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## On colonial difference and musical frontiers: directions for a postcolonial musicology

Among the many costume and spectacle designs held at the Louvre is the fascinating but enigmatic figure of America in Figure 1.1. The original depicts a cross-dressed female figure seated on a large alligator, her mouth opened in song as she accompanies herself on a lute. Like most other Americans or “Indians” in seventeenth-century iconography, the figure in this drawing wears a high feathered headdress, and her long feathered mantle, rarely used in French costume designs, is clearly an adaptation of American imagery in the travel literature.<sup>1</sup> Other features carry more ambiguous geographic or cultural associations. For example, earrings such as those shown here usually appeared in designs for North African characters, though French designers also sometimes assigned them to East Indians. Moreover, the figure’s face in this drawing is shaded a brown color, which often indicated an association with North or sub-Saharan Africa and with a French poetics of blackness.<sup>2</sup>

The indeterminate identity hinted at with the figure’s costume and appearance is intensified by her performance on a lute. In the light of the lute’s predominant seventeenth-century association with European high culture,<sup>3</sup> the instrument seems at first glance wholly out of place in the hands of a performer whose iconography gestures toward her identification with America, Africa, and Asia, but not Europe. We might indeed be forgiven for wondering, somewhat indelicately, what a lute is doing in the hands of an Indian?

Several factors complicate this sense of the instrument’s difference in relation to the performer. The lute’s associations with elite culture were commonly parodied in burlesque costume designs for French court ballets before the 1660s. French artists often substituted grotesquely distorted lutes for parts of musicians’ bodies or decorated burlesque costumes with lutes.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, lutes and related instruments were occasionally given to exotic figures in the spectacles, which potentially extended the instruments’ associations beyond Europe. For instance,

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Figure 1.1 Young woman with lute, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Collection Rothschild, 2161 d.r. © Photo RMN, Thierry Le Mage

the *Ballet de la Douairière de Billebahaut* (1626) featured *récits* for mandolin-players personifying America, Asia, the Arctic regions, Africa, and Europe, as shown in the well-known costume drawings for this ballet.<sup>5</sup> A lutenist costumed as an American also appears in the background of the commemorative image *Le Soir* (Figures 1.2a–b), which shows a performance of Richelieu’s *Ballet de la Prospérité des armes de France* (1641) attended by Louis XIII and the royal family.<sup>6</sup>

Burlesque parody of the lute’s elite social status and the instrument’s cross-cultural *travesti* in the hands of exoticized performers would likely have left its dominant cultural associations largely intact, or even reinforced them. If this were the case, neither the high social status nor the European identity of the lute would be truly jeopardized by their temporary subversion in the image of America considered here. Such an interpretation is perhaps supported by the existence in the same collection of several related images, which show other exotic allegorical figures performing on lutes (seated on a snail, an ostrich, and a tortoise, respectively).<sup>7</sup> The series likely alludes to the parts of the world, an overtly imperial theme that recurred in French court spectacles throughout the century and in decorative art for the royal châteaux, especially Versailles. The lute’s stable appearance in the four Louvre images suggests its identification with the perfect harmony that, in

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Christian Neoplatonic thought, underlay the created order. Neoplatonic ideas of cosmic harmony had long formed an important part of the lute's symbolism, and they also played a vital role in Bourbon royal propaganda, identifying absolute monarchy with the harmonic ordering of the world.<sup>8</sup> By placing lutes in the hands of exotic performers, then, the Louvre drawings may have emblemized their political subjugation, by showing their cultural integration, or "harmonization," with the French regime (see Chapter 6).

This interpretation attributes an integrity and resiliency to the lute's identity that allows the instrument to affect the identity of the exotic performer in the drawing while its own symbolic associations remain intact. The lute's association with unearthly harmony and the quality of nobility was indeed persistent. Yet this identity was rooted in the lute's genealogy (much as with dynastic nobility), and the many, often distinct reiterations of the instrument's historical and mythical origins in contemporary discourse indicate an anxiety around the question of where the lute came from, and what it signified in the hands of different performers. In the seventeenth century, this anxiety arose in part

