

THEODORE PRESSER

Before *The Etude*

Part I

By *E. Douglas Bomberger*

Editor's Note: This is the first of a three-part series examining the story of MTNA Founder Theodore Presser's colorful early career.

When Thomas Edison was asked about all the failed attempts he had made in pursuit of the light bulb, he reputedly responded, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."¹

This attitude of persistence in the face of failure has characterized the American spirit and is at the heart of some of its greatest success stories. Music publisher Theodore Presser (1848–1925) was the founder and editor of history's most successful magazine for piano teachers and students, *The Etude*, whose circulation reached nearly a quarter million at its peak in the late 1910s. This magazine was the springboard that allowed him to build a formidable publishing empire remembered as one of a small handful of America's most successful music publishing houses. His legacy lives on through the philanthropic foundation that was established from his bequest.

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But it is easy to forget that Presser, like Edison, endured a string of false starts before he finally found his life's calling with the first issue of *The Etude* at age 35. His subsequent success and vast wealth were made possible, in no small part, by the lessons learned from the missteps of his earlier years. Presser's career before the establishment of *The Etude* shows how his formidable work ethic, his indomitable persistence and his unwavering commitment to music education eventually triumphed over the disappointments of his youth. This story, told here through newly uncovered contemporary documents, gives an entertaining and instructive glimpse into the musical culture of 19th-century America.

Early Life

Theodore Presser was born July 3, 1848, in Pittsburgh to a German immigrant family. His father Christian, who had immigrated to the United States from the Saar region around 1826, was a glue manufacturer. Theodore was the sixth child of Christian and his first wife Caroline Dietz of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. His mother was frail when he was born and died when he was 2 years old. Christian remarried when Theodore was about 8 years old to Frances Sterling. He later described his stepmother to his colleague James Francis Cooke:

She was a woman of God—a sincere and devoted Christian continually pointing out passages in the Bible as a guide to me. She took as good care of me as any real mother. She was a plain-spoken, kind soul who made many friends. She was most self-sacrificing and a thoroughly good woman. I often wished that I might live a life on the same high plane as hers.²

After Christian's death around 1861, Frances married Martin Zirkel, and Theodore lived with his brother Edward, who was 12 years older and married with a daughter of his own. Theodore Presser survived all his brothers and sisters, but his loyalty to Edward and his wife Emily was reflected in the stipulations of his 1925 will. To their daughters and to the daughters of his sister Louisa, he left \$2,000 each; to the daughters of his brother William he left \$1,000 each; and to the sons of his brother William he left \$500 each. The descendants of Martin and Frances Zirkel received nothing.

Theodore learned very early the value and danger of hard work. After his father's death, he attempted to enlist in the

military, but at only 13, he was rejected. Instead he took a job at a foundry that made cannonballs for the Union Army during the Civil War. His work involved using a heavy ladle to skim imperfections from the molten iron, and he worked with enthusiasm until the heat and exertion made him sick and forced him to give up that job. When his older brother William Henry returned from fighting in the war and opened a saw factory, Theodore applied for a job. Again, the work involved heavy lifting of hot metal, along with straightening bent saws with a hammer and anvil. Not surprisingly, the teenage Theodore again broke down under the physical strain after six months and was forced to recuperate at home. Presser later recalled being enamored of hard work, but his ambition was not yet tempered by common sense.³

While recovering from these demanding jobs, Theodore obtained a temporary job handling ticket sales for the Pittsburgh performances of the Strakosch Opera Company. He found the position well-suited to his outgoing personality, and he enjoyed the opportunity to rub shoulders with the members of the company. When the job ended, he was hired by C. C. Mellor, the owner of the Pittsburgh music store where the sales had been conducted. Presser worked with him for the next several years, learning firsthand about running a business, serving customers and managing a music store. As Mellor's business grew, so did opportunities for young Presser, who was promoted to manager of the sheet music department.

While at Mellor's store, Presser may have gained his first experience in publishing. Two publications from this era attest to his employer's activities in this arena, and it is probable that even if Presser was not directly involved in their production, he came to know them well as he sold them in the store. The first of these publications was *Mellor's Musical Almanac*. The only surviving copy of this annual publication is dated 1868, but the introduction states that it was first published "a few years ago."⁴ After a few pages of calendars, weather predictions and such, the majority of the book consists of listings of Mellor's most popular music for sale. Sprinkled throughout the book are aphorisms with nuggets of wisdom and practical advice, as illustrated in Figure 1. Presser later had a fondness for pithy aphorisms, which may have stemmed from his work on this almanac.

