

The Voices of the Prairie: The Use of Music in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*

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There is one thing that will always remain the same to remind people of little Laura's days on the prairie, and that is Pa's fiddle.

—Laura Ingalls Wilder, Letter to Harper & Row, Publishers

The "Little House" series by Laura Ingalls Wilder has been widely praised as a richly detailed recreation of the settling of the American West. Much of the critical work on the eight-book series has dealt with the novels' historical authenticity and accuracy (Cooper, Segal), their autobiographical nature (Dykstra, Spaeth), the collaborative process with her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, which produced the series (Moore), and Wilder's literal and metaphorical use of space. Whether the "Little House" series is seen as a working out of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, or as part of the heroic, but inherently false, glorification of the settling of the West by white pioneers as argued in a recent controversial exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute, "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920" (Truettner), the "Little House" books have generally been analyzed as visual rather than auditory landscapes.

An overlooked, but important aspect of the series, is the metaphorical role that music plays in the novels. In examining the many uses of music in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), the second book in the series, I hope to draw attention to the symbolic importance that Wilder places on music in her novels, and suggest some of the many ways she utilizes music to develop her themes. Critics such as Hamida Bosmajian, Dolores Rosenblum, and Virginia Wolf have explored how Wilder uses the intimate circles of civilization within the vast open space of the prairie to create a sense of security and a synthesis with nature; I describe how Wilder uses music to symbolically link the settlers with the landscape of the prairie and how—over and over again, like a constant refrain—she connects the music of pioneers with the other voices of the prairie.

The Ingalls, like many settlers of the 1860s and 1870s, initially view the prairie as an empty, uninhabited locale waiting to be cultivated. It is

this very appearance of absence that makes the Kansas landscape so appealing to Pa, who at the beginning of the novel urges his family to leave Wisconsin, which is the setting of the first book in the series, *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932), where he feels crowded in by the sounds of the other settlers; he complains of "the ringing thud of an ax which was not Pa's ax, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun" (Wilder 1–2). The prairie becomes a blank canvas on which the family can make its mark. Or perhaps more appropriately, it is a clean piece of composition paper on which they can leave their notations.

Yet for all its apparent emptiness, the prairie is surprisingly deceptive and fertile with its own sources of music. Wilder describes the Kansas landscape in a typical early passage as, "That prairie looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before. Only the tall wild grass covered the endless empty land and a great empty sky arched over it" (Wilder 26). But as Laura's casual exploration of her new environment reveals, close to the place where the Ingalls have chosen to build the new house is "a queer little kind of tunnel in the grass" (Wilder 55), which the family quickly discovers is an Indian trail. The Ingalls, as well as the reader of the novel, are confronted not with a *tabula rasa*, but a richly populated landscape that is not quite so barren or as soundless as it might at first appear.

In a similar fashion, the aural landscape of *The Little House on the Prairie* initially appears silent and devoid of sound, except for the constant blowing of the wind. The reader might be tempted to consider the Kansas prairie to be a great empty chamber waiting to be filled by sounds of Pa's fiddle, or Laura and Mary's laughter; Wilder has too perceptive an ear for such a simplistic description. While Pa and his ubiquitous fiddle form one of the major voices of the prairie, it is certainly not the only one. Wilder is especially attentive to the songs emanating from the prairie itself, and she carefully plots her story around the music produced by the various parts of this landscape.

One of the chief sources of music is the flora and fauna. The Kansas prairie is frequently personified in the novel and is capable of producing a variety of sounds ranging from "the grasses [which] seemed to sing and whisper and laugh" (Wilder 112) to the melodies of the prairie meadowlarks. For the young Laura, it is these sounds that make the prairie such a comforting locale:

Laura was very happy. The wind sang a low, rustling song in the grass. Grasshoppers' rasping quivered up from all the immense prairie. A buzzing came faintly from all the trees in the creek bottoms. But all these sounds

made a great, warm, happy silence. Laura had never seen a place she liked so much as this place. (Wilder 48–49)

It is into this melodious landscape that the Ingalls attempt to integrate. The family's primary source of music is Pa's fiddle. Louise Mowder has argued that the "Little House" books are part of the literary movement that characterizes women in the western landscape by their silence (15). Although Pa's fiddle has the tendency to dominate and at times drown out the female voices of the "Little House" books, I would not go so far as to suggest that it becomes an instrument of socialization or means of silencing Ma and the children. Quite the opposite is the case when Pa encourages Laura to join in the music-making and develop her own voice, while Ma warns, "it isn't good manners to sing at the table" (40).

