“THE SUBLIMEST MUSIC ON EARTH”
AN AURAL HISTORY OF NIAGARA FALLS IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

The first known image of Niagara Falls, an engraving by an unidentified Dutch printmaker, appeared in 1697, in a book by Father Louis Hennepin entitled *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*. Hennepin was a missionary priest accompanying the expedition to America made by French explorer Robert LaSalle in 1678–1682, and he later devoted two chapters of his travelogue to Niagara. Alongside the engraving, *The Falls of Niagara*, Hennepin writes:

Betwixt the Lake *Ontario* and *Erie*, there is a vast and prodigious Cadence of Water which falls down after a surprizing and astonishing manner, insomuch that the Universe does not afford its Parallel […] At the foot of this horrible Precipice we meet with the River *Niagara* […] The Waters which fall from this vast height, do foam and boil after the most hideous manner imaginable, making an outrageous Noise, more terrible than that of Thunder; for when the Wind blows from off the South, their dismal roaring may be heard above fifteen Leagues off.¹

Hennepin, a “geologically ignorant author,”² tremendously exaggerates the features of the Falls, suggesting it to be over six hundred feet tall, and audible fifteen Leagues away.³ But as the first European reporter to have actually seen the Falls, Hennepin’s account is uniquely important, especially because his book was so widely disseminated; both his verbal and visual descriptions dominated the Western imagination in the century that followed.⁴ For people on the continent who

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³ Richard Cullen Rath notes that Hennepin’s claim, that the Iroquois people could hear Niagara Falls from a distance of fifteen leagues, is probably an exaggeration. He suggests instead that it supports the notion that the Iroquois and other Native Americans paid close attention to variations in the sound of the Falls, and were likely more attuned to such variations, moreso than the Europeans. Interestingly, he likens the Falls to an orchestra: “They might have been able to hear them better than could Europeans, much like a musician can pick out a particular instrument from a mix of sounds where a nonmusician might hear everything together.” See Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 37.
⁴ Within two years, Hennepin’s book was translated and published in Dutch, English, German, and Spanish, and by the early 1700s several editions were in circulation. For an overview on early accounts of the Falls, see Elizabeth R. McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7–40.
had never travelled to the New World, Niagara Falls was a natural marvel almost without precedent. Numerous images and written accounts succeeded those provided by Hennepin, and the “iconographic power” of the Falls persisted into the nineteenth century, even as its meaning changed. Niagara Falls evolved from a wild, exotic, and unsettled landscape in the early eighteenth century, into a sight of the sublime and picturesque, until it was eventually commodified, for both tourism and industrial power, in the nineteenth century. Scholarly examinations of the Falls have focused almost exclusively on these aspects of its history, especially as conveyed in concurrent visual and literary manifestations. What has remained almost completely unexplored is Niagara Falls as a sonic phenomenon. In his description, Hennepin makes sure to report the sound of the cataract, a sound that both terrifies and painfully overwhelms him: “an outrageous Noise, more terrible than that of Thunder.” Hennepin was certainly not alone in doing so; many reports of the Falls, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provide descriptions of its sonic attributes. The frequency with which these acoustically focused comments appear, and the importance of Niagara Falls as a unique and symbolic North American landmark both historically and in the present, make a study of its sonic traits vital for a complete understanding of its historical

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and contemporary reception in Canada and the United States. In this paper, then, I will explore the aural history of Niagara Falls, tracing shifts in people’s perception of the Falls via their written sonic experiences. This preliminary study is necessarily circumscribed by its short length: I will consider only three sonic “descriptions” of the Falls here, each one a distinct genre, but all from the mid-nineteenth century. I have chosen each historical object for its sonic significance: a poem by Frank B. Palmer, “Apostrophe to Niagara,” written in 1855; Eugene Thayer’s magazine article, “The Music of Niagara,” published in 1881; and finally, a more layered “musical” source, the reception of Ole Bull’s unpublished piece for violin and orchestra, Niagara, publicly premiered in New York in December 1844.