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That's It.—Stop grumbling. Get up two hours earlier in the morning, and begin to do something out of your regular profession. Mind your own business, and with all your might let other people's alone. Live within your means. Sell your horses. Give away or sell your dog. Smoke your cigar through an air stove. Eat with moderation, and go to bed early. Talk less of your own peculiar gifts and virtues, and more of those of your friends and neighbors. Be cheerful. Fulfill your promise. Pay your debts. Be yourself all you would see in others. Be a good man, and stop grumbling.

Figure 1: Practical advice from *Mellor's Musical Almanac for 1868*, page 128. Source: Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

The other publication was *Mellor's Musical Mirror*, a short-lived periodical whose first issue was published in May 1868. Volume 1 number 12 of the monthly magazine is dated March 15, 1869, and it appears that this was the last. Like many journals of this era, the content is drawn largely from “exchanges,” or material first published in other sources and reprinted through a sort of gentlemen’s agreement between journals. The ambitious aim, enumerated in the first issue, was “to reflect through our *Mirror* all that transpires in the whole musical world, and dwell particularly on musical matters in our midst.” This was to include announcements and reviews of concerts and church music, announcements of new musical publications, essays on teaching music, and correspondence. Building on the metaphor of the title, Mellor promised, “With the honest aim of concentrating and reflecting truth more clearly, to make contortions more hideous, we present our *Mirror* to the public, and shall continue to do so once a month, as long as our aim is recognized and proves a benefit to us all.”⁵ The pages of the *Mirror* were filled with local music news and advertisements for Mellor’s store, and if Presser had the opportunity to help with its production, he learned practical lessons that would later be reflected in the pages of *The Etude*.

In the hours when he was not at the store, Presser took piano lessons with Jacob Margstein (1839–1918), a German teacher who had emigrated from Mühlhausen in 1865. At 25 cents a lesson, the teenager took as many lessons as he could afford, and Mellor rented a piano for him so he would have an instrument for practicing at home. Theodore started his piano studies very late, and it required much effort for him to master his pieces.⁶ To supplement his studies, he attended concerts frequently, preserving the programs in a scrapbook that has since been lost.

Presser As A Musician

Mellor urged him to stay in the store and pursue a career in business, but Presser was determined to study music on

the college level. He passed the entrance exam at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and enrolled there in the fall of 1869. His principal area of study was music, but he also took courses in natural philosophy, intellectual arithmetic and French. He was enrolled in the teacher-training course, and during his second year on campus (1870–1871) he was listed in the college catalog as both a student and as an “assistant professor of instrumental music.”⁷ In a letter written to the editor of the college’s *Bulletin* shortly after Presser’s death in 1925, Rebecca Brush recalled that he practiced “six hours every day” on a piano that he rented from her during his time in Alliance.⁸ This stretches credibility, however, since in addition to piano, he was registered in the “Classical Course” as a freshman, the “Scientific Course” as a sophomore, as well as the “Vocal Course” and “Picturesque Drawing” both years.

