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To cite this article: Paul Watt, Laura Case, Suddhaseel Sen, Anna Piatigorsky, Sean Williams & Erin Johnson-Williams (09 Nov 2025): Colloquy: Studies of Music in the British Empire: Past, Present, Future, Musicology Australia, DOI: [10.1080/08145857.2025.2572120](https://doi.org/10.1080/08145857.2025.2572120)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08145857.2025.2572120>



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Published online: 09 Nov 2025.



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Colloquy: Studies of Music in the British Empire: Past, Present, Future

Paul Watt^a , Laura Case^b , Suddhaseel Sen^c , Anna Piatigorsky^d , Sean Williams^e  and Erin Johnson-Williams^f 

^aThe University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia; ^bThe University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; ^cIndian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India; ^dUniversity of Texas, Austin, United States; ^eThe Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA, United States; ^fUniversity of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

In this Colloquy, six scholars from various heritages and scholarly backgrounds take account of the past, present, and future status of scholarship about music and music making across parts of the British Empire. The starting point is a discussion of Jeffrey Richards' foundational book, *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876–1953*, published almost twenty-five years ago. This text has been key to many scholars working on Britain and the music of Empire since then, but the scholarly territory or domain of British imperialism has changed dramatically in the last quarter of a century. In the Colloquy, six scholars reflect on some of the key attributes of Richards' book by considering its strengths and limitations, as well as the ideas it can spark for us today.

KEYWORDS

Jeffrey Richards; music; Britain; Empire; imperialism

Introduction

Paul Watt

Next year [2026] marks twenty-five years since the publication of Jeffrey Richards' *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876–1953* (2001).¹ It was a landmark book; the first large-scale study of the ideology of British imperialism made manifest in British music. Across all genres of music and styles possible—from opera to hymns, from art music to popular music—this large volume, of more than 520 pages, has become the point of reference for scholars embarking on any kind of new study on British music and its imperial legacies. This Colloquy aims to use Richards' key book as a basis on which to position the past, present, and future of the study of music in the British Empire.

CONTACT Paul Watt  paul.watt@adelaide.edu.au

¹ Other books dealing with music and Empire published since 2001 include Cowgill and Rushton (2006); Zon and Clayton (2007); Ghuman (2014); van der Linden (2013), and Kirby (2022). Recent articles on similar topics include, but are not limited to: Johnson-Williams (2023a, 2023b); van Rij (2023); Watt and Oates (2023); and Kirby (2025).

In the colloquy, six scholars from Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and India—in disciplines spanning musicology, ethnomusicology, intellectual and literary history, popular music studies, and popular music amongst other interests—reflect on some of the attributes of Richards’ book by considering both its strengths and limitations, as well as the ideas it can still spark for us today.

Contributors were asked to write on whatever topic inspired them arising from their reading of Richards’ book. The contributors were not constrained by following a particular structure, argument, or pattern of thought. This looseness of framing was deliberate so that the contributors could respond in ways that suited their disciplinary or personal interests. They were encouraged to be in direct or indirect engagement with Richards’ book in positioning their responses.

The scope of Richards’ book is preceded in an introduction by John M. MacKenzie, the editor of the ‘Studies in Imperialism’ series, to which the book belongs, published by Manchester University Press. MacKenzie notes ‘that music ... played a major role in the life of a global ideological phenomenon like the British Empire’ and remarks on the quantity of music that ‘picked up local colour of indigenous musical traditions, albeit converted for western ends’ (MacKenzie 2001, vii). MacKenzie also notes that the book ‘will act as a remarkable quarry for future scholars’ (MacKenzie 2001, vii).²

In the introduction, Richards describes the book as concerned with ‘the expression in music of the ideology of the British Empire’ (Richards 2001, viii), beginning from 1876, the year in which the Royal Titles Act was passed—proclaiming Queen Victoria Empress of India—to 1953, the year of Elizabeth II’s coronation. The author describes his approach as not that of a musicologist but of a ‘cultural historian’ whose ‘primary focus is not analysis of the music but its cultural impact’ (Richards 2001, viii). In 2025, this pairing of cultural history and musicology could come across as an awkward or unnecessary binary—even a tautology—but in 2001 it was not. This gap between cultural history and musicology is seen in the critical reception of the book: its almost total absence from reviews in musicology journals in favour of reviews in history journals.

Most of the scholars who reviewed the book were critical of Richards’ endeavour and highlighted some of its strengths as well as lacunae, not just in terms of factual material but in its argument, or lack thereof. By and large, the critics perceived the book as too long, too empirical, and lacking in argument. For Paul Richards, writing in *Africa*, parts of the book were ‘heavy on details and light on argument’ (Richards 2003, 137). Patrick Brantlinger, in *Albion*, chastised the author for a lack of attention to detail in defining terms such as ‘imperialism,’ ‘jingoism,’ and ‘mindless chauvinism’ and lashed out at Richards for ‘repetitiously [reproducing] and also [celebrating] the uncritical beliefs of the many, many Victorian and twentieth-century musicians who lauded the beneficence and glory of the British Empire’ (Brantlinger 2003, 524). The most trenchant criticism came from Bernard Porter in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, who asserted Richards had over-represented claims of imperialism in music and was often simplistic and exaggerated (Porter 2002). Other reviewers, such as John Springhall (in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*), David C.H. Wright (in *Modernism/Modernity*), and Jeremy Dibble (in the *Times*

2 In this Colloquy we adopt the lower-case rendering of the letter ‘w’ in the words west and western.

Higher Education Supplement) appraised the book in more generous terms. Springhall finds ‘the great strength of this inexhaustible and profoundly empiricist work is that it provides a listing of almost every conceivable form of patriotic or imperial music expression’ (Springhall 2003, np). Wright (2003, 393) praised the book for its cross-disciplinary approach and its ‘wealth of empirical evidence,’ while Dibble was relieved to see the book did not ‘carry the baggage of contemporary political or cultural interpretation,’ concluding that the book ‘provides a compelling insight into a much-neglected area of British musical history’ (Dibble 2003, 26).

In a review-article in *Music & Letters*, Alain Frogley (2003) assesses Richards’ book in the context of other books about music in Britain published around the same time, especially *The English Musical Renaissance, 1860–1940: Construction and Deconstruction* (Hughes and Stradling [1993] 2001), in which Frogley focuses not so much on gaps as strengths within Richards’ book. Frogley seems impatient and frustrated with the Hughes and Stradling volume for not engaging in a more critical and conceptually informed interpretation of British musical politics of the period, arguing they ‘appear to have no knowledge [of cultural politics] nor do they seem interested in acquiring it’ (Frogley 2003, 242). After this long assessment, Frogley turns his attention to Richards’ book, describing it as a work traversing ‘virgin territory,’ ‘the first book ever to tackle this enormous and enormously important topic’ and ‘a solid foundation on which others may build’ (Frogley 2003, 243, 252). Later in the review, Frogley (2003, 255) considers Richards’ book to lack the scholarly sophistication of works such as Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993 [1978]), but is nevertheless an important book for its time.

There are some unusual aspects to the production of this book and its critical reception. It was published in a series of books on imperial history, not music. This should not strike us as immediately troublesome except to realize that the book was reviewed in only one musicology journal. Perhaps it was ‘out of sight, out of mind’ for the reviewers of the standard musicology journals, especially those in Britain, or perhaps, as one of the assessors of the Colloquy asked, musicology was not ready for a book like this. It is further noteworthy that the book was reviewed by musicologists, Wright and Dibble, in literary journals. It is also odd that coverage of the book begins so late in the imperial narrative—1876—when imperial influence was evident much earlier in the century. Other reviewers came from a variety of backgrounds in framing their responses to the book. Paul Richards’ scholarly work is in agrarian studies in Africa, especially Sierra Leone; Brantlinger is a literary historian; Porter, a British historian; and the late John Springhall, a scholar of British youth studies and decolonization. Although the book does not strike me as particularly cross disciplinary today, it was reviewed by scholars with diverse research interests across a wide range of subjects.

Since the publication of Richards’ book, many books and dozens of articles and book chapters have been written on all manner of British musical imperialism. Richard’s book was likely not the sole inspiration since the study of British imperialism was flourishing—if not in the ascendant—from the 1990s onwards. It is striking, as one of the anonymous readers of our Colloquy pointed out, that music is ‘not mentioned at all’ in the five volumes of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* and its subsequent series (1998–2016). Frustrating, too, is the lack of critique

in most of Porter's extraordinarily provocative books on British history, in which the author's trenchant criticism of the historiography is laid bare. Still, he offered an account of Edward Elgar and imperialism in an article in which he asks, 'Was Elgar a genuine imperialist?' (Porter 2016, 180).