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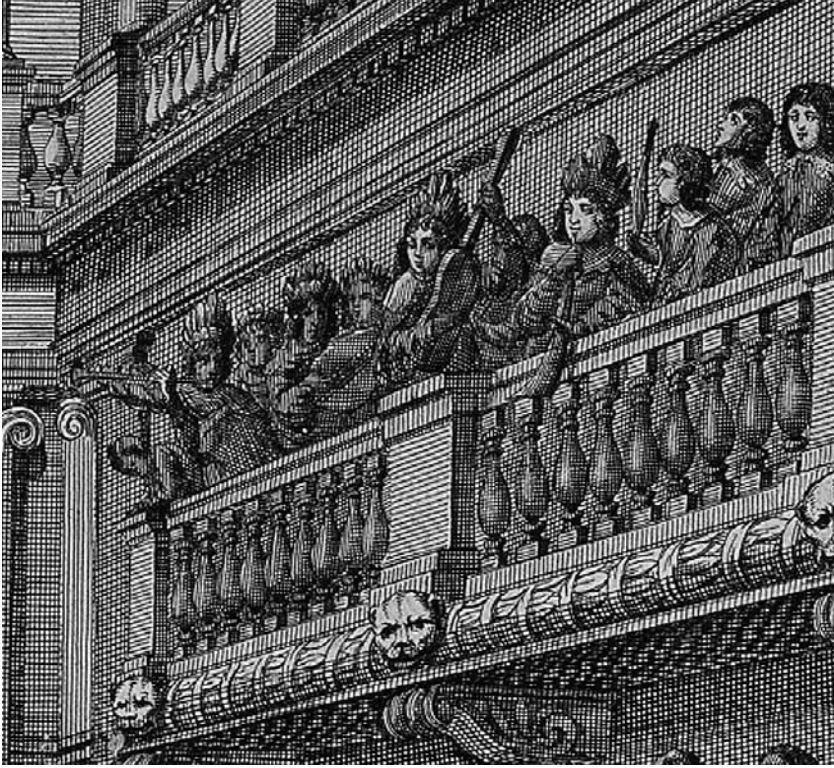
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Figure 1.2b Detail of *Le Soir*. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France

from the increased accessibility of lutes, lute instruction, and lute music to wealthy bourgeois, which called the instrument's nobility into question. However, it also responded to an uncertainty concerning the lute's proto-ethnic and religious identification, owing to its mixed heritage.

The lute's prestige in the early modern period derived in large part from its identification with cultural, philosophical, and religious lineages that European elites valued highly. Particularly important was the instrument's association with Greek, Roman, and Christian heritages that had long been important resources for European dynastic self-fashioning – evident, for example, in the association of the lute with Apollo, Mercury, the Hebrew King David, and the angels.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the Louvre drawings the lute symbolized the classical, Christian identity that the French kings claimed for their own lineage and, by extension, that of the nation. The lute's prestigious classical and Christian heritage made it an attractive symbol for Bourbon royal representation. However, the official versions of the lute's genealogy recounted in



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Bourbon propaganda and elsewhere obscured another ancestry, which did not accord quite so well with a dominant sense of what it meant to be French, or even European, in the seventeenth century. Modern scholars have definitively traced the lute's origins to central Asia, and the direct predecessors of the lute (especially the "ūd") came to Europe via the North African Muslim conquest of al'Andalus, as the Iberian peninsula was known under Umayyad and later Islamic rule. The precise transmission of the lute to northern Europe is uncertain, but the most likely route is via the Kalbid-influenced Sicilian court of the late thirteenth century. With the spread of lute performance throughout the Italian peninsula in the fourteenth century came a shift in the instrument's cultural symbolism, as according to Douglas Alton Smith the lute's "foreign – and heathen – associations slipped into convenient oblivion . . . while the instrument and its musical style were completely assimilated by the Italians." The poets Petrarch and Boccaccio inaugurated the enduring association between the lute and the ancient Greek lyre, with the result that the instrument's colonial diasporic transmission was displaced in favor of a more prestigious classical and Christian past, "its Islamic heritage forgotten or ignored."<sup>10</sup>