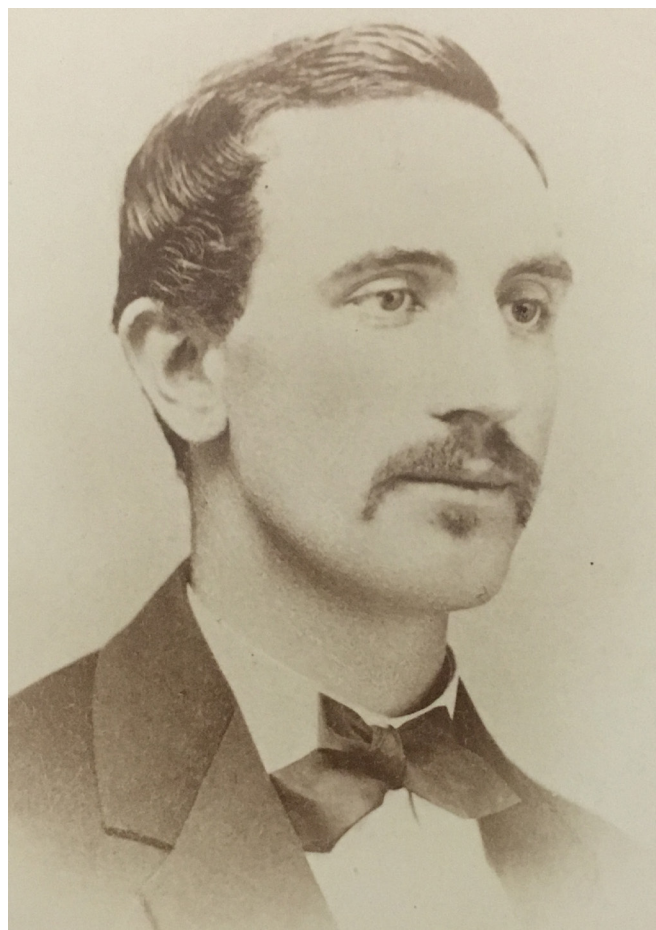


Figure 2: Theodore Presser at age 21. Source: Theodore Presser Foundation.

GRADUATED at Duff's Mercantile College, Pittsburgh: Ken. McGurdy, Tannery, Pa., Saml. D Straaburger, Pittsburgh, J. McNamee, Pittsburgh, George Geddes, Bolivar, Pa., Wm. Wilson Wible, Etna, Pa., Theodore Presser, Pittsburgh, Addison Bacon, McKeesport, Pa., all of whom passed an honorable examination, and who will no doubt, hereafter sustain the long established reputation of this favorite establishment, by their superior attainments in business. Each graduate was awarded the beautiful Diploma of the College.

Figure 3: Notice of Presser's graduation from the Duff Mercantile College. Source: *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, November 14, 1864, page 9.

Presser's diligence attracted the attention of a recent graduate of Mount Union College who was in the process of founding a college of his own. H. S. Lehr had settled in the small town of Ada in western Ohio with the idea of founding a "normal school" dedicated to teacher training. Faced with numerous challenges, Lehr persevered in establishing the school that is now known as Ohio Northern University.⁹ He hired Presser to teach music and French at the fledgling institution despite Presser's lack of a completed degree. One of Lehr's principal goals was to make education available to students of limited means. Presser adopted this altruistic attitude, which would later be such an important influence on his philanthropic work. Lehr also tutored Presser to help him fill the gaps in his general knowledge that resulted from leaving Mount Union before completing his degree.

The next several years of Presser's biography will sound familiar to readers acquainted with the role of adjunct teachers in higher education today. Presser cobbled together a career that combined part-time positions at multiple schools with frequent moves and periodic breaks for further training. He left Ohio Northern after a year to teach at one or more schools in Xenia, Ohio, then returned to Ohio Northern for another year. After this additional year in Ada, he returned to Xenia, where he taught at both the Xenia College and the Miami Conservatory of Music until the summer of 1876. The former school was previously a female college but also admitted some male students in a curriculum that resembled that of a junior college. The Miami Conservatory was a private music school that catered to the needs of a wide range of serious and casual students, as demonstrated by the advertisement in Figure 4.

MUSIC.



MIAMI

Conservatory of Music,
Xenia, Ohio,
A. N. JOHNSON, Pres't.,
J. A. BROWN, Director.

TUITION:

| | |
|------------------------------|--------|
| One Study per week | \$1 00 |
| Two Studies per week | 2 00 |
| Three Studies per week | 2 50 |

N. B. Pupils can enter at any time, paying only for the time they enter. Classes will also be organized for beginners, and every facility given for rapid advancement and culture.
For further information call at the Conservatory or address
J. ADDISON BROWN, Xenia, O.

Figure 4: Advertisement for the Miami Conservatory of Music. Source: *Xenia Torchlight*, March 23, 1876.

The proprietor of the Miami Conservatory was A. N. Johnson (1817–1892), who had been a colleague of Lowell Mason in his pioneering efforts to establish music in the public schools of Boston in 1837, the author of 36 books on music, and the composer of hundreds of hymn tunes.¹⁰ The Miami Conservatory of Music in Xenia was founded in 1871, but as Johnson was also proprietor of at least one other conservatory in another town, most of the day-to-day work was handled by Xenia resident J. Addison Brown. As

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Figure 4 shows, Johnson knew the value of advertisement, a lesson that would later prove crucial for Theodore Presser. Display ads for Johnson's publications and for the Miami Conservatory appeared regularly in the *Xenia Herald* and the *Xenia Torchlight*, as well as in *Church's Musical Visitor*, published in Cincinnati, and *Brainard's Musical World*, published in Cleveland. In at least four years of teaching at the conservatory, though, Presser's name never appeared in the school's publicity. When Johnson abruptly closed the school in the summer of 1876 to concentrate his energies on his Central Conservatory of Music in Columbus, Indiana, Presser left Xenia for good.

