While music educator Lowell Mason (1792–1872) may be an important figure in American musical history, historians debate the specifics, the importance, and the worth of his historical contributions. The “genteel tradition,” a term coined by George Santayana in 1911 and not often associated with Mason, was used frequently by literary modernists of the early twentieth century to describe varying sets of ideological commitments which they most often related to the literary culture of the Gilded Age. As Wilfred M. McClay notes, Santayana’s term became for early-twentieth century literary modernists “an ill-defined collection of social and moral conventions” that “provided an artfully blurred image of everything the angry young men disliked about American literature and life.”

Sinclair Lewis, Van Wyck Brooks, Malcolm Cowley, and others gave “genteel tradition” multiple and sometimes contradictory senses; but characteristics commonly noted by recent critics are sentimentality, lack of literary frankness about sexuality, and elitist efforts at mass cultural improvement.

Building on work done by Michael Broyles and Lawrence Levine and settling a long-standing debate between Mason’s detractors and supporters, this dissertation will proceed topically, comparing Mason’s work to the spectrum of genteel views on aesthetics, morality, business, politics, and religion. While Mason’s work was hardly in literature, genteel-style cultural improvement was at the heart of his mission; and the “improvements” he advocated helped lead directly to some of the genteel traditions the modernists later rejected. Mason’s fate has risen and fallen with that of the genteel; and inspecting Mason and the genteel together will show that Mason’s primary contribution to history lies in helping begin what would become truly genteel American culture. In the process, this dissertation will give the modernists’ now-old catchphrase

---

“genteel tradition” better critical definition than ever before. Rather than “father of American church music” or “father of singing among the children,” Mason’s perhaps less catchy but more appropriate title will become “father of genteel American music.”