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Hannah L. Scott, *Singing the English: Britain in the French Musical Lowbrow, 1870-1904*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 254 pp. 8 b/w illustrations, notes, appendix, and index. $170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367416126; $52.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781032235226; $39.71 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780367815431.

Review by Paul Watt, The University of Adelaide.

In 2019, Amanda Palmer, Sarah-Louise Young, and Maxim Melton posted a song on YouTube called "The French Brexit Song".[1] The song pokes fun at England (rather than Britain) for having left the European Union. The singers tell they are broken hearted by the result of the Brexit referendum and ask how England could possibly thrive culturally by cutting ties with Europe, especially France. When Brexit is finally done and dusted the singers want "all our French words back" and continue to sing how diminished English life would be when French words are "returned" to France. With much jocularity they sing "Without French letters you'll be lost. It is time for you to count la cost."

In the epilogue to *Singing the English: Britain in the French Musical Lowbrow, 1870-1904*, Hannah L. Scott describes numerous and recent songs from both sides of the Channel that mock, tease, ridicule, and parody Franco-British relations in the wake of Brexit. Indeed, Scott is right to say that these "explosions of rivalry" (p. 1) and the disdain the two countries have for each other has been a long-held feature of national identity in both. For example, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries we need only to look at the writings of Hannah More (1745-1833) to learn of her horror--not of French Catholicism but of French atheism--and her panic and paranoia that, like a breeze, atheism from across the Channel would waft into Britain and poison British morals.[2] In British (and American) etiquette books, by contrast, French fashion and manners were often praised for their superior taste and refinement.[3] Readers of various brows read this kind of literature in books or heard it from the pulpit by preachers in their non-conformist churches.

The title of Scott's book, *Singing the English*, is the name of the book's first chapter, which covers the musical fare at café-concerts. Scott draws on a forgotten song tradition that sought to "English up" through music, costume, and choreography. (The songs are listed in the book's appendix.) Scott describes the English "type" in most cases as "wealthy, genteel and from London" with an almost uniform pattern of ascribing adjectives to qualify this type, such has "sad" and "embarrassed" (p. 33). Many of the songs describe a British encounter with France that enriched the visitors' "cultural, linguistic, and or sexual" experiences (p. 34). The author dissects various songs to illustrate these points and describes the ways the texts and their structures are

easily recognised as "English" but also as signifiers of French nationalism. Further analysis considers the extent to which the songs were comical and political and the ways in which they exhibited novelty and surprise. The chapter also examines some of the extremely funny puns created by songwriters as well as the national and ethnic views in the song-texts, some of which are difficult to decipher. There is even in this chapter an analysis of the use of laughter in song.

Of particular interest is chapter two on the activities and reception of the French on street music performers. French writers, we are told, complained long and endlessly about the noise of street music and Salvation Army bands in, for example, travel texts and lived experience, with one writer, Marie-Anne de Bovet describing the British street as "rien n'étant plus étranger à l'harmonie que ces litanies traînantes et nasillardes, vociférées sur des pont-neufs [...] avec des éclats de fausset acides comme un citron vert fusant au-dessus d'une bouillie confuse de basses sourdes et ternes' (p. 83). Scott recounts other experiences of noisy bands from a delicious range of fiction as well as non-fiction sources that report also on British morals and religion. The chapter also considers the attention British Salvation Army bands occupied in the French press, described at times as vehicles for brainwashing. But other psychological menaces of these bands were also of concern; as Scott tells us, "concepts of madness and psychological manipulation are implemented to explain the inroads being made about the Salvation Army on French shores" (p. 93).

Chapter three, "Singing the Celts: British folk music and French identity," charts the sometimes fixation on (and criticism) of Celtic traditional music around parts of Britain. Underlying these nationalist narratives are discussions of musical evolution and race, which are mostly concerned with the music in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Scott describes the ways in which notions of exoticism and primitivism play out in literature surrounding Celtic culture from such publications as travel guides. The chapter then asks about the extent to which France could be Celtic drawing on a range of sources in relation to some French provinces. For many observers, "France and Celtic Britain are overtly linked by the parallel manifestations of modern times of their ancient and shared bloodline" (p. 150).

Travel literature is also a source for the final substantial chapter, "Singing in London," where Scott explores the ways in which "hearing music and sound become fundamental axes in the French mental conception of British character and culture" (p. 185). Extracts from a range of sources refer to the city's soundscape including street criers and the types of noise--including "dull" noise (p. 187)--and a cornucopia of all sorts of sounds from "acrobats, minstrels, [and] salvationists" (p. 189). The chapter also considers repertoire and literature pertaining to drawing room entertainment, including execrable singing "for two deadly hours" (p. 194). One writer, Vallès, gives a "scathing critique" of the sound, and artistic quality, of black-face acts, Scott commenting that there is much more to understanding these sounds or noise behind Vallès's perceptions than meets the ear, and presumably, the eye (pp. 201-202).

The introduction is a deft setting out of the many and complex music, political, and cultural issues that include a robust analysis of the "lowbrow," and the place of Britain in the French imagination and cultural life during the Third Republic. This book is not merely the analysis of song: it is a careful and intelligent study of the layers of meaning in the songs. Drawing on a swathe of references to language, literature, national identity, and psychology--as well as race, class, evolution, and politics--Scott superbly illustrates what the songs represent or suggest. This

sophisticated book is a major contribution to studies of French popular song and Franco-British cultural and political relations.

NOTES

[1] Amanda Palmer, Sarah-Louise Young, and Maxim Melton, "The French Brexit Song," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPLe9qhpBF8, accessed 4 January 2024.

[2] Hannah More, *Christian Morals* in *The Collected Works of Hannah More*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper Bros., 1847).

[3] Paul Watt, *Music, Morality and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023), chapter two.

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