Before proceeding with my reading of these sonically attentive objects, I want to position Niagara Falls as an especially productive place for the discipline of aural history and acoustic ecology. Indeed, Canadian composer and writer, R. Murray Schafer, first pointed to the potential of Niagara Falls as an important soundscape in his seminal work with the World Soundscape

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7 It is important to note that Niagara Falls occupies a liminal space, sitting as it does on the border of Canada and the United States. McKinsey’s claim for the Falls as an icon of the American sublime is thus problematic, particularly as Niagara Falls was claimed ideologically by both the United States and Canada (Britain). Initially there was much more commercial development on the American side, and thus many historical accounts are told by European visitors and immigrants coming via New York, not through Canada. In more recent years, however, the Canadian city has surpassed its American counterpart in building, tourism, and population. See the Epilogue in Irwin, The New Niagara, and Daniel Macfarlane, “‘A Completely Man-Made and Artificial Cataract’: The Transnational Manipulation of Niagara Falls,” Environmental History 18, no. 4 (2013): 759–784, for a discussion of Canadian and American interests at Niagara Falls in the twentieth century.

8 Niagara Falls offers a range of aural historical approaches and possibilities, which are unavoidably limited by the length of my study here. There is a veritable plethora of fascinating historical sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which I hope to collate and explore in an expanded project. My chosen objects of analysis and my historical perspective are also self-consciously Eurocentric. In other words, my emphasis will be on the written accounts by European and colonial women and men, not on the oral indigenous perceptions of the Falls. Rath discusses the sonic and symbolic importance of Niagara Falls to Native Americans briefly, see How Early America Sounded, 36–38. For other considerations of Niagara Falls vis-à-vis colonialism, see Robinder Kaur Sehdev, “Unsettling the Settler at Niagara Falls: Reading Colonial Culture through the Maid of the Mist” (PhD diss., York University, 2008), and Gail Edith Hallett Evans, “Storm over Niagara: A Study of the Interplay of Cultural Values, Resource Politics, and Environmental Policy, in an International Setting, 1670s–1950” (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 1991). For another consideration of the “imperial ear,” sound, and the African diaspora, see Edwin C. Hill Jr., Black Soundscapes White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).
Project. Niagara Falls appears only once in his book, *The Tuning of the World*, but very early in the introduction, as an example of the authenticity, or inauthenticity, of historical earwitness accounts. “I have always attempted to go directly to sources,” writes Schafer, “Thus, a writer is trustworthy only when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known.” He continues:

> To take an obvious instance, when Jonathan Swift describes Niagara Falls as making ‘a terrible squash’ we know he never visited the place; but when Chateaubriand tells us that in 1791 he heard the roar of Niagara eight to ten miles away, he provides us with useful information about the ambient sound level, against which that of today could be measured.9

This type of authentic earwitness account, like that of Chateaubriand or Hennepin, will form the basis of my study here. But that does not mean these accounts are without epistemological issues. Mark M. Smith notes that as historians treating issues of aurality, we need “sustained, careful consideration of whether to emphasize sound’s social constructedness or its objective value (or both) and of how we are to tease perceptions of sound from printed evidence.”10 In his work on soundscapes in early America, Richard Cullen Rath notes an important historical shift in sensory perception, a transformation from an ear-based oral culture to a printed literate one. But he makes an important caveat, drawing particular attention to sounds occurring in nature:

> Not all sounds can be reduced to print. Thunder and other natural sounds are a fine example. Presumably they sound more or less the same now as they did in early America, so the problem of sound being evanescent is moot. What has shifted is how they are heard.11

Sound and hearing are no less ephemeral than any other historical experience; they can be partially recovered and interpreted from documents. Addressing ephemerality, Rath carefully delineates

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what he studies as “soundways.” His soundways are “the paths, trajectories, transformations, mediations, practices, and techniques—in short, the ways—that people employ to interpret and express their attitudes and beliefs about sound.”

