Navigating Voices: Song, History, and Humanity in the British Imperial Project, 1770–1836
Abstract

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This dissertation investigates the cultural context and implications of British colonial elites and metropolitan musicians engaging with song as a material practice and an object of knowledge at the end of the long eighteenth century. Both socially embedded and fully embodied, singing has long been imagined through the lens of Western metaphysics as revealing the essential qualities of a person or people—a critical index of the body and the special purview of humanity. More recently, scholarship across music studies has demonstrated the centrality of listening to the colonial projects of classification and control. The present study is situated at the convergence of voice studies and global music history, employing ideas and methods from decolonial theory, early modern critical race studies, and queer theory, to articulate the work of song and the discourse of musical voice in the production of colonial modernity and its emergent categories of humanity. It argues that the material practice of song served as a practical conduit through which eighteenth-century Britons navigated distinctions of race, nation, and power. To underscore the intimacies and intricacies of vocal practice and identity in this period, the project focuses on socially liminal figures in moments of intimate performance and transnational exchange between England and Jamaica, Scotland and India, and Italy and Australia. Over four chapters, it considers practices of listening to, performing, documenting, and teaching song as they informed racial hierarchies, defined practices of desire, and disciplined bodies in contact.

The first part of the dissertation, "Global Intimacies," focuses on two instances of Britons listening to and engaging in foreign vocal practices. Chapter one, "Imperial Camp," re-evaluates the listening practices of writer William Thomas Beckford, descended from a powerful slaveholding family in Jamaica, to examine the colonial implications of his fixation with the castrato voice. For his 21st birthday, Beckford's custodians commissioned a cantata and enlisted Gasparo Pacchierotti and Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci to sing. *Il tributo* (1781) was a didactic work addressing the young man's perceived effeminacy and apathy over the business of empire, both of which were especially problematic given his fraught social position as a racialized "white Creole." But the realized voices of Italian castrati inevitably obscured the disciplinary message of the text, producing a conflicting image of English masculinity. *Il tributo* failed to enforce imperial race/sex proscriptions because Beckford's Camp mode of aurality—a tool by which he re-negotiated his place within the empire—undercut the cantata's moral imperatives.

The second chapter, "Colonial Ventriloquy," turns to the East India Company Raj, offering a new reading of Anglo-Indian Sophia Plowden's performances of Awadhi courtly songs, known to Europeans as "Hindustani airs," in late Mughal India. I attend to the imbalances and ambivalences of singing across cultures in the colonial encounter as well as the Orientalist policies of the colonial government. In contrast to the hereditary courtesans who sang and danced to the diverse repertoire of Indo-Persian songs, Plowden's process of acquiring, learning, and presenting them was heavily mediated by local musicians, teachers, and other interlocuters. Her resulting

practice enacted what I term "colonial ventriloquy"—the inverse of colonial mimicry—that failed to capture the gestural, bodily, and social elements of her models. While Plowden's embrace of local music may have been in earnest, these performances evacuated social and embodied context of *nautch* performances. What appeared to Anglo-Indian audiences as masterful and faithful reproductions of Mughal courtly song ultimately served to reinforce the East India Company's continued dominance in the region.

The second half of the dissertation, "Transnational Exchanges," shifts focus to the contribution of musical voice in constructing historical knowledge and new racial frameworks. Chapter three, "Musical Notes & Planter Histories," considers the writing of William Beckford of Somerley (cousin to the subject of the first chapter) on the enslaved singing practices heard on his Jamaican plantations in relation to the music-historical research of his friend and patron, music historian Charles Burney. In his *Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica* (1790), Beckford aestheticizes Black voices vis-à-vis what he calls Burney's "elegant and learned" *General History of Music* (1776–1789). He attempts to delineate humanity through song to both re-consume enslaved Black singing into the British imperial soundscape and reveal the "superiority" of white European civilization. While Beckford's and Burney's respective works on music stand a world apart in scope, method, and aim, both were grounded in projects of colonial modernity and the ongoing, racialized construction of the Human that lie at the origins of modern musicology.

The final chapter, "Global Journeys & Vocal Pedagogies," explores the pedagogical and global-historical writing of Isaac Nathan, an English Jew who received early cantorial training from his father and lessons under the Anglo/Scots-Italian Domenico Corri. Although Nathan never converted or abandoned the cultural ethos of Judaism, in transitioning from *meshorrer* (cantor's assistant) training to the Italian (*bel canto*) school he acquired a second vocal patrimony, not by birth but by study. The chapter considers this new lineage through Corri's ballad opera *The Travellers* (1806), which traces the supposed birth and evolution of music from East to West, alongside Nathan's magnum opus, *Musurgia Vocalis* (1836). It re-imagines the decolonial notion of "border thought" as a praxis of "border singing" to better understand Nathan's multilocal legacy of voice amid Britain's expanding intra-European dominance during the Regency era. Nathan's pedagogical lineage ensured a continued practice of pedagogy and performance that long informed the future of singing in Britain.

This study locates the production of modern global/colonial knowledge at the nexus of aurality and vocality—an ephemeral site of bodies in sonic contact—as the definition of music among elite Europeans underwent an aesthetic constriction and definitive shift towards the instrumental, the monumental, and the literate (and therefore infinitely reproducible). Through an archive of historical and pedagogical treatises, personal accounts, and operatic repertoire, it moves between public and private spaces, metropole and colony, and singer and listener, highlighting the connections between aesthetic production and consumption, human difference, and colonial domination. Reevaluating the singing cultures of late Georgian and Regency Britain and its colonial empire, the dissertation illustrates how the engagement between voice and ear, both material and fictional, generated new epistemological frameworks of music, history, and humanity in the imperial imaginary.