There has also been a proliferation of books on music published since Richards' time dealing to various degrees with Britain's music and its imperial connections. Edited books, such as *Music in the British Provinces, 1690–1914* (Holman and Cowgill 2007) and *Europe, Empire, and Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century British Music* (Cowgill and Rushton 2006) contain a small but important number of chapters dealing with imperialism in various guises, exercised or represented in Britain itself or in one or more of its colonies. Also of importance is *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire* (Zon and Clayton 2007), which includes some chapters dealing with imperialism, especially in India or derived from that country. More explicit works on British music and Empire are Fiona Palmer's *Conductors in Britain, 1870–1914: Wielding the Baton at the Height of Empire* (2017) and Sarah Kirby's *Exhibitions, Music and the British Empire* (2022). As sole-authored books they of course have more scope than edited books to tease out their topic and arguments. Palmer's volume examines how threads of notions of Empire are evident in the social and cultural history of British music at the nadir of Empire in the ways that the 'pedigrees, function, standards and talent' (Palmer 2017, 3) of eight profiled conductors intersected with imperialism. Though the conductors Palmer studies were emblems of Empire—they were knighted—they nevertheless worked at a time when the very notion of the British Empire was challenged by new patterns of musical commodification and influence from central Europe, and the rise of celebrity musicians everywhere. Through methods such as reception studies, historical musicology, and art history, Kirby charts expressions of exhibitions not just in the United Kingdom, but also in Australia and India. Kirby points out that these exhibitions, presented on a vast scale for months at a time, are ultimately a 'microcosm' highlighting 'many contested processes in relation to the role of music in British and colonial society, institutions, and thought' (Kirby 2022, 2).

More recently, a coauthored biography of Fritz Hart by Peter Tregear and Anne-Marie Forbes (2024) provides a canny account of Hart's Australian career, avoiding the temptation to run narratives of export and cultural improvement that previous scholars such as Stephen Banfield (2007) (in his study of examination boards) have constructed. But popular music studies have ventured into serious scholarly work on British imperialism, such as David Hammond's study of British brass bands as agents of power (Hammond 2013) and Penny Summerfield's study of similar themes in the late-nineteenth-century British music hall (Summerfield [1987] 2017). Further afield, Nalini Ghuman (2014) and Bob van der Linden (2013) have written on British imperialism and India. More recent research such as *Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930–1970* (Harris 2020), an article on Granville Bantock's culturally problematic travel to Australia in the late 1930s (Watt and Oates 2023), and a history of the violin in Australia by Laura Case (2025), account for the effect of British culture not just in Britain but its consequences in colonial countries—in these cases Australia—from the voices of those who experienced these consequences of invasion, or cultural replication and adaptation, in local circumstances. Harris and

Case's books are especially apposite because they are written by or with contributions from First Nations peoples. *The Oxford Handbook of Music Colonialism* (Johnson-Williams, Kok, and Liao [forthcoming](#)) takes similar voices into account and signals an emerging change in geographical location and local agency in framing the history not only of empire and imperialism, no matter its place of foreign origin.

Since 2020, the British Empire has been an especially contested area in the scholarship of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The death of Elizabeth II in 2022—while leading to an outpouring of grief at the end of a long and steady reign—invited commentary in the press on the continued relevance of the monarchy to the colonized world, including renewed debates concerning the return of the Koh-i-Noor diamond to India (Coughlan [2023](#)). Moreover, the demise of the Commonwealth Games, which is struggling to find continued support, raises questions about the future not only of the games themselves, but of the function and purpose of the Commonwealth of Nations (Ingle [2023](#)). The prospect of the portrait of King Charles III appearing on Australian currency outraged many people, and this issue became a 'hot potato' (Taylor [2023](#)). Further disquiet over the monarchy's presence in Australia focused on the meddling in 1972 by the then Prince of Wales and the Queen in the removal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam from office in clandestine circumstances (Hocking [2020](#)). The monarchy's influence in Australia continued to be derided by large numbers of the population, though a referendum in 1999 did not vote in favour of a republic because the attachment to the British monarchy was still highly valued (Wedesweiler [2003](#)). The genocide of Indigenous Australians by British colonizers continues to be an appalling blight on British imperialism and colours the reception of anything British (see, for example, Lydon and Ryan [2018](#); Reynolds [1989](#)).

One part of Richards' book deals, albeit extremely briefly, with the reaction to Imperial music in a colonial context. In chapter four 'Music for Official Occasions: Coronations and Jubilees,' Richards examines the many lives of the British national anthem, 'God Save the King,' and its many iterations, variations, additions, and deletions. With verses (and text) added to laud the monarch of the day or to highlight current affairs (usually related to the reigning monarch), the anthem was frequently changed to suit its historical context (Pickering [2017](#)). In passing, Richards writes of an occasion when a Canadian band refused to play the national anthem at an official function, but the anthem was sung anyway, unaccompanied. We are left to speculate as to the reason for the band's non-compliance. Or was Richards looking too hard at every instance, as criticized by Porter, to find British imperialism everywhere? Perhaps in this example, there was more to the story than merely the action of the instrumentalists. Were the musicians republicans? Were they not given time to tune their instruments? Was the event outdoors, with bad weather and the musicians soaked to the bone, their instruments damp and unplayable? Were the musicians poorly remunerated? These may seem specious questions, but they are nevertheless valid for they ask about the motivations, politics, and agency of those taking a stand against a dominant culture, which some may argue was a major shortcoming of the book, seen especially in the reviews by Porter and Springhall, as well as Frogley's critical comments about the limitations and narrow purview of Hughes and Stradling ([[1993](#)] [2001](#)). In short, there may well be more to the story

than meets the eye in some of Richards' case studies, for want of a better term. This is true of the history of the British national anthem and its adoption in Australia, as I show below.

In the rest of the Colloquy, Laura Case considers the violin as an instrument of colonization in Australia. Laura, a freshwater Aboriginal woman from southeast Australia, brings an Indigenous perspective to the history of the impact of imperialism on Indigenous music making, uncovering tropes of resistance and diversity. Suddhaseel Sen argues that the focus on the operations of the British in the colonies (something Richards does in his book) needs to be complemented by a focus on how colonized populations responded to them. Anna Piatigorsky provides a conceptually rich analysis of the politics and cultural theory of the adoption of British music examination boards in parts of the colonized world, drawing on the India Office Records of the early twentieth century to examine how two institutions competed to dominate western musical networks in colonial India. Her work highlights the interactions between these institutions and the colonial administration, revealing a contested site of power within imperial structures. Sean Williams explores the repeated British attempts to suppress traditional music in Ireland through normally rather successful techniques, and how the complexities of imperialist efforts resulted in Irish traditional music coming out stronger than ever on the national and international stage (and in pubs everywhere). Finally, Erin Johnson-Williams reflects on reading musicology in the present moment—considering how de-centring Britain in scholarship on music and imperialism can be a de-constructive process of 'looking away.'

Australia's National Anthem: An Imperial Hangover

Paul Watt

An examination of the use of 'God Save the King' outside of the United Kingdom opens a rich window into attitudes towards Empire, the monarchy, and colonial rule as voices from First Nations Australians, the multicultural community, and leaders of school curricula question the imperial flavour of the anthem in twenty-first century Australia. This study also brings into question the role of national anthems generally, which Jeffrey Richards mentioned only briefly (2001, 88–100), but which jumped out at me as an avenue of inquiry concerning the effect of British imperialism and music on race, class, and gender in Australia. In this part of the Colloquy, I outline the history of the British national anthem's place in Australia's colonized history and offer examples of how attempts to replace, reject, or superimpose the tune with new words—or an altogether different song—have brought to the fore issues of nation and identity from a variety of private as well as public interests.

The British national anthem was used in Australia, but only until 1984. Presumably, a swelling of national pride quite divorced from a once-guaranteed British identity sparked a plebiscite in 1984, and the national anthem was replaced by 'Advance Australia Fair.' Before 1984, a competition was held to nominate a new national anthem, but the six shortlisted songs were characterized by the 'banality of their imagery and the shallowness of the sentiment' (Pender 2005, 70). The result of the

referendum was convincing, not least because voting in elections and referenda in Australia is compulsory for people aged eighteen and over, but also because most referenda in Australia's history have failed. The nation had cut ties with the national anthem of its colonizer. But the debate was far from resolved.

Even though 'Advance Australia Fair' has been the national anthem of Australia since 1984, it has not remained static and 'God Save the King' was officially named as the Royal Anthem in the same year, to be played in the presence of the monarch or members of the royal family (Australian Government 2024; see also Dix 2021; Radic 1996; Watt 2014). In the spirit of inclusivity, the first line was changed in 1984 from 'Australia's sons let us rejoice,' to 'Australians all let us rejoice,' and in 2021 the second line was changed from 'For we are *young* and free,' to 'we are *one* and free.' This change noted that the use of 'young' referred to the short period of British colonization rather than acknowledging the 65,000 years of Indigenous presence before that (Australian Government 2024). Abuk Akol, writing from his perspective as a migrant from South Sudan, argues that Australia is neither young nor free, and the anthem is not inclusive for migrants and multicultural communities (Akol 2017). Historian Bruce Buchan agrees on similar grounds: arguing the anthem speaks to all Australians as 'an Enlightenment presumption of a racial "oneness" ... and stands as a symbol of cultural appropriation' (Buchan 2022, 118). A publication in the rationalist press argued the anthem contained too many Christian tropes and metaphors (Robinson 2021). Despite the ambivalence of the anthem, it has been translated into several Indigenous languages as well as Asian and European languages because, for the time being, there is no alternative (Australian Government 2024). Various proposals to replace the text with overt references to God and Christianity appear to put the Governor General's office into a grey area in relation to laws and official procedures, though there was no criminal investigation when the Catholic church completely altered the text, turning the secular anthem into a sacred hymn (Wallace 2014). The altered anthem could be used on occasions befitting the altered texts, such as church services, but this presented a conundrum, according to an expert in constitutional law, Peter Vickery (Dix 2021). And yet, still the troubles over the anthem were far from settled.

