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**Regina M. Sweeney**, *Singing Our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music during the Great War*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. x + 355 pp. Figures, appendixes, notes, bibliography and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl) and \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8195-6454-0 (cl). and 0-8195-6473-7 (pb).

Review by Timothy Baycroft, University of Sheffield.

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The First World War and the changes it brought to French society have been widely studied, yet Regina M. Sweeney has found a fascinating new angle by examining the changing culture of the period through songs and song-writing. An activity which permeated the whole of French society, singing was a form of public ritual which extended through elite, popular, military, and civilian cultures. It was also a means by which quite opposite views of the war could be expressed publicly, and its pervasiveness in society makes song an excellent means to understand and evaluate the numerous places which the war filled in the popular imagination. It is through song that Sweeney examines not only the war, but more particularly the “cultural transition the war affected” (p. 2), and seeks to increase understanding of the complex relationship between war and cultural practice.

Sweeney begins with a solid background of the place of music within French culture in the years leading up to the war. The significant growth of musical culture throughout the *fin de siècle* period took place within a context of increased availability and distribution of printed matter, as well as images such as picture-postcards. Individual songsheets could be bought cheaply, and the *café-concert* and the music hall became increasingly popular venues. Creativity and adaptability were key characteristics of the song culture, where even talented amateurs could draw from printed music, and create individual adaptations by putting new words to familiar melodies. Because the public was already familiar with many of the songs, slight changes could therefore add layers of meaning through *double entendre*. By the outbreak of the war, audiences were already accustomed to politically charged songs, with rival political positions each having their stock of supporting songs.

As she turns to the mobilisation for the war, Sweeney develops her ideas of singing as a form of public ritual, a culturally constructed act by which means private emotions are kept separate from an individual's commitment to a *public* ritual. Since certain songs were patriotic, participating in the national mobilisation ritual via public songs helped to transform doubt into confidence and bring war sentiment to life. This means, Sweeney argues, that the so-called “popular enthusiasm” can be interpreted as the participation in a known and familiar public ritual drawn from popular culture, which as often as not served to hide the real feelings of the participants as to express them. Music and song played a key part in the mobilisation ritual which was acted out in towns and villages all over France, helping to create what she called the “musical *union sacrée*” (pp. 55-61). Viewed from this angle, the attitudes of the population towards war in 1914 appear far more complex than in many standard accounts, as the role of such cultural manifestations as singing was not only reflective of the public mood, but also helped to create it.

Following the first section on the pre-war decades and the time of mass mobilisation, the book changes to a thematic structure. The second section, entitled “conflicting agendas” treats two specific questions across the period, those of censorship and eroticisation. In addition to printed matter, censorship was applied to songs, both lyrics and melodies which carried certain undertones. The authorities used censorship of songs to check subversive politics, to preserve the illusion of unity and resolve in the public forum, as well as in the realm of general morality. Differences emerged between the civilian and military spheres, in the latter of which the leadership was more concerned with preventing the spread of pacifism through music. In the chapter on the eroticisation of war, music is placed within the broader cultural context through comparison with postcards, several examples of which are provided for illustration. Several dimensions of the eroticisation of war through song are examined, including “the kiss” in song or the notion of sexual recompense for soldiering (e.g., kissing a soldier as a patriotic act) and representations of eroticised weaponry where guns and bayonets are given female names with accompanying songs. Each chapter, through a discreet question, displays the complexity of the links between the cultural practice of singing and the war.

The third section examines the cultural geography of war, with chapters focusing on different places, including Paris and the front, and one specifically focussing on unofficial singing. Each chapter thus analyses in greater detail separate segments of French society, and the differences which could be found through the culture of singing. These include the way in which the repertoire was much more static at the front among the soldiers, compared with Paris, and the way in which the army organised “official” entertainment for the soldiers, which repeated known cultural forms. While examining each area in turn, Sweeney never loses sight of the overall picture, clearly displaying the function of both the content of the songs, as well as the act of singing itself. The final chapter of the section returns to the subject of periodisation, to provide a more comprehensive sense of the way the various cultures associated with song described in the earlier chapters evolved throughout the war years, and to place the specific examples discussed back within a broader chronological framework.

The entire book is helpfully supported by 45 illustrations, as well as plenty of pertinent extracts from the texts of the songs discussed. It demonstrates a solid grasp of both the general and the particular, enhanced by the organisational structure of the book. Sweeney is able to examine, through individual details, an ensemble of cultural practices, including the richness of diversity, while at the same time depicting quite clearly more general trends across France affected by the war. Her study is also particularly useful for analysing conflicting undercurrents within French society, the links between state and society, and for understanding differences between military and civilian wartime cultures. The interdisciplinary methodology used, drawing upon a wealth of evidence in imaginative ways, makes this a refreshing and thought-provoking analysis of the war years, and of the place of musical tradition and singing within French culture.

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Timothy Baycroft  
University of Sheffield  
baycroft@sheffield.ac.uk

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