Drawing on this methodology, then, my purpose is not to interrogate the underlying beliefs or concreteness of my chosen sonic objects, but rather to situate them within a cultural history of Niagara Falls as a unique and naturally-occurring soundmark. Though I incorporate Schafer’s language throughout my work, this project is distinct from Schafer’s and acoustic ecologist Barry Truax’s preoccupations with modern soundscapes. As Rath notes, Schafer’s contribution is invaluable to the development of sensory history, but his work remains of limited value for historians: “notions of declension, loss, purity, and pollution imbue his work with nostalgia for a past that probably never existed.”

“What poets have shed / From countless quills / Niagaras of ink.” So wrote Colonel Peter A. Porter, commenting on the vast number of textual descriptions devoted to the Falls. In his 1899 history of Niagara, Frank H. Severance notes: “it is a striking fact that Niagara’s stimulus to the poetic mind has been quite as often through the ear as through the eye.” He goes even further, suggesting that, in fact, the best poems focus on the sound of the falling water, not on the physical

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12 Ibid., 2. Quoting himself in “Hearing American History,” *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008): 419, Rath continues: “I am not so much concerned with the underlying beliefs, historically inaccessible as they often are, or the concrete expressions themselves [where the problem of ephemerality does come up], so much as the ways between them.” Rath places his book, *How Early America Sounded*, within the field of cultural history, and marks it as a contribution to the history of the senses: “a field long called for, but only recently undertaken with any seriousness.” See his article, “Hearing American History,” for a brief overview of his methodology and situating his work within current disciplinary trends surrounding aural history.

13 Schafer’s “soundmark” is a “term derived from *landmark* to refer to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community.” Schafer, 274.


or visual properties of the scene. Frank B. Palmer’s poem, “Apostrophe to Niagara,” was apparently written in a few minutes, “the author seated on the bank, drenched, from the mighty bath at Termination Rock, and still listening to the roar and feeling the eternal jar of the cataract.”

Severance thus guarantees his reader an authentic earwitness account: the poet speaks directly of a personal bodily and sonic experience. The opening three verses read as follows:

This is Jehovah’s fullest organ strain!
I hear the liquid music rolling breaking.
From the gigantic pipes the great refrain
Bursts on my ravished ear, high thoughts awaking!

The low sub-bass, uprising from the deep,
Swells the great paean as it rolls supernal—
Anon, I hear, at one majestic sweep
The diapason of the keys eternal!

Standing beneath Niagara’s angry flood—
The thundering cataract above me bounding—
I hear the echo: “Man, there is a God!”
From the great arches of the gorge resounding!

Palmer equates the sound he hears with a specific musical instrument, the organ. The “angry” and “thundering” flood he describes is indicative of its awe-inspiring effects; indeed, this violent vocabulary was commonplace in the nineteenth century, used to illustrate the natural power and sublimity of the Falls. Like many of his contemporaries, Palmer aligns the sublime impact of the Falls with religious affirmation, particularly with his allusion to resurrection: with “one majestic sweep,” rising from the deep abyss to a supernal level. As Natalie McKnight notes, Niagara Falls reminded nineteenth-century viewers of other equally extraordinary and overwhelming forces,

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17 Ibid. Severance includes excerpts from two other, longer poems to make his gentle case for the superiority of sonic inspiration: “Minstrel of the Floods,” by Charles Henry Augustus Bulkley (1848), and “Thoughts on Niagara,” by the (importantly) blind poet, Michael McGuire (1854). See pages 316–319.
18 Ibid., 317–318. The poem is seven verses long, each four lines.
19 Natalie McKnight discusses Niagara Falls as embodying Romantic ideals of the sublime at length in her article, “Dickens, Niagara Falls and the Watery Sublime,” *Dickens Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2009): 69–78.
such as God, and death, one of the more famous examples being Charles Dickens’s 1842 account.\textsuperscript{20} For Palmer, the enormous, unrivalled sound of the Falls communicates irrefutable proof of God, and further, is the eternally singing voice of God himself:

\begin{quote}
I hear Niagara, in this grand strain,
His voice, who speaks in flood, in flame and thunder—
Forever mayst thou, singing, roll and reign—
Earth’s grand, sublime, supreme, supernal wonder.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

According to Severance, upon reading Palmer’s poem, the Reverend T. Starr King said that “the apostrophe has the music of Niagara in it.”\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, its contents are highly suggestive of Eugene Thayer’s later “ingenious and highly poetic paper”\textsuperscript{23} on “The Music of Niagara,” which appeared twenty-six years later.