The fiddle, which Pa had carefully packed between pillows on the wagon trip out west, represents his link with civilization and society as much as the dainty china figurine that Ma carefully unwraps and places on the mantel-shelf of the new cabin to remind herself that the family is "living like civilized folks again" (Wilder 129). Ma's china figurine is a powerful symbol of female domestication appropriately at the center of the hearth. Pa's fiddle is frequently played outside the house and its bright tunes both encourage and promote Laura's liveliness and independence.

For such a taciturn man as Pa, who tends to speak in clichés—"all's well that ends well" (Wilder 92), "Better be safe than sorry" (Wilder 153), and "There's no great loss without some small gain" (Wilder 320)—he is unusually eloquent once he puts his hand to the bow. Like a frontier version of Orpheus, no object, animate or inanimate, seems immune to his powers of music. The most dramatic example of his musical skills comes one night when he plays to the stars:

The large, bright stars hung down from the sky. Lower and lower they came, quivering with the music.

Laura gasped, and Ma came quickly. "What is it, Laura?" she asked, and Laura whispered, "The stars were singing." (Wilder 50–51)

In this passage, Pa is capable of coaxing the stars into song, which ought to remind the reader that *Little House on the Prairie* is not an unvarnished pioneer account of the settling of the West, but a carefully constructed text full of literary allusions. Wilder referred to this mixture of fact and fancy in her "Book Fair Speech," in which she suggested "Every story in this novel, all the circumstances, each incident are true. All I have told is true, but it is not the whole truth" (220). Pa's ability to create the music of the spheres suggests how well the Ingalls have

adapted into their new landscape. Pa and his surroundings are capable of singing the same tune.

This theme is made most graphic in the highly symbolic, but geographically inaccurate, scene in which Pa and the nightingale sing a duet together. This episode occurs shortly after Mr. Edwards, the self-proclaimed wildcat from Tennessee, departs from his first social visit with the Ingalls. A celebratory evening, full of song and dance, at his leave-taking Edwards announces, "Play, Ingalls. . . . Play me down the road!" (Wilder 68). After musically sending off his closest human neighbor to the tune of "Old Dan Tucker," Pa begins to serenade his nonhuman neighbors. Wilder establishes the atmosphere for this magical passage with one of her most lyrical descriptions of the landscape: "Only the wind rustled in the prairie grasses. The big, yellow moon was sailing high over head. The sky was so full of light that not one star twinkled in it, and all the prairie was a shadowy mellowness" (Wilder 69). Wilder's other-worldly description prepares the reader for the transition from the realm of reality to that of the mythic. If this were a fantasy or a fairy tale, the reader might expect the appearance of elves or fairies dancing in that moonlight. But something almost as astonishing occurs:

Then from the woods by the creek a nightingale began to sing.

Everything was silent, listening to the nightingale's song. The bird sang on and on. The cool wind moved over the prairie and the song was round and clear above the grasses' whispering. The sky was like a bowl of light overturned on the flat black earth. (Wilder 70)

The family is transfixed by the nightingale's beautiful song, which embodies the beauty and wonder of the prairie, the vast new landscape that engulfs the Ingalls. In the profound silence that follows the bird's song,

Pa lifted the fiddle to his shoulder and softly touched the bow to the strings. A few notes fell like clear drops of water into the stillness. A pause, and Pa began to play the nightingale's song. The nightingale answered him. The nightingale began to sing again. It was singing with Pa's fiddle.

When the strings were silent, the nightingale went on singing. When it paused, the fiddle called to it and it sang again. The bird and the fiddle were talking to each other in the cool night under the moon. (Wilder 70)

In this brilliant musical metaphor, Wilder unites the song of the pioneer with the music of the prairie landscape. It is a frontier version of Paradise where human and animal join together in harmony. It is such a profoundly moving passage that the reader may scarcely notice that it is geographically inaccurate and a physical impossibility. A quick examination in John Zimmerman and Sebastian Patti's *A Guide to Bird Finding in Kansas*

and *Western Missouri* (1988) will confirm the absence of nightingales on the prairie. Is this simply an ornithological error on Wilder's part in a text which has been widely praised for its careful attention to detail; I think not. Wilder mentions nineteen different types of birds in the course of the novel, and this is the only appearance of a nightingale. The nightingale, which figures so prominently in English poetry for its musical skills—think only of John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"—is a bird limited to England and western Europe. The point of the passage is metaphorical, not literal. Using literary allusions, Wilder blends the song of Pa's fiddle and the nightingale's tune to create the powerful image of the pioneer living in perfect harmony with the environment.