While teaching in Ohio, he found time for two extended periods of study in New England, first at the New England Conservatory and later at Eben Tourjée's Summer Institute in Rhode Island.¹¹ During the first of his stays in Boston, he made the acquaintance of George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931) of Lawrence, Massachusetts, who quickly became a close friend. Chadwick reported in his memoirs that he often stayed in Presser's apartment rather than travel home to Lawrence after attending a late concert in the city. In 1876, Presser got Chadwick his first full-time teaching job at Olivet College in Michigan when Presser himself turned down the president's offer in favor of a job at Ohio Wesleyan Female College.

With the closing of the Miami Conservatory, Presser had learned a hard lesson about working solely for another. In his next position, at Ohio Wesleyan Female College in Delaware, Ohio, he took active leadership of the program and learned the value of entrepreneurship. During his two years in Delaware (1876–1878) he showed a new sense of initiative that put him in the national spotlight for the first time. Presser succeeded Albert Augustus Stanley (later the long-time director of the School of Music at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor) as head of a very small department of music at OWFC. Presser taught piano and organ, while Miss Anna M. Nation taught "vocal culture." His name appears regularly in the student newspaper, *The College Transcript*, during his time at Ohio Wesleyan, often in connection with performances of the Athenaeum and Clonian Societies.

The *Transcript* noted approvingly in October 1876 that Professor Presser's name had also appeared in *Church's Musical Visitor* as the "moving spirit" of an upcoming gathering of music teachers to be held in Delaware during the Christmas holiday. The college had agreed to make its facilities available for an event that would have major importance to the music teaching profession as the organizational meeting of Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), which is still one of the country's leading organizations of music teachers. The idea had evolved in conversation with

other teachers during the summer courses in New England, but it was Presser who took the initiative to convene the event, to advertise it extensively and to host it at his home institution.

Music teaching can be a solitary profession. Its practitioners work alone, often in areas where there are few if any other music teachers. During the 19th century, teaching standards were inconsistent, and unscrupulous teachers were common. Presser recognized that a gathering of music teachers from around the country could be beneficial for reasons he articulated in the advance publicity brochure:

1. Mutual improvement by interchange of ideas.
2. To organize associations in each State [*sic*].
3. To cultivate fraternal feeling.
4. To broaden the culture of music among us.
5. To discuss disputed technicalities.¹²

Presser worked closely in the planning phase with William H. Dana of Warren, Ohio, who recalled their experiences in a paper delivered at the 1914 MTNA Convention. He said the immediate motivation for both of them was the prevalence of lazy and incompetent music teachers who took their students' money for years before passing them off to other teachers with barely anything to show for their efforts. Presser and Dana were determined to raise the level of knowledge among interested colleagues and thus equip them to expose charlatan music teachers.¹³

The first order of business on the afternoon of Tuesday, December 26, was the election of officers. Presser declined to accept the presidency of the new organization, but he did agree to serve as secretary. His former teacher Eben Tourjée of the New England Conservatory was elected president. Twelve others were elected as vice presidents charged to establish chapters in their respective states of Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Georgia, Massachusetts and Maine. Of the 62 founding members, 44 hailed from Ohio. Eighteen of the founding members were women.

The following two days were devoted to lectures and discussion. The topics ranged from the general (for example, "Church Music" by Presser's former Xenia colleague J. Addison Brown) to the specific ("Is Transposition necessary to the forming of the different keys?" by James McGranahan), and from the abstract ("The Teacher" by N. Coe Stewart) to the personal ("A music teacher's Trials and Tribulations, and how to overcome them" by S. S. Jackson). These four and many of the other papers were subsequently published in a book of proceedings that also included transcriptions of the discussions that followed. A stated goal of the organization was to "discuss disputed technicalities," and this was evident after Chadwick's paper. Presser's 22-year-old friend, just a few months into his first

teaching job, delivered an impassioned address on the shortcomings of popular music, ridiculing its simplicity and lack of substance. Among the audience members was George F. Root, one of the most successful writers of popular songs in the country. During the Civil War, he had written a number of enduring popular songs—“The Vacant Chair,” “The Battle Cry of Freedom,” “Just before the Battle, Mother” and “Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!”—and he was also the composer of numerous familiar hymns. He objected to Chadwick’s characterization of popular music, and the two men traded strong words that Chadwick described afterward as “red hot.”¹⁴

When the convention closed, participants agreed that it had been both enjoyable and instructive, and they empowered the executive committee to plan another meeting. The next convention took place in Chautauqua, New York, in 1878, perhaps in an effort to attract more members from this large and influential state, which had been underrepresented at the first meeting. Within a dozen years, the association’s membership grew to 1,649, and the annual gala concerts of American orchestral music were major events in the musical life of the late-19th century.