Other, more substantial changes to the national anthem have been proposed over the years, including a 2009 collaboration between Yorta Yorta woman, Deborah Cheetham Fraillon, and Judith Durham. Cheetham and Durham's version of the lyrics associates the anthem more directly with Indigenous experiences (Cheetham 2015). The tune is not altered, but the new lyrics lend the anthem an Indigenous voice. On 1 January 2021, an article in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper interviewed several musicians on their thoughts about the currency of the anthem; most desired to see it replaced by other national songs such as 'Waltzing Matilda' (Dwyer 2021).

Cheetham's push for change did not appear out of the blue for First Nations peoples, and others had been actively challenging the racist expressions of the anthem in a range of situations, from the sports ground to school assemblies. In 2016, Wiradjuri man and rugby player Joe Williams refused to stand at an Australia Day awards ceremony remarking: 'Are people hurt because I didn't stand? Or are they hurt because I made a statement as an Aboriginal man and chose to exercise my rights in a free country?' (Mao 2018). In 2017, Indigenous man and boxer Anthony

Mundine shunned the anthem, describing it as ‘a racist anthem’ and ‘disrespectful to our people’ (Mao 2018). In 2018, Harper Nielsen, a nine-year-old school student from Brisbane, made news for refusing to stand for the national anthem when sung at her school assembly (Mao 2018). This caused an outrage, and prominent songwriter-musician, Shane Howard came to Nielsen’s defence, claiming:

This young girl deserves our utmost respect and admiration. Certainly not our derision. Who is the mature thinker in all this clatter? It’s certainly not the adults banging on about how she should be chastised. Let’s be honest. What she says is patently true and we all know it. (McFadyen 2018)

In a 2014 article published by the Faculty of Business, Government and Law at the University of Canberra, Alex Bhathal described the racist aspect of the anthem in much stronger terms:

Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders and migrant settlers of colour who raise concerns about racism will find themselves accused of bullying and misconduct. Because racism is in the eye of the beholder. And in the case of debates about the national anthem, the beholder is wilfully and wrongfully misunderstanding the meaning of the word ‘fair.’ All these racial injustices are enabled by our delusion that we are a fair country, as reinforced on the national and international stage by our anthem. And that is why we need to ditch the racist play on words, along with the dirge, and move on. It will take us a long time to get to justice, but at least we’ll be closer to the truth. (Bhathal 2021)

In practical terms, refusing to stand and sing the national anthem has had serious and pernicious consequences for some Australians. In 2024, the children from an Indigenous family were ‘disenrolled’ from a Christian school after one of them refused to stand for the anthem. The children’s mother, speaking on their behalf, commented that ‘we’re not disrespectful, we just quietly sit aside and let the song pass’ (Carbone, King, and Burns 2024). The family currently has a racial discrimination complaint before the Human Rights Commission. Again in 2024, the singing of the national anthem was reported upon in Melbourne’s right-wing daily newspaper, the *Herald Sun*. The lyrics of the anthem proposed by Cheetham had been adopted by a primary school and the newspaper reported ‘anger’ at the ‘revised anthem,’ although the anger seemed to come only from one source: Daniel Wildsaid, a member of the conservative think-tank, the Institute of Public Affairs. Wildsaid described the updated version of the lyrics as ‘an appalling example of activism and division being forced upon our students ... we are witnessing the activists and elites in our society trying to divide us ... students should be singing our national anthem and paying respect to our flag’ (Delibasic and O’Brien 2024).

Australia’s twenty-first referendum was held in 2023 and resulted in a convincing vote against the addition of a statement in the constitution acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land, as well as introducing an Indigenous voice to Parliament. The failures of this (and other referenda) can be attributed to many factors that do not appear, at least upon first glance, to be racially motivated (such as ill-thought-out models of who would be the head of state in a newly fashioned republic, and the practicalities of how a Voice to Parliament would function). There are also other, less pressing, concerns regarding the national anthem. Officially

composed in F major, the anthem is difficult for most of the population to sing (especially when reaching the higher notes). This could suggest that pitch standards in Australia may have altered since it was composed with a British populace in mind. However, this is a line of inquiry awaiting a scholar with more expertise than me to unravel. Perhaps there is scope to produce a transposition that may result in a more tuneful performance, though Wendy Hargreaves argues the anthem's melodic shape is already too complicated for the average singer to render tunefully (Hargreaves 2023).

Research on the effect of imperialism on Australian musical culture is already well-established, but scholars could further investigate ways in which music acts as just one element of a nation 'out of tune' with its imperial inheritance. The monarch still appoints the Governor-General of Australia and reserves the power to stand down the Australian Prime Minister. Australia also retains many other trappings of Empire: an honours system, the observance of the King's birthday, and the arguable fetishization of ANZAC Day—perversely, the result of the British harvesting of cannon fodder from Australia and New Zealand (Lake et al. 2010). Studies interrogating the vestiges of imperial culture in national and local communities in Australia, as well as the place that Indigenous stories play in culture-memory, trauma, and hope for the future could be useful avenues for future research. The musical expressions of these events in Australia's history await detailed study not only in relation to the constant change of meaning for the national anthem, but also for songs (both sacred and secular), anthems, and hymn-tunes generally. In the meantime, 'Advance Australia Fair' is still considered by many to be divisive and racist, and seems a long way off from either settling on a more inclusive text or replacing both the text and tune altogether. Overall, the study of national anthems needs to move beyond studies of taxonomy, reductionist semantic analysis, and nationalist generalizations and culture indexing in order to be more meaningful in their understanding of lived experience, and to evaluate their impacts across various segments of national and local communities (Cerulo 1993; Hummel 2017; Silaghi-Dumitrescu 2020).

An Indigenous Perspective on Music and Imperialism in Australia

Laura Case

In his groundbreaking book from 2001, Jeffrey Richards argues that music should be credited as one of the main features of cultural imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as Paul Watt notes in his introduction to this Colloquium, what Richards' book does not do is examine in much detail the effect of British imperial music when transplanted to British colonies.

As a freshwater Aboriginal woman from south-east Australia who plays the violin, I am somewhat well situated to offer an Indigenous perspective when considering the impact of imperialism on Indigenous music making. As European music spread throughout Australia, one of its main effects was the displacement of Indigenous people and our ancient traditions and culture. Although it is vital to acknowledge that the violent settlement of the British Empire resulted in the widespread cultural erasure of Aboriginal people, it is also important to recognize the ongoing resistance

and resilience of Indigenous people who have survived the forces of Empire since 1788. Writing back to Empire as decolonial practice is a useful form of prioritizing those voices, which have been consistently omitted from formative accounts of national history. Histories that uncover tales of resistance and diversity are necessary to absorb the inherent issues of imperialism's development while celebrating the triumph of those who underwent and endured it (Fullagar 2020, 8). The complexities and actualities of imperial rule cannot be truly demonstrated within a narrative of domination alone. Philip Jones, in his 2014 study, remarks that the Anglo-European governors who settled in Australia during the late eighteenth century brought with them preconceived notions of the 'other' as essentially human cultures, yet incompletely realized. These cultures were primarily defined by their perceived lack of intelligence, technology, and recognition of a higher being (Jones 2014, 88). Enlightenment intellectuals and theorists often depicted societal advancement in a linear fashion within their writings. This was done not only to highlight European societal progress but also to underscore the supposed absence of refinement and civility in newly encountered non-European societies. To the Europeans, true refinement was considered the hallmark of a successfully established and superior society, distinct from what they termed 'the state of nature.'

Consequently, Aboriginal people, whose systems of reading, counting, and farming were not akin to European standards, did not meet the European definition of being 'civilized.' As colonial governments intensified efforts to civilize, educate, and convert Aboriginal people during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many individuals, particularly children, were segregated from society onto missions or reserves managed by religious denominations or the government (Martin 2020, 61).

While on these missions, Indigenous peoples were taught European activities and were often prohibited from practising their traditional customs or languages. Newspaper reports that described the missions emphasized visual symbols of 'civilization,' which Toby Martin identifies as including 'Aboriginal policemen, Aboriginal children in school, neat houses and streets, well-manicured gardens, healthy black babies in clean hospitals and Aboriginal brass bands and choirs' (Martin 2020, 63).

By the 1920s, an obsession with racial categories led to various proposals, which sought to address the issue of the 'half caste.' These proposals were driven by the genocidal intent to 'breed out the colour,' a notion that significantly influenced the stolen generation and assimilationist policies (Martin 2020, 63). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, visions of whiteness dominated the thoughts of White Australia. Policies of assimilation were implemented alongside segregation, aimed at diminishing the visibility of Aboriginal people in their own national landscape (Haebich 2018, 10).

On many missions around the country, Aboriginal people were taught western art music, a practice that was seen as part of their preparation for integration into White Australian society. Anna Haebich (2015, 37) argues that this strategy was aimed at making them 'contented and happy,' thereby replacing their 'savage customs with the enjoyment of European civilization.'

In 1950, the orchestra from the Garden Point Mission on Melville Island, situated off the north coast of Australia, gained widespread attention due to the skill of their leader—a seventeen-year-old violinist named Mercy. Her ability was used as explicit

evidence of the perceived corrective influence western art music would have on Aboriginal people. The headline from Melbourne's daily newspaper, the *Age*, reads: 'A seventeen-year-old full blood Aborigine girl; Mercy—first violinist in a 25-piece orchestra at Garden Point half caste mission—has proved to Native Affairs authorities that some aborigines do take advantage of their opportunities' (*Age* 1950, 3). Similarly, Melbourne's *Argus* proclaimed that 'a young aboriginal girl has proved that wild natives are capable of complete education' (*Argus* 1950, 6). The *Kalgoorlie Miner* detailed an event where 'during a recent visit to the mission by the Director of Native Affairs ... Mercy led the 30-piece school orchestra in a concert. Mr. Moy was impressed by this example of what education can do for a full-blood native' (*Kalgoorlie Miner* 1950, 2).