Attempts to mitigate the lute's troubled origins are characteristic of elite European music writings in the early period of external colonization. However, such attempts never fully succeeded, and for this reason colonial-era music sources, such as the image of the American lutenist in Figure 1.1, can tell us much about what was at stake in Europe's representations of its own, as well as others' music. Postcolonial theory is helpful here, if adapted to the unique circumstances of early colonial music cultures, since some aspects of colonial power relations have remained fairly constant across the long history of European colonization. Among these is a selective memory of origins, evident in early modern discourse on the lute.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has emphasized the centrality of colonial processes to the characteristically ambivalent memory of colonial or postcolonial nations. According to Bhabha, colonialism destabilizes national "genealogies of 'origin'," which are always involved in historical or other forms of collective memory, but which are particularly fraught in colonial situations. While selective memory characterizes most human collectives, what distinguishes colonial or postcolonial nations is their necessary forgetting of cultural difference, in the negative sense of an ancestry that is disavowed in national discourse. The difference that colonialism injects into the self-representation of nations is, in Bhabha's words, "the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding *to* does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of

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subaltern signification."<sup>11</sup> "Subaltern signification," as Bhabha defines it, indicates cultural memory that is barred from being plausible knowledge, but that also ensures the impossibility of secure memory by virtue of its exclusion. In national contexts, subaltern memory can recall an unwelcome colonial past; hybrid cultural production; genocide, ecocide, or enslavement; racial or ethnic mixture; or past migrancy. It is, in short, any aspect of national histories or other forms of memory that makes it impossible to really know who we are and where we come from, because we have always already come from somewhere else in a time other than now.

Applied to early modern Europe, Bhabha's correlation of the ambivalence of national memory with past or present colonialism needs revision on several counts. First, his conception of the modern nation-state only corresponds in a limited way to early modern nations, which were more porous and mutable and which were usually organized around dynastic rulers, not an empowered citizenry. Early European colonialism also involved other types of polities in addition to nations.<sup>12</sup> Inhabitants of the principalities, kingdoms, city-states, and nations of Christendom associated the term "empire" generally with a powerful ruler's dominion, and specifically with the Roman empire, the Holy Roman empire, and with the dynasties that claimed their legacies, as well as with the burgeoning Ottoman empire. This idea of "empire" was also, of course, extended to colonial and trade dealings with peoples and territories outside Eurasia, as with American colonization. However, even early commercial empires, such as the Portuguese, depended on relations with powerful royal or noble patrons and were thus promoted as opportunities for enhancing dynastic prestige.

All of these factors distinguish early modern from modern empires. Nevertheless, adapted to early modern imperialism and also to the unique properties of music cultures, Bhabha's writing on colonialism and collective memory helps us understand how accounts of an instrument's origins focus anxieties concerning imperial conquest in Europe's past and present. By the seventeenth century the nations of Christendom's Atlantic rim inhabited a colonial condition in a double sense, as postcolonial *and* colonizing civilizations.<sup>13</sup> These nations had their own complex, regional histories of colonial conquest, but they all laid claim to the imperial legacy left by the Roman conquest of western Europe and Britain. The prestige accorded to classical cultural and political forms, together with the Holy Roman empire's association with the development of Christianity, assured the near-universal veneration of the Roman imperial heritage among Christian elites. However, the colonization of the Iberian south by the Umayyad dynasty and other Islamic powers in the eighth through the fifteenth centuries arguably left a competing legacy of large-scale, long-term conquest on

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European soil that, together with the memory of the Crusades and the threat of the encroaching Ottoman empire, established the powers of Muslim North Africa and Asia Minor as arch-rivals and enemies of early modern Christendom. The Atlantic nations' relationship with empire was further complicated by their efforts to establish colonies, plantations, and trade outposts in the Americas and elsewhere from the fifteenth century onward, because European external colonization raised the specter of Europe's own subjugation to foreign, non-Christian powers. While Roman imperial conquest could be recuperated as the precursor of an autonomous, Christian, conquering Europe, the past reality and present threat of conquest by Muslim powers came to haunt Christendom's sense of its own identity. Genealogies traced to Rome (and hence to Greece) obscured the Islamic imperial ancestry of many European political and cultural forms, including important aspects of its musical theory and practice.<sup>14</sup> This alternate European ancestry went largely unacknowledged in the early modern period, because its memory of Muslim Arab dominance threatened the religious, cultural, and proto-racist hierarchies that sustained European distinctions between colonizer and colonized, "civilized" and "savage."