While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries experienced a flood of literary, poetic, and visual depictions of Niagara Falls, which often referenced its sound in some way, strictly musical literature inspired by the Falls was relatively rare.\textsuperscript{24} One particularly fascinating artifact is Thayer’s article, “The Music of Niagara,” which appeared in the February 1881 issue of *Scribner’s Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine for the People*, a New York-based literary periodical published

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\textsuperscript{20} McKnight points out that Niagara Falls also fits even the scientific definition of sublime, “to cause to pass from solid to the vapor state by heating and again condense to solid form.” Because of the motion and immense pressure, the water becomes vapour, and many observers equated the mist, which would eventually return again to the Falls, with death and resurrection, especially given the ever-present rainbow. In 1842, after his first visit to the Falls, Charles Dickens wrote: “The broad, deep, mighty stream seems to die in the act of falling; and, from its unfathomable grave arises that tremendous ghost of spray and mist which is never laid.” See McKnight, 70. McGreevy also equates this poem with an optimistic view of death, see Chapter Three, “Death at Niagara,” 41–70.
\textsuperscript{21} This excerpt is the seventh and final verse.
\textsuperscript{22} Severance, 317.
\textsuperscript{23} Severance’s assessment of Thayer’s essay, which is not included in his history. Ibid.
between 1870 and 1881. Thayer was a German-trained American organ virtuoso. His four-page article is a captivating and literal exploration of the “music,” or sound, of Niagara Falls. Thayer ventures to various parts of the Falls, on both the Canadian and American sides, to analyze its sound, essentially completing what I can only describe, somewhat anachronistically, as a Schaferian soundwalk.\textsuperscript{25} He begins by arguing against the “roar” of Niagara, a term by then commonly associated with the Falls:

\begin{quote}
It had ever been my belief that Niagara had not been \textit{heard} as it should be […] What did I hear? The roar of Niagara? No. Having been everywhere about Niagara, above and below, far and near, over and under, and heard her voice in all its wondrous modulations, I must say that I have never, for a single instant heard any \textit{roar} of Niagara.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Though Thayer never defines “roar,” the reader infers it to be a loud, uncontrolled noise, a sound thus antithetical to music and to the music he hears: “From the first moment to the last, I heard nothing but a perfectly constructed musical tone—clear, definite, and unapproachable in its majestic perfection.”\textsuperscript{27} Using quasi-scientific explanations based on vibrations of the overtone series, Thayer delineates the “grand and noble unison” of the Falls as an aggregate dominant seventh chord, sounding over a low G. He supports his findings with rather rudimentary diagrams and comparisons between the various heights of the Falls to the length of relatively proportioned organ pipes, alongside constant references to the efficacy of his excellent ear and knowledge of the “king of instruments” that allows him to explicate the “mighty voice of the ‘thunder of waters.’”\textsuperscript{28} Thayer also establishes the rhythm of the Falls, and layers his science with an overtly

\textsuperscript{25} Schafer defines a soundwalk as “a walk with a concentration on listening,” and further, “an exploration of the soundscape of a given area using a score [map] as a guide.” See \textit{The Tuning of the World}, 212–213. Barry Truax, advocating for soundwalking in aid of soundscape composition, writes: “It [soundwalking] is arguably the most direct aural involvement possible with a soundscape.” See “Sound, Listening and Place,” 196.


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
religious meaning: “here has the Creator given us a Chronometer which shall last as long as man shall walk the earth. It is the Clock of God!” He determines the quality of the tone to be “Divine!”: “There is no other word for a tone made and fashioned by the Infinite God.”

