

THE STEPHEN FOSTER COLLECTION

10 EARLY AMERICAN SONGS FOR SOLO VOICE AND PIANO

Arranged by Mark Hayes
With background information by Kathleen Ballantyne

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Alfred Music
P.O. Box 10003
Van Nuys, CA 91410-0003
alfred.com

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Stephen Foster (1826–1864)

For someone who would later become known as “The Father of American Music,” it’s appropriate that Stephen Collins Foster was born on July 4th, 1826, fifty years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

William Barclay Foster, Stephen’s father, was a prosperous Pittsburgh-area merchant who had risen through the ranks of a river-shipping firm to join the social elite. William served two terms in the Pennsylvania legislature, and was later elected as mayor of Allegheny City, a suburb of Pittsburgh. His mother, Eliza Clayland Tomlinson, also came from wealthy beginnings. William and Eliza had nine children together; furthermore, Eliza also raised William Jr., whom William Sr. had fathered with another woman prior to their marriage. Due to the death of his youngest sibling in infancy, Stephen was the beloved baby brother of the Foster family. He would remain close with his parents and siblings throughout his life, including living with them during his own adulthood and marriage.

Although Stephen was born into wealth, financial troubles burdened the Foster family throughout his life. A few bad business decisions made by William spiraled into years of legal battles, and The White Cottage, the family home where Stephen had been born, was seized by the bank in 1826. From that point on, the Fosters would move frequently. Some historians have theorized that this left a lasting mark on Stephen, as a number of his songs have a wistful yearning for home.

As a young, middle-class man in an era before publicly funded education, Stephen’s schooling was a mixture of private tutoring and attendance at private academies in the greater Pittsburgh area. While he detested rote memorization, he was an avid reader and would be considered literate and well educated by modern standards. Henry Kleber, a German-born music dealer in Pittsburgh, was likely Foster’s sole source of formal music training. Kleber himself was a songwriter, accompanist, and conductor.

Foster was only 18 years old when his first song was published in Philadelphia by George Willig. Titled “Open Thy Lattice, Love,” Foster’s setting of the poem by George P. Morris was dedicated to 13-year-old Susan Pentland, his next-door neighbor back in Allegheny. The publication didn’t sell well.

Still, Foster continued making music with a group of young men, including his brother Morrison and close friend Charles Shiras. According to Morrison, Stephen and his friends met twice a week in the Foster home to sing songs in harmony under Stephen’s direction, including songs from minstrel shows, which were popular entertainment at the time. It is likely, among this group of friends, that Stephen first tried his hand at both singing and writing in that style.

In 1846, Stephen was hired as a bookkeeper by his brother Dunning’s steamship firm in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was while he was employed there that he wrote “Oh! Susanna,” which launched his career, quickly sweeping through the nation and becoming the unofficial theme of the California gold rush.

1. Beautiful Dreamer

Arranged by
MARK HAYES

Words and Music by
STEPHEN FOSTER

Slowly, with freedom (♩ = ca. 120)

Beau - ti - ful dream - er,

wake un - to me, star - light and dew - drops are wait - ing for