By studying artistic values of the past using current methodologies, scholars are able to construct models of cultural preferences by which all artistic works are then judged. In doing so they capture the most acclaimed aesthetic principles (whether acclaimed by audiences, patrons, or critics) and create the paradigm for the canon of works of a specific era or region of artistic study.

_Spirit of the Times_, a nineteenth-century sporting journal published weekly in New York City (1831-1902), contained reviews of musical events occurring in New York, London, Boston, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and other important, primarily American, metropolitan areas. Using data gathered from each issue of this seventy-one year chronicle, this project focuses on the emerging middle class segment of American society and their cultural biases and preferences.

The interpretation of the data gathered from _Spirit_ yields answers to questions raised concerning canon formation and audience reception. Analysis of the data suggests that those writing in and reading _Spirit_ showed a deeply-rooted bias towards English and Italian _bel canto_ opera with clearly delineated forms, simple, easily understood plots, and cantabile melodies. _Spirit_ readers were interested in virtuosic performances, primarily those from vocalists such as Maria Caradori-Allan and the Seguin Troupe. While there are exceptions to this, the most frequently reviewed (and therefore programmed) work was _La Sonnambula_ by Vincenzo Bellini. Orchestral works reviewed were most frequently of German or Germanic origin, performed by German-influenced organizations, including the New York Philharmonic Society and the Germania Musical Society.

American composers whose compositions were discussed and reviewed within _Spirit of the Times_ reviews, while smaller in number, were generally afforded more space per review, demonstrating the importance of “national” composers' works, thereby suggesting that the editors of _Spirit_ were aware of the role they played in assisting the creation of the “American” cultural model.