Thayer’s essay is a particularly intriguing earwitness account: though its scientific accuracy may be contested, Thayer unquestionably believes what he hears and analyzes, arguably a type of Schaferian keynote, and he writes with purpose. In fact, two readers did question and strongly criticize Thayer’s unfounded science in the June 1881 issue of *Scribner’s Monthly*, to which Thayer’s own response is amusingly obstinate, concluding: “If the readers of my article will but read it again a little more closely (and perhaps between the lines in some places), I think they will find that all their questions are met and answered in words or by easy inference.” Indeed, his account runs counter to the predominant sonic perception of the Falls by the late-nineteenth century, for several unique reasons. Thayer argues against the Falls making a disturbing noise, the “roar,” thus rejecting both the earlier conception of the Falls as wild, unkempt, and dangerous, and the more contemporary readings that frequently used “thundering” and “roaring” as descriptors of its power, whether that be in a resplendent, commercial, or industrial manifestation. Further, the layering of the Falls with religious associations was more common in the 1830s and 1840s, a feature present, for example, in Dickens’s 1842 account, and even in Palmer’s 1855 apostrophe. By 1881, when Thayer was writing, Niagara Falls was teeming with tourists and burgeoning

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29 Ibid., 586.
30 Ibid.
31 A keynote sound, in soundscape studies, is a sound “heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived.” In a landscape, keynote sounds “are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals. Many of these sounds may possess archetypal significance; that is, they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sense as a distinct impoverishment.” See Schafer, 9–10, 272.
32 The two letters to the editor are from L.Y. Schermerhorn and Clarence M. Boutelle, respectively. See “Communications,” in *Scribner’s Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine for the People* vol. 22, issue 2 (June 1881): 307–308.
industry, with accompanying human and technological sound signals: visitors frequently bemoaned the commodification of a once transcendent landmark. In her reading of Thayer’s work, Von Glahn suggests that his outdated spiritual interpretation was an attempt to reconcile religious thought with ever-increasing scientific discovery, especially as Niagara’s potential as a source of enormous hydraulic power came to be realized. His acoustical facts, according to Von Glahn, “are loosely applied and merely means to an end.” But to what end? In his work, Schafer comments effusively on the fundamental and symbolic importance of water and its eternal language: “Of all sounds, water, the original life element, has the most splendid symbolism [...] Rain, a stream, a fountain, a river, a waterfall, the sea, each makes its unique sound but all share a rich symbolism. They speak of cleansing, of purification, of refreshment and renewal.” I would suggest that Thayer’s rather atypical reading of Niagara Falls was purposefully so, an effort to transcend (and perhaps implicitly save) the Falls from vulgar spectacle, as others also made similar attempts to rehabilitate and safeguard the landmark (soundmark) from further commercialization. In 1882, just a year after Thayer’s essay appeared, J. B. Harrison wrote a series of letters in support of the preservation of the Falls: “Young people cannot sit in silence gazing at the Falls, through all the long summer day, thinking of aesthetic sublimities, or communing with the Absolute and

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33 Schafer’s sound signal is “any sound to which the attention is particularly directed,” distinct from an ambient keynote sound (see n32 above for the definition of a keynote sound). As early as 1845, G. D. Warburton found Niagara “overrun with every species of abominable fungus—the growth of rank bad taste: with equal luxuriance on the English and American sides, Chinese pagoda, menagerie, camera obscura, museum, watch-tower, wooden monument, tea gardens, ‘old curiosity shops.’” Quoted in Ralph Greenhill, Niagara (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 114.

34 Von Glahn, 22.

35 Schafer, 170. Schafer also discusses the historical and symbolic importance of water in Chapter One, “The Natural Soundscape,” 15–21.
Niagara Falls was a soundmark, a “unique tone” of the natural soundscape, that needed to be preserved.