Mercy was raised as the only 'full blood' on the mission for half-caste children after she was stolen as a baby from her mother, who was an 'inmate' at the Channel Island Leprosarium in the Northern Territory (*Sunday Herald* 1950, 5). Sydney's *Sunday Herald* admits that 'Mercy had never seen her mother' as 'she was taken from the arms of her mother as a baby' (*Sunday Herald* 1950, 5). Mercy's 'tribal relatives' were from the Roper River area, approximately 450 kilometres south-east of Darwin. A *Sunday Herald* writer notes that when Mercy's father finally found her, 'she was grown up and sophisticated and had no desire to return to the tribal life, which she had never known' (*Sunday Herald* 1950, 5). Mercy's civilized education is used as evidence that she should not have to return to her uncivilized roots, but it is also used as further evidence that Aboriginal people can be civilized when exposed to a European education. These accounts were written during an overtly assimilationist phase and quite explicitly reflect the governmental aims of cultural assimilation through the removal of children like Mercy from their families with the goal of 'educating' and assimilating them into 'White' Australia.

Mercy's education is a focus of many reports, with the *Argus* reporting that 'after several years training, Mercy now speaks perfect English, reads and writes well and reads music at sight' (*Argus* 1950, 6). Despite Mercy's 'success' being the ultimate goal for Aboriginal children, it seemingly came as a surprise to the authorities, and not only is her future described as 'uncertain,' but Mercy herself is described as a 'problem.' The *Sunday Herald's* headline reads 'Aboriginal is a Gifted Problem Girl' (1950, 5), while Melbourne's *Labor Call* writes, 'the question now being asked in the N[orthern]T[erritory] is whether Mercy will be permitted and assisted to follow the well-known Harold Blair, aboriginal singer now overseas, and the Namatjira brothers, who followed their yearning for painting to success.' This same report concludes by asking, 'she has been given a white girl's opportunities. Will she be allowed to use them?' (*Labor Call* 1950, 4). The *Sunday Herald* concludes, 'no one knows what is going to happen to Mercy, this full-blood native with a white woman's education. What happens to her and her violin may easily serve as a pointer to the future of the Northern Territory aborigines' (*Sunday Herald* 1950, 5).

Despite reports celebrating the good work of the nuns on missions such as Garden Point, they have also been well documented as places of particularly heinous abuse (Garden Point Mission [2011]). Maxine Kunde, Josie Calma, and Alfie Calma are siblings who survived their time at Garden Point Mission and spoke publicly of their experience in interviews by the ABC in 2019 and 2021 (Zillman 2019). Ms

Kunde was just six years old when she was stolen from her mother, along with her siblings, and interned by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart under Federal Government policy. Her siblings, Alfie and Josie, were both molested by a priest, while Ms Kunde was physically abused by the nuns (Zillman 2019).

East Arrente woman Zita Williams was stolen from her family in 1947 and taken more than 1,000 kilometres from her home to Garden Point. In a report from 2016 she said that it was ‘pretty hard to comprehend that somebody can do such a cruel thing ... because of the colour of my skin and that’s all it was’ (Sherwood 2016). Of the restrictive practices, she said that ‘they flogged us from day one, to stop us speaking language. They told us we were pagans and that we were spawn of the devil and that the language was evil and we couldn’t speak it. So we got belted every time’ (Sherwood 2016).

Restrictive regimes, such as those at Garden Point Mission, are undoubtedly responsible for widespread cultural loss, which continues to impact many Indigenous people still today. However, music itself has always been an inherent part of Aboriginal cultural practice and expression (Bracknell 2015, 3). As such, it stands to reason that as Aboriginal people, we do not always see such musical efforts as overtly ‘European’ forms of music making, but rather as a means of engaging with our own cultural and collective identity in a way that aligns with our traditional experience of ‘musicking,’ particularly where this is all we have direct access to on account of such pronounced cultural loss.

As an Indigenous musician who has lost access to much of my musical and cultural traditions as a direct result of European colonization, I am naturally critical of the violent settlement of Australia by the British Empire, which has brought about deep injustices and intergenerational trauma to my family over many years. However, I also feel an urgency to reframe the general understanding of the music created by Indigenous people. No matter what form it takes, to me, this is evidence of European imperialism’s failure to erase our culture completely. I stand proud in my Indigeneity, despite all efforts to assimilate my ancestors. It is necessary to engage with concepts such as agency and resilience to fully honour Indigenous narratives of survival. These narratives exist in stark contrast to histories that highlight only the brutality of oppressive regimes. By focusing solely on imperialism’s legacy of domination, power, and subservience, we risk overlooking the remarkable endurance of Indigenous cultures. Acknowledging our ongoing cultural continuation is not just an act of recognition—it is a testament to our survival.

Emphasizing Indigenous agency repositions Indigenous people and our diverse musical practices at the heart of this narrative. In doing so, we challenge the conventional divisions between past and present, tradition and modernity. This assertion of our identity, existence, and agency not only redefines how we are viewed but also places a higher intergenerational responsibility on non-Indigenous listeners. To truly engage with the histories of musical imperialism, I urge non-Indigenous listeners to move beyond binary and hierarchical thinking. By considering all forms of Indigenous musical practice through the lens of resilience and cultural survival, we can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indigenous contributions to music. This approach not only respects our traditions but also supports the ongoing vibrancy of our cultures.

In conclusion, by considering music and imperialism through an Indigenous lens, we not only challenge the hierarchies embedded in histories of domination but also celebrate the resilience, survival, and ongoing cultural contributions of Indigenous peoples—offering a powerful and essential counterpoint to the imperial narratives of Jeffrey Richards.

The Blind Spot of Imperial Studies

Suddhaseel Sen

A couple of months ago, I attended a talk by a visiting Japanese scholar at the institute where I teach. During the Q&A, I learned that modern Japanese audiences were more familiar with the representational conventions of modern film and drama than they were with kabuki and noh,³ and that they needed training in these traditional theatrical forms to gain an understanding of their representational conventions. The situation is analogous to modern, urban Indian responses to the two classical traditions of Indian music, North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Carnatic). As I have found from my personal experience of teaching music courses to students at my institute, the extra-musical connotations of western art music that were taken up by composers of film music such as Miklós Rózsa and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, or their modern-day successors John Williams and Howard Shore, are much more readily decoded by students from urban and semi-urban backgrounds than are the extra-musical connotations (such as they are) of Carnatic or North Indian classical music. This was not the case with Indian film music and its audiences from the 1950s or 1960s, even though the hybridization of Indian music, in terms of the encounters with western music in different parts of India, had begun earlier.⁴ From the level of governmental policy to educational approaches taken up by tradition-conscious Indian households, people feel the need to recuperate and preserve ‘classical’ musical and dance traditions, since they are not as readily understood as they were by Indians from older generations.

This might seem quite irrelevant to the task in hand—responding to various aspects of Jeffrey Richards’ ground-breaking book—but I would suggest that there is an important connection in case we wish to take stock of the methodological issues involving the study of European imperialism and its aftermath. At the outset, let me state that I find much to admire in Richards’ book, especially given his caveat that he is not a professional musicologist, but rather that he is offering a cultural study. Richards’ research is extremely meticulous and draws attention to people and to repertoire that one would never have heard of but for his research. Furthermore, from what I have read of his book, Richards does not sound like an apologist for the Empire. What is perhaps missing from the book—and

³ Both are traditional forms of Japanese drama. Kabuki evolved in the seventeenth century while the older noh dates back to the fourteenth.

⁴ I have previously discussed this process in the context of colonial Bengal (Sen 2020). On similar processes in Bombay/Mumbai, see Beaster-Jones (2015), and Booth and Shope (2013); and on southern India, see Subramanian ([2006] 2011), and Weidman (2006), amongst others. There is a vast history of pre-colonial cross-cultural exchanges with the Middle East, South-East Asia, and China.

understandably so, given Richards' training, and the time in which the book was written—is the story from the other side, that is to say, the side of the colonizers' 'Other,' India.

This, too, is not surprising. The publication of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) had the salutary effect of calling out the imbrications of arts (and scholarship on the arts) with larger political power structures, their attendant inequalities, and the subsequent domination of apparently neutral scholarship by the covert and not-so-covert operations of power. One drawback of that book's Foucauldian methodological orientation was the focus on the operations of power and not on the responses they generated. In 1978, that one-sidedness was not the cause of problems—after all, much work needed to be done about the damage done by colonialists, not just economically, but also culturally and politically. Perhaps it is true to say that in 2001, the year of the publication of Richards' book, much preliminary work needed to be done on the musical aspects of British imperialism, with a focus on the colonizer.

This also means that unless scholars make the effort to broaden their focus from the workings of the colonizer to the responses of the colonized, we do not get to know how Indians responded to the cultural dimension of these encounters. It is often taken for granted that the progressive response to the western impact must have been, or should have been, one of resistance. The consequences of the impact were, in fact, more complex. To give but one example, the poet and musician Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), one of the most important creative figures of modern India, took a trenchantly anti-colonial position in English-language works such as his book *Nationalism* (Tagore 1917) and, like the British composer John Foulds (1880–1939), opposed the use of the harmonium for Indian music. And yet, Tagore also argued forcefully for the adoption of harmony in Indian music, professed a lifelong admiration for the piano music of Beethoven and Chopin, and made a remarkable synthesis of western and Indian elements in his body of songs, collectively known as *Rabindrasangeet*.⁵ His example is a pivotal one in the context of modern Indian music, but it is not the only one. Indian responses range from a more thoroughgoing embrace of western music, such as among the Christian denominations, Goans, and Parsees on the one hand, to resistance from other quarters, on the other.

