

Music History and Cosmopolitanism / abstract & bio
Whealton, Virginia (Indiana University, Bloomington, US)
Session 2b / Wednesday June 1, 4:30–6:30 pm

Cosmopolitanism in “A Country of Steam Engines”: The American Travelogues of Henri Herz and Oscar Comettant

During the 1840s and 1850s, a series of European virtuosos arrived in the United States. Leopold Meyer, Jenny Lind, and others toured nearly every corner of the country, performing a range of European repertoire. In this paper, I examine the writings of Henri Herz and Oscar Comettant, who published the most substantial American travelogues to appear in the Parisian musical press during the 1850s and 1860s. Although concert tours in mid-nineteenth-century America have generally been understood as promoting cosmopolitan sensibilities, I investigate the ways in which these Parisian writers suggest that Americans are not ready for—and even resist—cosmopolitan exchange, musically and socially. I argue that both musicians consciously construct cosmopolitan personae, and that Americans’ ostensible lack of cosmopolitanism prompts these authors to call for a teacher-student relationship between Europeans and Americans, in both art and politics. More broadly, their travelogues suggest a shift away from earlier French Romanticism by questioning the possibility of cosmopolitan musical development in Americans’ democratic, unequal, and increasingly technological society.

According to Herz and Comettant, America’s musical problem is two-pronged: Americans do not cultivate music, and they lack meaningful musical exchanges across religious and racial divides. Both musicians thus differ from Chateaubriand and Tocqueville, who had praised Americans’ preservation of European musical traditions, and who had recounted musical exchanges between white settlers and Native Americans. Instead, Herz and Comettant claim that love of technology and money stunts Americans’ artistic sensibilities, both as musicians and as listeners, and they often portray Americans’ *mélange* and warping of musical traditions as comical at best. Thus, I suggest that these musicians portray American creolization as inimical to participation in broader cosmopolitan culture. Just as importantly, I address how and why Parisian musicians such as Herz, Comettant, Berlioz, and Liszt used travelogues to cultivate a cosmopolitan public image.

Virginia Whealton is a PhD Candidate in Musicology at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her dissertation, “Travel, Ideology, and the Geographical Imagination: Parisian Musical Travelogues, 1830–1870,” investigates how the Romantic generation of musicians in Paris used prose travelogues and travel-inspired compositions to craft their public personae and contribute to French sociopolitical discourse. Ms. Whealton’s dissertation research has been supported by several grants, most recently by a Mellon Innovating International Research and Teaching Fellowship. Past and upcoming conferences presentations include the Francophone Music Criticism Network Colloquium (2013, 2015), the North American Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music (2013), the national meeting of the American Musicological Society (November 2015), and the Fryderyk Chopin Institute and the Institute for Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (November 2015). In addition to her research, Ms. Whealton is committed to interdisciplinary teaching, and she successfully has proposed a course on Women and Music that has been adopted into Indiana University’s general studies curriculum.