But not all music presented in *Little House on the Prairie* is so harmonious. Besides the song of the nightingale, the prairie also contains the song of the wolves. On another moonlit night, a pack of wolves surrounds Ingalls' cabin and serenades the family with a far less pleasant tune, "Their howls shuddered through the house and filled the moonlight and quavered away across the vast silence of the prairie" (Wilder 98). It is immediately after a terrifying night of music that Pa and Laura together build the stout door that protects and separates the family from the dangers of the prairie.

Nor do all the other songs of the prairie originate from the animal inhabitants. Through music the other human inhabitants of the prairie make their presence known. It is instructive to see how Laura and her family respond to the different sounds produced by the cowboys and the Indians.

In the chapter, "Texas Longhorns," Pa once again plays his fiddle for Laura. Surrounded by the secure sounds of Pa's fiddle, Laura feels that, "Everything was so beautiful that Laura wanted it to stay so forever" (Wilder 162). But this music is interrupted by the strange sound of the cattle on their way to Fort Dodge. Listening intently, Laura can make out a sound that she compares to "almost a rumble and almost a song" (Wilder 163). She asks, "Is that singing, Pa?" only to have her father confirm that it is, "The cowboys are singing the cattle to sleep" (Wilder 163). Reassured that these are also songs of the prairie, Laura falls asleep dreaming of "cattle lying on the dark ground in the moonlight and of cowboys softly singing lullabies" (Wilder 163).

Pa returns too exhausted to play his fiddle after a demanding day's work with the cowboys keeping the cattle out of the ravines in exchange for a calf. Pa's moods can be accurately gauged by his willingness to make music. The four other instances when Pa refuses to make music are when he loses Jack, the dog, after fording the river (Wilder 27), when

he is attacked by mosquitoes (184), when he feels that the girls' Christmas has been ruined prior to the appearance of Mr. Edwards (Wilder 242), and when he is too busy making bullets in preparation for the Indian attack (Wilder 288).

That night, Laura again hears the songs of the cowboys, but now having a better sense of the harsh work that accompanied such tunes, "Their songs were not like lullabies. They were high, lonely, wailing songs, almost like the howling of wolves" (Wilder 165). Although these songs now sound more animal than human, Laura is drawn to their primitive rhythm. She lies in bed captivated by these "lonely songs wandering in the night" (Wilder 165). In the young girl's imagination, they become a "crying for the moon," and their very sounds "made Laura's throat ache" (Wilder 166).

This musical call of the wild, found in both the songs of the wolves and the lullabies of the cowboys, suggests the raw power in the music of the prairie. A far more frightening sound for Laura occurs in the music of the Indians. Although the family cannot see the gathering of the tribes for the Jamboree, they can hear the sounds as the Indians debate whether to attack the settlers. For the young girl, this music sounds "something like a song, but not like any song that Laura had ever heard. It was a wild, fierce sound, but it didn't seem angry" (Wilder 265). For many nights, the fearful family listens to the constant beating of the drums, which is finally broken by the most frightening sound that Laura hears: the Indian war-cry (Wilder 292). Yet all this seemingly wild music which threatens to engulf the family ends peacefully when the Indians decide not to attack the settlers. Rather than fight, the Indians, under the direction of Soldat du Chene, choose to move further west.

This dramatic episode has been appropriately foreshadowed in "The Blue Juniata," which is the most fully cited song in the text. Ma sings the tune as Pa accompanies her on his fiddle in their attempt to calm the girls after the two Indians have appeared at the cabin during Pa's absence. When "Ma's voice and the fiddle's music softly died away" (Wilder 235-36), Laura asks what turns out to be the most troubling question of the novel: "Where did the voice of Alfarata go, Ma?" (Wilder 236). Ma explains that Alfarata, the Indian maiden of the song, went further west since, "That's what the Indians do" (Wilder 236). It is the fleeting voice of the Indian girl coupled with the disappearing dark eyes of the Indian Papoose that come to symbolize for Laura the transitory nature of the prairie and its inhabitants. Since the Juniata of the 1844 song refers to the river in Pennsylvania, the reader can assume that the Indians have already been forced to move further west. When Laura persists in asking

her vexing questions—"Why do they do that, Ma?" (Wilder 235) and "Will the government make these Indians go west?" (Wilder 236)—the only answer Pa can provide is to softly play his fiddle.