Presser’s role in the first convention cannot be overstated. In his welcome address on the opening session, Root predicted, “Whatever be the outcome of this meeting, we all feel that Mr. Presser, of this place, deserves great credit for what he has done to bring it about; and should it be a success, and lead to similar conventions in other States, we shall remember that he bore the cares and labors of making the beginning.”¹⁵ Root’s prediction came true, despite the efforts of others to take credit. In 1883, the periodical *The Musical Visitor* reminded readers:

Now that the Music Teachers’ National Association is an established fact, it has many claimants for its origin. Fortunately, this is one of those things about whose origin there can be no real question, as its records, as well as the music journals of the date of its inception, have authentic accounts of it. The honor belongs to Theodore Presser, . . . a most efficient and scholarly musician, who is too modest to assert his claims in the premises and so we do it for him.¹⁶ ♪

Notes

1. This quotation first appeared in an ad for GPU Nuclear Corporation, in *Black Enterprise* 16/11 (June 1986): 79. Though never verified as original to Edison, it summarizes his philosophy so well that it has become part of American folk wisdom.

2. James Francis Cooke, “Theodore Presser (1848–1925) Educator—Publisher—Philanthropist: A Centenary Biography,” *The Etude* 66/7 (July 1948): 404.

3. These stories were related by Cooke, “Theodore Presser,” 404–5.

4. Charles C. Mellor’s *Musical Almanac for 1868. For the use of Seminaries, Professors of Music, and the Musical Public* (Pittsburg [sic]: Charles C. Mellor, [1868]), p. 1.

5. “Mellor’s Musical Mirror,” *Mellor’s Musical Mirror* 1/1 (May 1868): 4.

6. Cooke, “Theodore Presser (1848–1925): A Centenary Biography Part Two,” *The Etude* 66/8 (August 1848): 479.

7. Questionnaire answers prepared for Walter J. Wilcox, November 1947, communicated via email by Alan Zahorsky, Reference Librarian at the University of Mount Union, December 2, 2014.

8. Quoted in Newell Yost Osborne, *A Select School: The History of Mount Union College* (Alliance, OH: Mount Union College, 1967), p. 485.

9. Sarah Lehr Kennedy, *H. S. Lehr and his School: A Story of the Private Normal Schools* (Ada, OH: Ada Herald, 1938; reprint Ohio Northern University Press, 1983).

10. For a detailed discussion of Johnson’s life and contributions to American music education, see Jacklin Bolton Stopp, “A. N. Johnson, Out of Oblivion,” *American Music* 3/2 (Summer 1985): 152–70.

11. Presser was one of twenty-three graduates of the “Partial Course” at the New England Conservatory, according to the program of the Annual Commencement Exercises on June 26, 1875 provided by Maryalice Perrin-Mohr of the Spaulding Library, New England Conservatory.

12. A copy of the brochure is found in George Whitefield Chadwick’s *Memoirs, 1869–1876*, Spaulding Library, New England Conservatory.

13. William H. Dana, “The Beginnings of the M.T.N.A.” in *Studies in Musical Education, History and Aesthetics: Papers and Proceedings of the Music Teachers’ National Association, 1914* (Hartford, CT: Music Teachers’ National Association, 1915), pp. 179–82.

14. The paper and the subsequent discussion may be found in “The Popular Music—Wherein Reform is Necessary,” in *The Proceedings of the Music Teachers’ National Association, 1876* (Delaware, OH: George H. Thomson, 1877), pp. 35–43. The letter in which Chadwick described the event is preserved in George Whitefield Chadwick, *Memoirs, 1877–1880*, Spaulding Library, New England Conservatory.

15. George F. Root, “Welcome Address,” in *The Proceedings of the Music Teachers’ National Association, 1876*, p. 8.

16. *The Musical Visitor* 12/9 (September 1, 1883): 234.