The history of musical encounters becomes more interesting (and complex) when non-western histories are brought into dialogue with western ones. This is a difficult thing to accomplish, as for one thing, India is a union of diverse cultures; the number of official languages is currently close to thirty, while the number of dialects goes into four figures. It is simply impossible for any scholar to attempt singly to cover this immense history, or even a part of it—collaborative research needs to be the order of the day. Secondly, Indian and western musicology do not speak with each other. Only a handful of scholars, such as Harold Powers, have been experts in both fields, but even much of their work lies in separate compartments, so to

⁵ Analyses of various aspects of Tagore's rooted cosmopolitanism in the musical domain can be found in Sen (2018a, 2018b, 2020). For translations of Tagore's essays advocating greater engagement with western music, see Pritchard (2012, 2018).

speak. How many bi-musical musicologists do we have? And how many readers can they expect to have among trained musicologists? Or, for that matter, how many ethnomusicologists feel free to ground their work in history as opposed to anthropology?⁶ After the important work of Richards and others, studies of the cultural impact of imperialism need further collaborative research if we intend to shift attention to the responses of formerly colonized communities. Another challenge for musicologists is the fact that empirical data on non-western music are much harder to get than those from non-western literature. The fact that archiving in the modern sense was done by Europeans meant that we had a better idea of what *they* played, what *they* heard, and so on, with non-European participants left almost always unmentioned. That said, Eurocentrism of this kind was also often compounded by non-European indifference to their own musicians.

For instance, we do not know the names of the members of the orchestra of Indian and western instruments set up by Foulds at the All India Radio (Delhi), in 1939. In her book *Resonances of the Raj*, Nalini Ghuman suggests that the *vādyā-vrindā* (ensemble of instruments) set up by Ravi Shankar at the All India Radio (Delhi) in 1948 may have had some or all of the musicians of Foulds' ensemble at its disposal (Ghuman 2014, 300). She may well be right, but it is next to impossible to find out the names of the musicians of the ensemble—both Shankar's biographer and I have tried to unearth the names (and discussed the matter with each other), but with no success: there are no extant records available in India. Compare this with the rich wealth of detail about the British in Richards' book; I doubt whether Richards would have been able to give as full a picture of the Indian side of the colonial encounter even if he knew all the official languages of India and were bi-musical. The steep, even insurmountable, challenges in finding archival records on the Indian side makes historical research into Indian musicians extremely challenging, especially if one is wary about using records created by India's ex-colonizers.

There is one more point that I would like to make in regard to this connection, one that takes me back to the example I began with. Japan was never colonized by a European power, but both Japan and independent India face one thing in common: in both countries, the urban population has perhaps become increasingly removed from their traditional art forms, even as they have become familiar with western ones. Over the last three hundred years or more, the long reach of European global dominance, both culturally and politically, is such that the lens of Empire can only partly explain the reasons behind the cultural dominance of western art forms in various parts of the non-western world. This is because westernization has also profoundly impacted many parts of the non-colonized non-western world.⁷ To understand how the colonial past is connected to the present, non-western musicologists need to join hands with each other and their western counterparts, and place the histories of cultural encounters side by side in a comparative framework

6 As Anna Schultz rightly points out, 'Ethnography is deemed appropriate for the non-West; historical methods are deemed appropriate for the West. These institutional forms remain entrenched, even as research methods and theories are increasingly hybridized' (2020, 45).

7 For an excellent recent study of cross-cultural interrelations in music history that takes a relational approach to the study of India, Indonesia, China, and Australia, and also offers probing theoretical insights, see Cook (2024).

while refraining from the tendency to create hierarchies. The findings of Richards' pioneering work on music and Empire can very well enrich that scholarly conversation.

Duty or Self-Interest? British Music Institutions and the Battle for Empire, 1904–1906

Anna Piatigorsky

In *Imperialism and Music*, Jeffrey Richards foregrounds his discussion of Edward Elgar by considering the binary meanings of Empire at the turn of the century, acknowledging first that imperialism represented ambition, greed, and racial supremacy, before suggesting that Empire was also 'a vehicle for service, for the practice of a modern chivalry, for work, long, hard and thankless, in fulfilment of the Christian ethic on earth' (Richards 2001, 53).

In this framing, Richards chose to emphasize the latter qualities, lauding the mystical religion of 'altruistic empire' that both informed Elgar's representations of Empire in his work, and inspired the actions of imperialist politicians such as 'Balfour, Curzon and Milner' (Richards 2001, 53). As Paul Watt points out in the introduction to this Colloquy, despite presenting an impressive and wide-ranging body of research, Richards offers a largely benign picture of imperialism.

Nonetheless, Richards' binary formulation does provide us with a valuable starting point. It raises the question at the centre of this Colloquy: what if we take his binaries, duty and altruism on the one hand, ambition and opportunism on the other, and apply them to the ways in which British music institutions interacted with Empire? By examining a series of exchanges recorded in the India Office Archives, I consider how British music institutions attempted to gain influence in Bombay during the early twentieth century. Here, I conclude that such institutions blurred the lines between altruism and self-interest in their quest to gain influence and opportunities.⁸

Two examination organizations dominated music education in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Trinity College of Music, established in 1872, and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), founded as a collaboration between the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music in 1889. Conservatoires created examination systems as a way of transmitting their influence and expertise to the general public, as well as raising funds to defray their running costs. Comprising a combination of classical repertoire and technical exercises, carefully graded so as to appeal to intermediate as well as advanced students, examinations were designed to be reproduced across Britain and the Empire, overseen by administrators, examiners, and volunteers. Increasingly popular from the 1880s, music examinations were available to anyone who could pay the fee and became a requirement for a career in music teaching.⁹

⁸ For the sake of consistency with my sources, I use the earlier versions of place names, such as Bombay for Mumbai, Calcutta for Kolkata, etc.

⁹ Institutions and their examinations also reinforced the idea that western art music was a respectable pastime, particularly for middle-class women. For example, Anna Bull writes of Victorian music

By the early twentieth century, the enthusiasm for examinations had resulted in a surplus of teachers and musicians, bearing qualifications that had diminishing value in a British market where there were not enough jobs. Thus, examining institutions were eager to expand the practice of examining into white settler communities across the British Empire. Trinity College first opened examination centres abroad in 1881 (Rutland 1972, 15), and by the late nineteenth century, its examiners were regularly traveling to Australia, New Zealand, India, and South Africa. Trinity College's in-house journal, the *Academic Gazette*, noted the potential for Empire as the place where 'the Teacher of Music may hope to sow on fruitful soil, and where the Examiner in Music may hope to reap a harvest of good musicianship' (*Academic Gazette* 1897, 570).¹⁰

Examination institutions had multiple motivations for expanding into the Empire. As well as providing much-needed employment for teachers and examiners, success abroad (or even better, a monopoly on local music networks) would only add to their status, and provide customers for the future when the British market became saturated. However, their mission was complicated by the fact that, unlike Britain, where there was still a growing market that could accommodate multiple competing examination institutions, the musical networks within white settler colonial societies were much smaller—and required examiners to undertake months of arduous travel. In a discussion of examining in Australia, Trinity College pointed out (implicitly) the problem of competing with the ABRSM:

I am inclined to think that there is not sufficient room for more than one first-class institution to work with success. When you consider, for example, that Tasmania has not so many inhabitants as an English town of a population of 150,000, you will understand how impossible it is, with the additional expense such examinations entail, for it to fully justify the activity of more than one institution. Of course, large cities like Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Brisbane will find plenty of work for other bodies, but the distances are so great, and important cities so few, that I cannot but think the competition, from a practical point of view, rather a misfortune than otherwise. (*Musical News* 1898, 218)¹¹

As a prelude to my discussion of the India Office Archives, we need to consider whose voices they represent. The documents in question, which record a power struggle between the ABRSM and the India Office, exclude all but western, largely British voices, ignoring the varied communities that participated in British music examinations. The English-speaking groups across India who sought access to western music education included musicians in the Maharajas' courts, wealthy Brahmin communities, Parsi and Christian communities.¹² Thus, when Trinity College

institutions as drawing on 'classed and gendered norms of respectability to make a profit but also to codify and reify these norms as musical standards. In this way the exam boards' business was in credentializing middle-class femininity' (Bull 2019, 48).

10 For discussions of examiners and self-interest, see Johnson-Williams (2020, 317–50); and Watt and Oates (2023, 443–77).

11 In addition to competing with each other, British institutions had to compete with emerging local institutions who were setting up their own examination systems, particularly in Canada. See Johnson-Williams (2015, 142–226).

12 For a detailed discussion of encounters between the ABRSM and Parsi communities in Colombo and Bombay in the mid-century, see Kok (2023, 386–405). For scholarship on Trinity College and the Wodeyar

examiners first arrived in India in the late nineteenth century, they could take advantage of a potential market that extended well beyond British and European society, a fact that examiners and commentators rarely mentioned in early twentieth-century music journals.

