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## **Lost in Translation: American Sounds and British Sensibilities**

The four essays here exploring British and U.S. musico-cultural exchange originated in a fall 2003 graduate seminar at the University of Wisconsin titled “Exporting American Music.” Taking as our point of departure the commodification of American musical entertainments outside the borders of the United States beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century, we read widely on theories of cultural reception, transnationalism, and what writers often referred to as “Americanization,” the seeming worldwide popularity and widespread power of things American.<sup>1</sup>

Performers, repertoires, and forums, such as John Phillip Sousa and Maud Powell, “coon” songs and marches, world’s fairs and international expositions, provided case studies for exploring the processes of cultural transmission as we sought to better understand American identity as experienced and created through American music consumed outside the nation’s borders. Americans and their music, we learned, could simultaneously represent entrancing images of freedom and youthful vitality as well as engender outright hostility toward behaviors perceived as overbearing, insensitive, and culturally coercive. We came to appreciate that the responses to particular American musics or musicians were rarely transparent but were instead highly contingent and often contradictory. Paying close attention to the changing “landscapes of expectation,” to expand dimensionally on Hans Jauss’s notion of the “horizon of expectation,” became crucial to formulating our own interpretations of why performers succeeded or not and what works or repertoires thrived or failed in foreign environs. Receptions of American music, while providing compelling insights into what it was and is to be “American,” also told us as much about the sensibilities of the receiver.

William Cody, a.k.a. Buffalo Bill, emerged as a figure whose considerable European popularity encapsulated a number of issues we encountered time and again concerning race, gender, nationality, and difference.<sup>2</sup> With his cinnamon-scented golden curls, fringed buckskin clothing, Colt 45 pistol, and accompanying Cowboy Band, Cody presented a particular

kind of masculine image of the United States as unfettered and largely untamed, not unlike the landscape from which he hailed. Cody was, however, a kind of “middle man,” whose masculinity mediated between the Native American or “Noble Savage” he repeatedly subdued in his daily performances and the civilized European male hemmed in by his geography and culture who attended his shows. Although white and male, Cody remained an American Exotic, and central to his popularity was a continuing European fascination with American strangeness: its wide open spaces, its subjugated native peoples, and especially its formerly enslaved Africans.

Seminar participants undertook projects that explored aspects of American music as performed and received outside the nation’s borders, and all of their collective work helped to shape the essays and introduction here.<sup>3</sup> These four essays, however, provided a coherent theme in their exploration of British-U.S. relations, a relationship surprisingly under explored. “Two nations separated by a common language” has long been the way of defining British-U.S. relations. However, as is the case with most clichés, cultural realities are more complicated and certainly more interesting than stereotypes of British Invasions, American cultural imperialism, British stodginess, or American vulgarity. While a common linguistic framework should encourage shared perceptions and assumptions, translation, literally the bearing across of ideas, practices, and states of being, was challenging from the beginning. As Russell Shorto argues in *The Island at the Center of the World*, America’s colonial past was shaped by the presence of multiple cultural and linguistic mindsets.<sup>4</sup>

New York City, in particular, benefited from its Dutch heritage as New Amsterdam, a settlement that institutionalized open markets and relative tolerance for polyglot and polycultural difference. While England ultimately attained control over the colonies, Anglicizing Dutch place names as it went, the emerging United States never functioned as an easy imitation of its ruling empire. Indeed, much of what made the colonies attractive—furs, forests, tillable fields, space both psychological and geographical—were precisely desirable because they were less available or differently available in England. And yet the colonies and later the republic relied on England for cultural resources of all kinds.

The success of the Virginia Minstrels tour of England, beginning in the 1840s, served to make American entertainments part of the material goods of commerce and exchange with its former colonizer and the rest of Europe. Cultural traffic across the Atlantic now ran in both directions. Throughout the nineteenth century the United States and England, in particular, continued to share performers and repertoires, often with unexpected results that suggest both shared and diverging tastes. The 1897 Hugh Morton and Gustave Kerker show, *The Belle of New York*, is a case in point.<sup>5</sup>

Following a modest fifty-six performances on Broadway, it scored a hearty success in London, launching the career of Edna May, and running for 674 performances. Was it the American story of the Salvation Army

lass (shades of the later *Guys and Dolls*) or Kerker's musical novelties, including a Chinatown ballet, that appealed to British audiences curious for images of American urban life? Did calling it a "revue" hurt its U.S. reception as the label set up expectations of something other than it delivered? Accounting for the difference in reception—what was lost or gained in translation—remains the interesting task.

