Landfill from the digging and maintenance of the nearby Miami Canal and its later refilling, plus the rapid expansion of Over-The-Rhine added to the confusion, covering many old graves.

It seems likely that someone moved our Scottish friend George Pollock (like many Scots, probably a staunch Presbyterian) and his marking stone from his 1831 churchyard grave at Walnut and Main Street to a new burial ground near the lunatic asylum turned orphanage, then built Music Hall on top of him, probably in the 1895 expansion to build a gallery or perhaps the conversion of the Miami Canal to Central Parkway, dug him up again in 1927 and put him under an elevator, only to dig him up yet

again in 1972. It is a measure of George's patience that all that has come out of that elevator shaft is pleasant music, though his story gives new meaning to the term "elevator music." May he rest in peace and may you all remember George's musical ghost the next time you visit Music Hall late some spooky night!