The ideological preference of one origin story over another always leaves traces. The lute's discourse of origins is a small but significant case in point, since divergent early modern accounts of the lute's genealogy, symbolism, and performance decorum never added up to a coherent whole. Even the powerful Christian Neoplatonism of the lute's early modern symbolism could not preclude other, less desirable aspects of its heritage from emerging in iconography and discourse. In just one example, the prolific author of conduct manuals, François de Grenaille, warned his female readers against too high a regard for the lute, on account of its base origins. His disenchanting account of Mercury's creation of the lute from a tortoise shell is unorthodox, to say the least: "As to the musical instruments that form the principal ornament of the consort, I am astonished that they should be taken for miracles, seeing as they are for the most part no more than images of a gutted tortoise."<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to know how common was Grenaille's rather tactless assessment, but what matters here is that such minor departures from the lute's conventional mythology highlight the possibility of a more radical differentiation, which I will refer to here as a "subalternity."

The distinction I want to make between oppositional knowledge – as in Grenaille's statement – and a more drastically divergent, subaltern signification – which Grenaille's statement only intimates – is illustrated by commentary on the lute's origins in the Burwell lute tutor, an anonymous manuscript treatise from late seventeenth-century

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England.<sup>16</sup> The section on “The Origin of the Lute or the Derivation of the Lute” attributes several distinct beginnings to the instrument. The opening places the lute’s origins in heaven (“if wee trust piously the Divines”), and points to its first earthly appearance in the consort that accompanied the angels’ announcement to shepherds of the birth of the Christ child. According to the treatise, the lute “lightened” the shepherds’ “rude understandings amidst the thicke clouds of Judaism” and taught humans the “shape and figure of the instrument.” Thereafter the church adopted the lute, and it gained its present ascendancy first in Italy, where “they use nothing but lutes and voices for to answer and agree the better with the musick of the angells.” However, the genealogy falters as the author returns to the purported Hebrew origins of the lute, recalling its traditional identification with the cithara: “Judaisme . . . sunge anthemes with instruments of musick but as there light was but grosse and rude soo the musicall instruments were then but in the infancy and imperfection.” The cithara recalls still another origin in pagan antiquity, which “made gods of those that have beene the first inventors of the lute.” The semi-divine musician Orpheus is, of course, chief among these, and the treatise’s author segues into other well-worn classical associations: Mercury’s creation of the lute, Amphion’s musical construction of the city of Thebes, and Arion’s performance on the back of a dolphin. The author tries to rehabilitate the lute’s Hebrew and pagan beginnings by casting them as prefigurations of Christian Europe’s perfection of the instrument, but for all that its plural origins remain irreconcilable with the desire for a single, Christian ancestry.

The third chapter again asserts the lute’s Italian origins, while noting the present-day preeminence of French lutenists: “The first and most famous lute masters wee confesse were the Italians who were the first authors of the lute as all the world must acknowledge and that the french have beene the most famous in that.” However, the next statement implies that the Italians in question are not the lute’s fourteenth-century progenitors but the ancient Romans, whose conquest of the Gauls, we learn, accounted for France’s subsequent dominance on the instrument. The lute treatise thus acknowledges the role of conquest in the lute’s European adoption and even alludes to the secretiveness of this knowledge: “Although there is some confusion in the French to acknowledge that they have beene subdued by the Romanes yet they must not be ashamed to acknowledge that they owe there skill to their conquest.” Yet the lute’s (and by extension Europe’s) imperial genealogy is also disavowed. In the context of the contradictory, multiple origins that the author attributes to the lute the allegation that France’s cultural preeminence was rooted in its imperial past is scandalous, though manageable due to the cultural prestige generally accorded to Rome. The English author’s pointed recollection of the



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imperial genealogy of French culture notably does not extend to England's own imperial history, which is nevertheless in play. Moreover, while it obscures England's own ambivalent relation to empire, the focus on French lutenists' Roman tutelage also displaces knowledge of the lute's transmission by way of Umayyad or Kalbid music cultures, respectively. Though the lute's transmission through Muslim conquest was nearly unthinkable in the context of the treatise – far more so than England's ambivalence toward Rome – its subaltern relation to what could have been thought forms a condition of the treatise's representation of the lute.