The four studies here try to answer such questions and riddles of translation. The first three authors explore the reception of American performers or popular American musical products, and the fourth reverses the gaze, exploring a British-created work that draws on American musical culture. In all four essays, issues of difference—primarily race but also class—figure prominently in the reception landscape accounting for both successes and failures, the understandable and the untranslatable. Julia Chybowsky explores the career of nineteenth-century singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and her connections to pre-existing categories of and expectations about African American music, performers and on-going controversies about the "peculiar" institution of slavery outlawed by then in England and challenged in the United States by figures like Harriet Beecher Stowe with whom Greenfield worked. Chybowsky's complicated telling of Greenfield's British reception demonstrates the power that England's response to her and her work had for shaping later notions in the United States about Greenfield's musical place and cultural meaning. Katie Graber explores the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their British performances, ones that were again marked by musical and racial typologies about performance practices and repertory. Although much was shared conceptually and discursively by British and American reviewers and audiences, the performers themselves identified differences regarding their treatment in the England and the United States.

Moving to the twentieth century Jenni Veitch Olson seeks to understand the British response to the 1970s musical *Grease*. Like *The Belle of New York*, the British reception of *Grease* exposes marked differences in British and American tastes as shaped by divergent responses to the decade of the 1950s. Race is present by its absence in the musical's presentation of teenage American life and nostalgia for the past, an absence felt more keenly by British audiences. In the final essay Ryan Ross examines *The Rio Grande*, a score by British composer Constant Lambert that presents an idiosyncratic gloss on the American Exotic and ultimately says more about England in the 1920s and Lambert's own national fantasies than it does about the United States. Lambert's musical fascination with African American singer Florence Mills suggests the potency of linkages among musicality, sexuality, race, and Exoticism that influenced nineteenth-century receptions and brings us full circle to Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and her voice.

Together all four authors provide compelling pictures of transnational exchange and cultural borrowings with miscegenations—literal and figurative—of all kinds. Their explorations and interpretations reveal how

much was shared across national and racial boundaries, but also how much could be lost in these translations of musical culture as performers, composers, and consumers changed places, positions, and contexts. As scholars and students of American music, we present these case studies as attempts to understand both the dynamic processes of culture and ourselves as receivers, shapers, and interpreters of those processes.

## Notes

1. We used Hans Jauss's *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and later scholars who have adapted aspects of his work such as Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997); James L. Macor and Philip Goldstein, *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Philip Goldstein, *Communities of Cultural Value: Reception Study, Political Differences, and Literary History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001) for a theoretical framework of reception history. We also found David Metzger's article "The New York Reception of *Pierrot lunaire*: The 1923 Premiere and its Aftermath," *Musical Quarterly*, 78 (no. 4, 1994):669-699 an especially helpful model of musical reception study. See the selected bibliography for a number of texts exploring aspects of transnational cultural dynamics and "Americanization."

2. We found the following sources on Buffalo Bill and the Wild West Show particularly helpful: Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in James R. Grossman, ed. *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 7-66; L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Alan Gallop, *Buffalo Bill's British Wild West* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2001); Joy Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); Johanna Riegler, "'Tame Europe' and 'Mysteries of Wild America': Viennese Press Coverage of American Indian Shows, 1886-1898," *European Review of Native American Studies* 1 (1988), pp. 17-20; and Michael L. Masterson, "Sounds of the Frontier: Music in Buffalo Bill's Wild West," Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1990.

3. Other members of the seminar were Bethany Ackeret, Jennifer Baron, Jeffrey Boeckman, Mark Chevy, Molly McGlone, Brian Mullen, Alex Nohai-Seaman, Griff Rollefson, Paul Shin, and Robert Torre. They likewise presented compelling interpretations of transnational exchange with examples as diverse as Patrick Gilmore's Peace Jubilees, contemporary Christian Music, French rap, and Frank Zappa.

4. Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America* (New York: Doubleday, 2004.)

5. I am drawing here on the work of Eden Kainer and Dr. Berlinda Lopez carried out in the Tams-Witmark collection of the Mills Music Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison and presented in their unpublished essay, "A Reception History of Morton and Kerker's *The Belle of New York*," 1999.

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