The ABRSM set their sights on India in 1904, by which time Trinity College had already created networks in Delhi and Bombay. In an effort to displace Trinity College, the ABRSM sought the help of the Judicial and Public Department of the India Office, which functioned as a vast, transcontinental employment hub for those looking for opportunities, embodying the dynamic movement of Empire. The ABRSM began their quest by utilizing their royal connections. Their first communication came from the office of the Prince of Wales to the India Office in Whitehall. Here, Sir Arthur Bigge, private secretary to Prince George, outlined plans for the ABRSM's secretary, James Muir, to visit India. They requested all possible privileges, including 'introductions to the Viceroy, the Governors of the various Presidencies and Provinces, and such other Officials as may be in a position to further the Board's scheme of Examination in India' (Bigge 1904).

The exchanges that followed revealed that Trinity College had succeeded in dominating music across European education networks in India, effectively shutting out opportunities for a rival examination board. The ABRSM, however, insisted that their royal charter gave them rights and obligations to Empire:

I need, perhaps, hardly remind you that the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music are the only two chartered institutions for giving a musical education which offer local Examinations, and that the Associated Board, consisting of members appointed by the two institutions, is therefore the only body holding Local Examinations in Music which can be considered in any sense as having a direct public responsibility. (Muir 1904)

In this case, the ABRSM's royal charter had limited value. Charters, awarded through an act of parliament, served as a kind of guarantee of probity and quality, and—for professions such as engineering or medicine—reassured the public that a practitioner conformed to a recognized 'standard.' But what did the ABRSM's charter mean in terms of public responsibility? If it implied a responsibility for maintaining standards of teaching and playing through examining, neither the musical institutions across India nor the colonial administration considered the study of music high stakes enough to justify replacing Trinity College. Nevertheless, Muir's letters eventually prompted a response from the director of Public Instruction of Bombay, who was unimpressed by the ABRSM's credentials:

Trinity College of Music, London, has been holding local examinations in Bombay for some years past. Unless there are reasons, of which I am ignorant, for discrediting the work of the Trinity College, there would appear to be hardly scope for the Associated Board. If this fact is brought to the notice of the Associated Board they may perhaps reconsider their decision to depute Mr. Muir to India. (Lamington 1904, 22)

courts, see Vedavalli (1992, 16–32). See also an account of a returning Trinity College examiner, Dr Creser (*Musical Times* 1899, 817–18).

The British Board of Education, acting on behalf of the ABRSM, was undeterred by the dispatches from Bombay, refusing to take no for an answer:

Without desiring to depreciate the work of the Trinity College of Music, the Board of Education are of the opinion that the extension into India of the influence of the Associated Board would be to the advantage of the study of Music in that Empire, and it would be impossible for them to advise the Secretary of State [of India] to refuse the assistance now asked for by the Associated Board. (Board of Education 1904)

What kind of assistance did the ABRSM think they could obtain by applying sustained pressure? Trinity College, according to accounts by returning examiners, did in fact receive special treatment when they arrived to examine. But this resulted from their examining activities. Their status in India as musical representatives of London developed gradually and organically, as Trinity College graduates aligned with English-speaking schools and created their own musical networks. In an article from 1892, the *Academic Gazette* acknowledged the way in which former students and examination participants did the work of the imperial institution, spreading Trinity College's influence:

Several of our old diplômés and students have become the local representatives of successful new [examination] centres in the Colonies and the Indies. In this way the College is striking its roots in every quarter of the globe. Floreat! (*Academic Gazette* 1892, 2)

The ABRSM's efforts to pressure the colonial administration into sidelining Trinity College reflected the organization's elevated stature at the turn of the twentieth century. At the time, they drew heavily from the ranks of the Royal College of Music, an institution whose prestige extended well beyond its royal charter.¹³ The Prince of Wales, along with Prime Minister William Gladstone, had played a foundational role in establishing the Royal College of Music in 1882. A 1900 report noted that the annual meeting of the Royal College of Music and the ABRSM took place at Marlborough House, the residence of the Prince of Wales. Serving as president, he personally chaired these gatherings and maintained his involvement until his accession to the throne in 1901:

The 17th annual general meeting of the Royal College of Music was held on Tuesday, at Marlborough House, the Prince of Wales (President) in the chair. Among the members of the Corporation and the Council present were: –The Duke of Cambridge, the Marquess of Northampton, Lord Harlech, Lord Herries, Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, Lord Windsor, Lord Thring, Sir J. Whittaker [etc.]. (*Musical News* 1900, 33)

Such a close association with royal and political authority effectively positioned the ABRSM as the foremost examining institution throughout the British Empire. Their determination to assert dominance over emerging musical networks in Bombay echoes Jeffrey Richards' notion of 'altruistic empire.' In this context, the ABRSM could not separate their sense of imperial duty from their desire for influence and

¹³ Even though the ABRSM consisted of an alliance between the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music, in their early years of examining, they relied mostly on the prestige of the Royal College of Music's founders, such as Sir George Grove. For a detailed account of the ABRSM's close relationship with the Royal College of Music, see Wright (2013).

financial gain. Much like Richards' dichotomy of obligation and self-interest, their actions exemplified the inherent contradictions of imperial enterprise.

Irishness and the Musical Imperialism of Britishness

Sean Williams

If we imagine that the ideology of the British Empire was one of expansionism, advantageous trade, Protestantism, white supremacy, and the creation and maintenance of an unequal sociopolitical hierarchy favouring British interests across one quarter of the globe, it would be easy to locate its neighbour to the west and its first colony at the centre of that ideology. Ireland is an island of two nations; one (Ireland) is a republic, and the other (Northern Ireland) remains a constituent country of the United Kingdom. In Jeffrey Richards' *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876–1953*, those who may have felt the impact of that imperialism most keenly do not figure prominently. In adding information about British musical imperialism in Ireland, this contribution joins perspectives from Australia, India, and within Britain itself to connect the broad strands of similarity. As Erin Johnson-Williams notes in this Colloquy, the decentralizing of Britain itself in British imperialism and music offers creative possibilities for the expansion of Richards' reach.

It is easy to imagine that British instrumental and vocal music spread liberally through Ireland as a natural one-directional consequence of colonial proximity alone, but that would ignore the fact that Ireland—like the other areas discussed in this Colloquy and beyond—had a significant musical tradition of its own. Richards points out that music serves as a primary element of cultural imperialism; this is true to a certain extent in Ireland, except for the essential point that the Irish used music as a primary emblem of resistance through the use of songs, tunes, and dances that were emphatically not connected to Britain.

In his slim volume titled *The Cultural Conquest of Ireland* (1990), Kevin Collins lays out a handy system by which an imperial power can enact the conquest of hearts and minds. The steps are—in order—conquest, inhibition, dualism, mimicry, and alienation. Briefly, conquest features the military takeover of a place and the displacement of its inhabitants; inhibition comprises the suppression of local cultural materials; dualism creates a space for both colonized and colonizing expression; mimicry results when the colonized imagine that the colonizers' culture is superior; and alienation is when the colonized cease to connect to their own cultural materials. After recognizing each stage in England's systemic use of cultural imperialism in Ireland, I will draw your attention to the results of its applications in the music of Ireland, and how this all connects with Richards' writing.

The conquest happened first through Viking (795–1169 CE) and Anglo-Norman (1169–1172) invasions, which led to the establishment of Anglo-Norman control through the leadership of Henry II over most of the island. At the time, Irish society had a sophisticated corpus of epic tales, lays (chanted recitation), and complex rhyming patterns that appeared in poetry and song, performed by bards. Irish monks notated many of the longer stories and poems; Christianity had been in Ireland since the fifth century. The early history of Irish music was also characterized by

the prominent roles of harps and bagpipes in a class-based society. In addition to the harps of the precolonial era, bagpipes were adopted and adapted from various sources. While Irish players initially used mouth-blown pipes similar to the Scottish Great Highland pipes in ceremonies and celebrations, by the eighteenth century the *uilleann* ('elbow' or bellows-inflated) pipes served as a quieter, indoor instrument.

Henry VIII had ordered most Irish musical activity to cease by the 1550s, declared himself to be the 'King of Ireland,' and instituted English laws and the English language. After Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558, she came to believe that Irish people were 'seditious and dangerous persons' (Rimmer 1977, 39). She systematically began to target the information-bearers—harpers and bards—even as her own court included musicians from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. In 1603, shortly before she died, she is said to have uttered the pronouncement, 'Hang all harpers and burn their instruments' (O'Boyle 1976, 10). The ensuing hunt for famous harpists was successful, and ultimately just two harps from this period are known.

The stage of inhibition—forbidding the use of the Irish language, destroying musical instruments, and shifting Ireland from primarily Irish-owned land to British-owned land—was completed by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Oliver Cromwell and his New Model Army were dispatched to Ireland in 1649 to eradicate Catholicism and displace the Irish inhabitants from the fertile inland areas out to the rocky coasts, using the phrase 'To Hell or Connacht' (the latter referring to the westernmost province of the island). Ireland was incorporated into the British Commonwealth by 1659.

Even as the settlement of Ireland was proceeding apace during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the system of dualism of native Irish and colonial English/Anglo-Irish led to a bifurcation of musical sounds. At their most basic level, the Anglo-Irish—people of English descent who lived on estates across Ireland—spoke English, enjoyed the musical genres popular in England and on the Continent, and paid little attention to the songs and tunes of those who served them. The Irish-speaking people of the villages continued their traditions of singing Irish-language love songs and laments, including a very personal, localized tradition of sacred song in the face of outright proscription (Ní Riain 1993, 193).