At no point does the text thematize or even allude to the lute's transmission via the hybrid colonial and postcolonial cultures of the northern Mediterranean. If we regard the treatise as provisionally closed and thus as legible on its own terms (in the manner of a structuralism or a stricter sort of hermeneutics), this critical aspect of the lute's past is unavailable as a topic or even an implicit meaning of the text. Under these conditions the problem of colonialism (past and present) would seem to be largely exterior – thus, irrelevant – to the treatise, or at best marginal to its concerns. And yet the plural genealogies assigned to the lute and the treatise's allusion to the Roman origins of French musicality respond noticeably to a pressure, albeit one that is not named or figured in the text. I identify this pressure with an otherness that acts on, and in relation to, the treatise and its readers, yet is absent when addressed by historical or hermeneutic questioning. These subaltern relations, which I mark in the treatise's *saying*, are largely excluded from its expression, or what it *says*, for reasons having to do with the ambivalence of colonial discourse: its orientation toward what it cannot *not* want.

At the heart of this study is the thesis that among the conditions shaping European music and its discourses was the pressure of an otherness that bears witness to colonial domination. This idea of the “witness” is influenced by philosopher Kelly Oliver's writing on the ethical and historiographical importance of what bears witness to atrocity, beyond the intersubjective process of “recognition.” Oliver notes the double nature of eyewitness testimony: as an address that testifies to what happened, providing a basis for historical and legal processes; and as an address that bears witness to what is beyond the recognition of both the witness herself and of discourses such as law or history that rely on empiricism and an actualized subject. As her primary example, Oliver considers testimony by survivors of Holocaust atrocities. With Giorgio Agamben, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Primo Levi, and others, Oliver observes that those who witnessed the horrors of mass annihilation cannot testify to the full truth of its history. Whereas historians have traditionally listened for what can be

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expressed directly in such testimony – especially what can be translated as historical fact – Oliver advocates a psychoanalytic-influenced historiography that listens as well for the performative, affective “truth” of an address that attests to extreme forms of oppression, which destroy the very possibility of witnessing.<sup>17</sup>

European colonization, which perpetuated genocide, ecocide, and cultural–spiritual devastation on a massive scale, also worked to annihilate the possibility of witnessing to its atrocities. There are nonetheless key differences between the Holocaust survivors’ testimony that Oliver considers and the kinds of “witness” that appear in archives relevant to music or song. The archives that speak to early colonial musical encounters include written and material artifacts, repertoires, performance traditions, and oral traditions, rather than the testimony of living or recently deceased witnesses. Moreover, the written, notated, and material portions of the archive, which have been most accessible to historians, were largely controlled by European colonial agents. Description, transcription, mimicry, allusion, or other attempts by Europeans to reframe indigenous song cultures from colonial perspectives are neither ethically nor historiographically equivalent to first-person, survivors’ testimony. Such testimony can perhaps be recovered from ethnohistorical and hybrid oral traditional–historical accounts of indigenous responses to European colonialism in the Americas. European colonial writings also sometimes report indigenous peoples’ responses, including resistance to the Europeans’ cultural invasion, though these reports (especially their ventriloquizing) need to be treated with caution. Yet even European music discourses and performances that seem to lack any memory of colonial violence often bear traces of such a witness, which is not available for translation as historical fact or interpretation, but whose silence itself opens these discourses and performances to deconstruction.

This difference that attests to colonial violence is most readily perceptible in music as an exoticism, or in representations of music as savage, primitive, or monstrous. Yet it is also subtly active in other musical texts from the period, as a nearly agential pressure that prevents the emergence of a self-identical European subject but that does not constitute a discrete oppositional figure, gesture, or style process. The former instance, of difference as something at least minimally figured in music or its discourses, is addressed in studies of gender, racial, sexual, or other forms of difference in music, particularly those studies informed by cultural theory or hermeneutics.<sup>18</sup> The latter, far less accessible process has not, for the most part, been explicitly considered in music historical studies concerned with difference, though it is sometimes broached obliquely, for example, in studies that trace the workings of “desire” in music. Subalternity, which is prevented from