The Venezuelan pianist Teresa Carreño (b. 1853 - d. 1917) has been considered among the foremost piano virtuosos of the late nineteenth century. Her touring career, which spanned fifty-five years, brought her to the major musical venues in Western, Eastern, and Central Europe, Scandinavian countries, North and South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, North America, Mexico and the Caribbean.

Although she was not originally from the United States, her involvement in American musical life for extended periods was a determining factor in the development of her musicianship. In fact, part of her music education took place in the United States in the early 1860s, the initial stages and subsequent flourishing of her performing career occurred under the auspices of American musicians and institutions, and many of her compositions were written in the United States for local audiences and as a response to local circumstances. In a similar fashion, Carreño’s contributions to the development of concert life in America were highly significant. She maintained an intense performing activity in the United States, concertizing not only in cities with a considerably vital musical life such as New York, Boston or Chicago, but also in smaller cities from the southern, eastern, and northern areas of the country. Her American performances were important for the concert life of this country, especially during the 1870s, when the presence of renowned touring instrumentalists in the east was rather scarce. Through her interpretative qualities and continuous performance, Carreño frequently acted as an inspiring catalyst, even an active supporter, of local professional amateur associations as well as emergent generations of musicians. Moreover, she actively participated in the dissemination of orchestral, chamber and piano pieces by J.S. Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, and Schumann throughout the country, contributing to the establishment of international performing standards in the United States.

Carreño’s performances after 1890 reflected her fervent interest in the contemporary repertory, with a special advocacy of Edward MacDowell’s compositions, along with works of other Americans such as Amy Beach and Regina Watson, in a conscious effort to secure a place for this music side by side with works of the performing canon. Carreño’s support of American composers in her tours abroad contributed to bring their works international acclaim. In particular, the growing reputation of Edward MacDowell in European venues, largely due to Carreño’s performances of his piano concertos, was an
enormous stimulus in the consolidation of the country’s self-image of artistic excellence and international competitiveness.

Finally, Carreño fulfilled an important role as a leading female model for new generations of American women who entered into musical life as professional performers and composers. Being one of the first female pianists with a consistent touring presence in the country, her American tours, notably during the 1870s, had a positive impact in the construction of the role of women in American musical life. Even though women vocalists began to tour America in 1850, notably the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind and the Spanish born soprano Adelina Patti, female instrumentalists of renown rarely toured through the country before the mid 1870s. The exceptional appearances of the French violinist Camilla Urso from 1852 and Teresa Carreño from 1862 and later in the early 1870s challenged the views of a society where women instrumentalists were expected to exert their artistry within the boundaries of domestic performance. In the area of piano playing, the vulnerability of professional women was still marked in American culture during the 1870s and even during the following decades. Carreño’s extended tours since the early 1870s not only anticipated the emergence of the Americans Julie Rivé-King (later in the 1870s) and Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler (in the mid 1880s) but also contributed with them to challenge the stereotypical gendered images that had prevailed in American culture.

This dissertation will draw upon archival research conducted at various venues, principally, Archivo Histórico de Teresa Carreño in Caracas, Venezuela, Carreño Collection at Vassar College, Edward and Marian MacDowell Collection at the Library of Congress. The work will examine personal correspondence, diaries, concert contracts, programs, and concert reviews in contemporary journals, among other sources.