The importance of mimicry cannot be understated; British musical influences permeated the Anglo-Irish social sphere. The Anglo-Irish in residence supported both British and European classical music traditions. Georg Frideric Handel had famously held the premiere of his *Messiah* in Dublin in 1742, and hundreds of Anglo-Irish homes featured pianos and other keyboards in parlours. George Petrie (1790–1866), a Protestant born in Ireland to Scottish parents, was an artist and song collector who lived in the era of the parlour piano. Petrie published *The Petrie Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland* in 1855, and Thomas Moore (1779–1852) arranged romantic nationalist verses set to Gaelic melodies in his *Irish Melodies* (1808–1834). Both featured piano accompaniment.

Between the piano and the creation of a very specific kind of Irishness, there was a 'right'—and very European—way of being Irish, which though consistent with a distinctive identity, nevertheless held that that identity's best interests lay within the Union with Great Britain. (Ó Laoire and Williams 2023)

It had become advantageous to accept English—but not Anglican—ways of being in the world.

The Irish of the nineteenth century had the full array of imported instruments from the Continent and England: fiddles, accordions, concertinas, flutes, tin whistles, and more. Small groups and solo players performed for dances; the forms (jigs, reels, hornpipes, etc.) were all in place by the nineteenth century. Slow airs, which were either composed instrumental pieces or the melodies of songs, were also a feature of instrumental music. The vocal tradition of *sean-nós* ('old style') Irish-language singing was a remnant of the elite rhyming patterns in use prior to colonization; the rhymes were simpler, but the songs bore echoes of the *amour courtois* or courtly love song tradition brought by the Normans, centuries earlier. The songs now known as *sean-nós* are not so much narrative as establishing emotional content in the context of love and/or grief.

As the post-Enlightenment influence of European Romantic Nationalism was felt in Ireland, the allure of folklore collection caught the attention of both the Irish and the Anglo-Irish by the end of the eighteenth century. This new trend of understanding nationhood through the celebration of the local resulted in a significant number of Irish songs and other items being collected over the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, culminating with the efforts of the National Folklore Collection in the 1930s. A concurrent sense of revival occurred in literary circles titled the 'Celtic Twilight' after a poem by W.B. Yeats; writing exclusively in English, he and his fellow poets and playwrights hoped to reawaken a sense of understanding and pride in Irish culture, while accepting the dominance of the English language and culture. The alienation from Gaelic Ireland seemed complete by the time Ireland fought for—and ultimately won—its independence from the British, but not from British influence.

Collins's work features a final chapter titled 'Cultural Revolution' (Collins 1990, 98–109). In the complicated decades since Ireland's War of Independence, Partition of 1921, and the ensuing Civil War, various factions within the society have struggled for dominance. The presence of mostly Protestant marching bands in what is now Northern Ireland (under the control of the United Kingdom) is directly connected to the British brass band tradition; they are sometimes referred to as 'blood and thunder' bands. The summer marching season is primarily in celebratory commemoration of specific colonial-era events such as Protestant William of Orange's victory over James I, a Catholic, on 12 July 1688. The bands are 'at the heart of loyalist political culture in so far as they are an essential ingredient at the major public commemorations and celebrations' (Jarman 2000, 159). Notably, both the Catholic Irish and urban Irish-American popular culture of the twentieth century featured *céilí* bands with pianos and horns for dances rather than for marching.

Ireland fell into crisis in the 1950s, when its rigid economic policies led to mass emigration, including many of its traditional musicians moving to England and North America. The revival, when it happened, came from several sources: the UK/US folk revival and its balladeers; Irish individuals such as Seán Ó Riada (who started what would later become The Chieftains); and the growth in the 1970s of Irish groups such as Dé Danann, Planxty, Sweeney's Men, and others. The groups created spectacular recordings featuring arrangements of traditional fiddle tunes

interspersed with songs in Irish and English. Those groups in turn influenced thousands of other musicians in Ireland and abroad to look past the imperialist idea that anything traditionally thought of as Irish—including the language and all forms of traditional expression—was backward and a reminder of the ‘bad old days.’

The election of attorney Mary Robinson to the presidency in 1990, and Irish membership in the European Union, catapulted Ireland into its ‘Celtic Tiger’ era, with a flourish of new theatre, new poetry, new music, renewed attention to the Irish language, legalized birth control and divorce, and an economic boom concurrent with the fall in power of the Catholic Church after a series of scandals. Everything changed. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Ireland’s economic power has waned, but its current path as a liberal democracy runs contrary to that of its former colonial power, particularly since the Brexit vote of 2016. As part of a resurgence of Irish language usage, the popularity of the Coláiste Lurgan Irish-language summer school in Indreabhán (west of Galway)—which teaches English-speaking teens to sing Irish-language choral arrangements of popular hits—and of Kneecap—the Belfast-based hip hop group that features rap in Irish—has at least temporarily ensured the continuing growth of musical interest in the language. Choirs performing outside of churches today include arrangements of Irish songs in both English and Irish, even though they experienced significant diminishment as part of the independence movement of the early twentieth century.

What of Irish music in the present and the future? The entwinement of Ireland with North America politically, culturally, and historically should not be diminished. Ireland’s alleged divorce from England in its struggle for independence never occurred for a number of reasons: linguistic (English is by far the dominant language), familial (10% of the United Kingdom is Irish), economic (Britain is Ireland’s primary trading partner), and politically (Northern Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom). Musically, what is now considered the standard ‘session’ (instrumental dance tunes located in a corner of an Irish pub ... all over the world) developed in Britain after the 1950s when many musicians moved there for economic reasons. The ‘pub in a box’—sports paraphernalia on the wall, Irish road signs, farmyard tools, pictures of Irish/Irish-American film stars and musicians, and more—is found from London to Tokyo to Rio de Janeiro (Vallely 2011, 363). The ‘bad old days’ of conquest, imperialism, and suppression of traditional music are, apparently, over. Does this mean that Irish traditional music (the instrumental dance tunes in particular) will stand as is, frozen in time, or that the *sean-nós* vocal genre of love songs and laments will thrive? Not necessarily. It does mean, however, that 800 years of British imperialism through conquest, inhibition, dualism, mimicry, and alienation can be regarded, ultimately, as unsuccessful.

Imperialism and Music: (De)Centring Britain

Erin Johnson-Williams

If imperialism has—to some extent—always been about ‘centring’ or ‘centralizing’ power, then perhaps a significant part of the process of approaching decolonization

is about decentring the country of the former colonizer (Irving 2018; Potter and Saha 2015). In this contribution, I offer a brief reflection on the ‘centredness’ of Britain in Jeffrey Richards’ (2001) book *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876–1953*. In doing so, I invite readers to consider the creative possibilities for more dialogic (and nuanced) understandings of the effects of the British Empire on the world by looking and listening ‘away from’ Britain. If a ‘decolonial turn’ has, indeed, permeated the academic humanities (Gallien 2020), it is worth considering how and why ‘turning away from’ Britain-centric, work-centric, and composer-centric trends in scholarship on music and empire over the last two and a half decades will influence the reception and impact of work on music and the British Empire in the future. As has been noted in recent summaries of archival work on music and empire, there is often a ‘Britain bias,’ both in terms of the subject matter and the sources kept/made available by institutional libraries (Burnett, Johnson-Williams, and Liao 2023). To that end, if we are to take up the challenge of influential decolonial scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith to create space for Indigenous voices and perspectives in writing imperial history (Tuhiwai Smith 2021), then it is incumbent upon music scholars to reflect critically on what has traditionally been given more ‘space’ in research on music and the British Empire.

Looking back on my own academic journey, Richards’ *Imperialism and Music* was one of the first iconic books that I turned to when I initially approached the topic of nineteenth-century British music and Empire at the start of my doctoral studies. I distinctly remember hunting out a copy in my university library and poring through its pages, dutifully taking notes and making lists of themes, genres, composers, and locations. What was exciting to me—coming from my traditional, western/settler colonial ‘historical musicology’ training—was the cultural history underpinning of the book’s contents: the work was structured by themes of imperialism as opposed to composers and genres. That said, most of Richards’ book was really about Britain, and written ‘for’ historians and musicologists interested in how imperial themes influenced—and were manifest within—British music. Certainly, this was always the book’s intention, which was undeniably clear from the title alone: *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876–1953* was a project that brought an understanding of imperial culture to shed light on Britain; it was not a project specifically focused on the musics of formerly colonized peoples nor how imperial repertoires influenced those traditions. This narrative positionality, however, begs the question of what the book currently represents in light of recent trends towards decolonization, hybridity, and discussions of music that consciously and explicitly go beyond the imperial metropole in order to avoid its dominance (Burnett, Johnson-Williams, and Liao 2023, 346).

As I diligently took copious notes while reading Richards’ book as a PhD student I learned a lot of extremely valuable information about composers associated with the English Musical Renaissance, and his focus on musical genres such as the ‘imperial hymn’ was the direct inspiration for a lot of the subsequent work that I have done on hymns as a form of musical imperialism (Johnson-Williams and Burnett 2024). Richards’ major contribution was to highlight how musical forms such as ‘operetta and ballet, films, music hall songs, ballads, hymns and marches’ were powerful cultural expressions rather than simply ‘minor’ genres of

representational music (Richards 2001, vii–ix). The book ‘centres’ the aesthetic hierarchies of Romantic ‘absolute music’ right at the start of his opening chapter on ‘Empire and Music,’ and discusses imperial music, which is ‘representational’ by contrast (Richards 2001, 3–4; 6). Nevertheless, Richards’ advocacy for the repertoires that he studies is there to ‘help to open up to other researchers a hitherto neglected field of enquiry’ (Richards 2001, ix). These repertoires, however, seem to struggle to live up to the aesthetic hierarchies that Richards tries to unpick at the start of his book, by virtue of the fact that the homage to Romantic ‘absolute’ music—an aesthetic construction that, indeed, emerged precisely at the height of European imperialism—happens at all (Johnson-Williams 2023b; Levitz 2017).