But just as the Indians must make their journey further west, the Ingalls are eventually forced by the government to leave the prairie and go back east. Angered by the news that he will be forced to leave his Kansas homestead, Pa decides to leave before he is confronted by the soldiers. Saying farewell to the little house on the prairie, the family hitches its wagon and starts on the journey back to Wisconsin. But as they depart, they hear a mockingbird begin to sing. In a scene, perhaps more symbolic than realistic, Wilder has her parents comment on the bird's song: "'I never heard a mockingbird sing so early,' said Ma, and Pa answered, softly, 'He is telling us good-by'" (Wilder 326).

Little House on the Prairie is a novel saturated with music. During the course of the book, the family sings or plays fourteen songs that are quoted at length. The number of songs is typical of the amount of music found in the other seven volumes of the series. Generally, Wilder uses songs to emphasize or reinforce the action that is occurring in the narrative, much in the same way that an illustration highlights a particular scene. For instance, when Pa goes out hunting, Ma sings "By Lo, Baby Bunting" (Wilder 201), or just before Pa leaves for his four-day trip to Independence for supplies, he sings "Green Grows the Laurel" with the key line "So woeful, my love / At the parting with you" (Wilder 207). Eugenia Garson has noted, "Laura Ingalls Wilder's memories were filled with the songs of her girlhood, so it was natural that music should have played an important part in the 'Little House' books" (7). As a children's librarian, Garson received so many requests concerning the songs that appeared in the "Little House" books that she eventually compiled *The Laura Ingalls Wilder Songbook* (1968) which includes sixty-two of the songs and tunes mentioned in the series.

So it is fitting that after hearing the mockingbird's farewell, Pa celebrates the family's departure from their prairie home in a series of four songs—"Oh Susanna," "Dixie," "Rally Round the Flag," and "The Gum-tree Canoe"—that all ironically comment on the Ingalls's situation. "Oh Susanna," sometimes called "The California Immigrant," is a song of the West that recounts the failure of the settler to thrive in a new environment. "Dixie" is a song of the South that celebrates a false sense of permanence: "In Dixie land I'll take my stand, / And live and die in Dixie!" (Wilder 334). "Rally Round the Flag" is a patriotic tune of the Civil War from the North that praises the government and its soldiers, which only moments before Pa has scorned for expelling the family from

their new home. These three songs all point to geographic directions that are no longer open to the family. The novel ends with Pa singing the bittersweet "The Gum-tree Canoe" as the family makes their way back to the east. Despite Pa's initial belief that the fertile landscape of the prairie will allow the family to "live like kings!" (Wilder 50), the Ingalls have come to resemble the kings of Laura's favorite song "I Am A Gypsy King" (66). Pa sings of the family's lack of fixed home as they head back east:

Row a way, row o'er the water so blue,
Like a feather we sail in our gum-tree canoe.
Row the boat lightly, love, over the sea;
Daily and nightly I'll wander with thee.
(Wilder 335)

In an account entitled "Grandpa's Fiddle" that has only recently been published in *A Little House Sampler* (1988), Rose Wilder Lane, the daughter who encouraged and helped structure her mother's recollections into what was to become the "Little House" series, writes of Laura and Almanzo Wilder's final meeting with her grandmother and grandfather in De Smet, South Dakota, as they departed for what would be their final house in Mansfield, Missouri. Pa plays his fiddle for the last time for the family. He promises Laura the fiddle, which can still be seen at the Wilder's home in Mansfield. Rose Wilder Lane records a conversation she recalls hearing as a young girl, or carefully creates the following conversation which emphasizes the importance of Pa's fiddle and music in general to Laura and the structure of the "Little House" books:

"To think, Manly, he gave me the fiddle," Mama said. "It's the first thing I remember, Pa's playing us to sleep when we were little in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. And by the campfires through the awful mud, across Kansas and Missouri, all the way down to Indian Territory and back, and all the way out here, across the whole of Minnesota and beyond the Big Sioux river clear to Silver Lake. He played the fiddle by the campfire at night. We never could—I see it now, though I didn't then—we never could have gotten through it all without Pa's fiddle." (Lane 68)

Whether this is an accurate account from the childhood of the young Rose Wilder Lane, or an insightful bit of evaluation by the successful journalist and novelist who edited her mother's prose into the series, I can imagine no fitter tribute, nor a more accurate evaluation of the importance of the literal and symbolic place of music in *The Little House on the Prairie*.

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