I want to conclude with a consideration of Norwegian violin virtuoso Ole Bull’s composition, *Niagara*, or more specifically, its reception after its première in December 1844. Ole Bull first came to America in 1843, and was often accompanied when on tour in America by none other than Eugene Thayer. Despite Bull’s conviction that *Niagara* was the best composition he had ever written, the piece did not receive “the unreserved critical acclaim to which he was accustomed—indeed the work seemed to be an embarrassment to the critics, who apparently did not know what to make of it.” Why, then, was this piece problematic? After hearing a series of Bull’s compositions, including *Niagara*, George Templeton Strong writes, “which of the three is the greatest humbug, I’ve not decided […] He’s a great player, undoubtedly, but […] his orchestral parts […] are thin and miserable beyond expression, mere noise, perfectly trivial.” N. P. Willis, a more receptive critic, notes a “prophetic boding” of imminent dissatisfaction at the suggestive title: “We believe that we have heard a transfusion into music—not of ‘Niagara,’ which the audience seemed *bona fide* to expect, but of the *pulses of a human heart at Niagara*.” Willis suggests that Bull’s composition does not attempt to directly translate the sound of Niagara Falls into music, but rather captures the “small still voice that replies within us to the thunder of waters […] It was the answer to Niagara that he endeavoured to render in music—not the call!” Perhaps

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36 Greenhill, 117.
37 Schafer, 26.
39 Quoted in Haugen and Cai, 87.
40 Quoted in Haugen and Cai, ibid.
41 Quoted in Severance, *Studies of the Niagara Frontier* (New York: Buffalo Historical Society, 1911), 193.
42 Ibid.
then, Bull’s *Niagara* was perceived as “thin” and “miserable” because the title provided an expectation of an overwhelming sonic experience, like audience members had experienced at the Falls themselves. Even Lydia Maria Child, describing the work programatically (and enthusiastically) with specific imagery of the Falls, writes that “the sublime waterfall is ever present with its echoes, but present in a calm, contemplative soul […] it seems to me a perfect disembodied poem; a most beautiful mingling of natural sounds with the reflex of their impressions on a refined and romantic mind.”43 Her positive review thus outlines the same issue that the other critics observe to be a fault: the inherent, natural sound that characterizes Niagara Falls could not be satisfactorily translated into music; additional cerebral and inward human experience necessarily penetrated its musical manifestation. Perhaps this failure of representation is obvious, and equally true for the myriad literary accounts, poems, and visual artworks that Niagara Falls inspired.44 But I suggest that the failure of Bull’s composition was all the more pointed because it is an auditory art; the act of listening and hearing is more bodily, more enveloping than seeing and sight, and the sensory parallel would afford too direct a comparison, rendering his music palpably insufficient.45

In 1893, Antonín Dvořák visited Niagara Falls, and apparently transfixed, declared, “Lord God, this will become a symphony in B minor!” Maurice Ravel, seeing the Falls several decades

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43 Quoted in Severance, 194.
44 Indeed, in Porter’s *Official Guide*, he insists repeatedly that experiencing Niagara cannot be matched in any artistic form of representation, be it prose, poetry, or painting (his guide lacks music, but the inference is not, I think, unreasonable). See, for example: literature, 278; poetry, 286, 293–294; visual art, 295.
later in 1928, is said to have exclaimed, “Quel majestueux si bémol!” Thayer and his fellow musicians and composers perceived the Falls in musical terms, identifying a keynote sound in its tumbling water (albeit conflicting ones). But the auditory impact of Niagara Falls was felt by every visitor: its sonic attributes feature in numerous accounts throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. This cursory study is but a microscopic toe-dipping into the sensory and aural history of Niagara Falls and its thundering waters, focused only on mid-nineteenth perceptions of its sublimity, religiosity, and inadequacy in musical translation. Niagara Falls is a vital Canadian soundmark, and explorations of its complete aural history are essential for a broader appreciation and understanding of both indigenous and colonial history in Canada, particularly as urban sound and political pressure have encroached and continue to push the sonic boundaries and cultural meaning of this striking natural soundscape.

46 The verity of these statements is questionable, but they are often repeated. Helmut Kallmann quotes them both in his article, “Niagara Falls in Music.”
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