The next step, for current scholarship on music and the British Empire, is to think about how genres such as the ‘imperial hymn’ intersect with Indigenous repertoires and experiences; the sort of work that has been done by Grant Olwage (2002, 2004, 2010), Philip Burnett (Burnett 2023), and (in different contexts) Dylan Robinson (2020). Alternative perspectives by scholars like Kofi Agawu (2016) on British musical genres that were taken to colonial spaces—who have described the hierarchical harmonies of the British hymn as a form of colonial musical ‘violence’—now need to be brought in line with publications on music and the British Empire that historically centred British voices even when engaging with the notion of how the Empire took many musical repertoires ‘abroad’ (Darian-Smith, Grimshaw, and Macintyre 2007; Gascoigne 2006; Ward 2001). What has changed in music scholarship since Richards’ book was first published is the notion that there is something ‘embarrassing’ in studying Empire that needs to be defended (rather than challenged directly). Take, for example, the following quotation from Richards:

If the idea that imperialism is something to be ashamed of or embarrassed about is abandoned and it is accepted as a cultural and ideological episode in British history, then it can be accepted as an element—and an important one—in the make-up of our greatest composer [Elgar]. (Richards 2001, 45)

There are quite a lot of implicit assumptions going on here. First, that Empire was something so unacknowledged in much traditional musicological literature because dealing with the difficulties of Empire involved confronting the ‘embarrassment’ of reckoning with an imperial past. Second, there was also an aesthetic preconception that music written explicitly ‘for’ Empire would not (necessarily) be as ‘G/great’ as music written for other reasons (Empire has never set comfortably within the hierarchies of older debates about art-for-art’s sake). Richard argues for the inclusion of Empire in the cultural history of music specifically because doing so will tell us more about a ‘great [male] composer’ like Edward Elgar (1857–1934). The bigger elephant in the room here is that imperialism is something that British society needs to address and discuss so that more awareness of colonialism—which William Fourie has written about as Britain’s ‘cultural amnesia’ about Empire (Fourie 2020)—can finally be acknowledged. Re-reading *Imperialism and Music* in light of the upsurge in conversations around decolonization over the last decade, this absence is stark. As British imperial historiography more generally is now heading towards what Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes (2021) has explored as *De-Illustrating the History of the British Empire* (effectively, a move

away from centring the perspectives and voices of the colonizer), then how can music scholars work to ‘unread’ or—even—‘unhear’ (Morabito et al. 2025) historicized norms?

As intersectional and decolonial scholarship is increasingly recognizing, music is a particularly useful model for creative approaches to understanding the complexities of Empire: music, after all, can be a reflexive medium for approaching and exploring repatriation through sound (Diettrich 2019). Yet, if—as Paul Watt argues in this Colloquy—pieces of music like Australia’s national anthem are a kind of ‘imperial hangover’ of Empire, then the next question is how (and for whom) this kind of hangover can be cured. To decentre Britain from future scholarship on music and the British Empire also means to defamiliarize ourselves with—and then perhaps, to hear afresh—the aesthetic hierarchies around musical value that underpinned so much of the music written within imperial cultures. Part of this task involves critically asking ourselves, when we read and listen, not only which repertoires are absent from the last two decades of published academic scholarship on music and the British Empire but also ‘who’ is listening—and who has the privilege of listening, reading, and researching.

I will conclude with a gesture to Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening* (2020). Robinson’s opening chapter, entitled ‘Writing Indigenous Space,’ invites non-Indigenous readers (a demographic that includes privileged researchers such as myself) to respectfully take a step back from reading a section of his book that is—at the end of the day—not reserved for them:

To resist the claiming done by these colonial frames necessitates refusing inclusion and taking actions that bring new spaces of sovereignty into being. To do this here, in this gathering upon the page or screen (depending on your current reading situation), I’ve asked non-Indigenous, settler readers not to join us. Perhaps this makes you feel uncomfortable. It has made me feel uncomfortable at various times I have done it in the classroom and for gatherings I have organized. At certain times I have been subjected to non-Indigenous colleagues’ indignation arising out of a sense of entitlement that their prior work with Indigenous people should gain them access to a space I requested they not enter. Reconciliation’s rhetoric tells me I must work hard to form new relationships with the state, to seek alliances with settler organizations and individuals, and to make spaces open to anyone who might hold the desire to learn of any and all things Indigenous. ...

... Yet celebration of such structural transformation is premature for reasons I do not need to name to Indigenous readers gathered here, reading together this page or screen (Robinson 2020, 33–34).

I was struck by my experience of reading Robinson in contrast to the ways of researching that I had always been taught: to assume that everything written down was mine to read. When I first read Richards’ *Music and Imperialism*, for example, I took extensive notes—‘hungrily,’ or extractively, along the spectrum of power relations that Robinson’s book encourages us to think about. Recent decolonial turns, however, remind us that there are different ways of reading, listening, and knowing that are equally (if not more) powerful in understanding music history’s past. After spending time with Robinson’s quotation, above, I stopped, put down my copy of *Hungry Listening* (paid for by my British university’s research allowance); and

reflected on whether current western structures of reconciliation could ever liberate a genre like the ‘imperial hymn,’ or the ‘imperial march,’ beyond the aesthetic hierarchies of its initial creation. I did not ravenously take extractivist notes while reading Robinson; some of the answers to these questions were not my stories to tell. But I did take notes about my strong reactions for the future of British music studies. The culpability for the legacies of the aesthetic hierarchies of Empire—the reasons why certain repertoires are valued, defended, canonized, or shied away from—is one that, as music scholars, we all share.

The future of academic studies of music and the British Empire will need to continue asking these questions: who has the power to read; who has the power to listen and hear the nuances of a highly complex past. Potentially giving ‘Britain’ a different kind of space in studies on ‘Empire’ might be a creative way to start to listen differently.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

Paul Watt is an adjunct professor of musicology in the University of Adelaide. His research crosses a range of fields including nineteenth-century music, musical biography and criticism, popular music, intellectual history, and religious and literary studies. He is the author of three books, *Ernest Newman: A Critical Biography* (2017); *The Regulation and Reform of Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century England* (2018); and *Music, Morality and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2023). He is currently writing a cultural history of Gregorian chant in Australia.

Laura Case is a lecturer in musicology and Associate Dean of Indigenous Strategy and Services at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Her research looks at the social and cultural history of music in Australia with a particular focus on the violin, cross-cultural interactions, and feminist perspectives. She is passionate about using music to reframe Indigenous histories and reclaim Indigenous knowledge. Laura is of Wiradjuri heritage from Central West New South Wales and a classical violinist with over twenty years of performing and teaching experience. Laura is the author of *A Socio-Cultural History of the Violin in Australia: Identity, Resilience, and Colonial Legacy* (2025).

Suddhaseel Sen is an Associate Professor of English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Bombay. He has a PhD in English from the University of Toronto and a second PhD in Musicology from Stanford University. Sen has been a Research Fellow for the Balzan Research Project, *Towards a Global History of Music*. His publications include a book monograph, *Shakespeare in the World: Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Europe and Colonial India, 1850–1900* (Routledge, 2021); and various journal articles and book chapters on cross-cultural exchanges and adaptations in the fields of literature and music. The latter include essays on Wagner and German Orientalism; the Indian composers Nareish Sohal and Rabindranath Tagore (the latter better known as a poet and writer); and India’s ‘national song,’ *Vande Mataram*, among others.

Anna Piatigorsky is a postdoctoral fellow in the Program in British, Irish, and Empire Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Her recent PhD dissertation, “‘Hands Across the Sea’: The Local Music Exam in the Contested Space of the British Empire,” presented a 150-year exploration of the impact of exams on music education across the British world. Anna’s

research interests span the music of the Belle Époque, musical modernism in early twentieth-century Britain, and the pedagogy of classical music. She teaches courses on Western music history, musical nationalism, and topics in nineteenth-century musical life and culture at the University of Texas at Austin.

Sean Williams is a professor of ethnomusicology and Irish Studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Her research interests include liminality, language, gender, religion, and food. One of her books—*Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song-Man* (co-written with Lillis Ó Laoire)—won the Alan P. Merriam Prize for the most distinguished monograph in ethnomusicology. Her current book, *Music at the Threshold from the Sacred to the Dangerous* (Oxford, forthcoming), is about music and liminality.

Erin Johnson-Williams is Associate Professor in Music Education and Social Justice at the University of Southampton. Her research focuses on decolonization, the imperial legacies of music education, trauma studies, gender and maternity, hymns and race, and soundscapes of colonial violence. She has published widely on the history of music education in Britain and the British Empire, and has particular interests in decolonizing music education in the United Kingdom, trauma, and colonial experiences of concentration, incarceration and enclosure through music and sound.

ORCID

Paul Watt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1773-6404>
 Laura Case  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8837-571X>
 Suddhaseel Sen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3495-8690>
 Anna Piatigorsky  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8653-8394>
 Sean Williams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2678-9946>
 Erin Johnson-Williams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3305-5783>

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