

## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Sarah Kirby. *Exhibitions, Music and the British Empire***

Music In Britain, 1600–2000. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2022.

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(eBook). xiv+260pp., 29 figs, 13 tables

#### **Reviewed by Paul Watt**

The 2022 World Fair (aka ‘Expo’) held in Dubai has recently drawn to a close. The next Expo will be hosted by Buenos Aires in 2023; the one after that will be staged in Osaka in 2025. These Expos are all linked to the first Expo of them all: the Great Exhibition staged in London in 1851. To be sure, the term ‘great’ is an understatement. The 1851 event, and those that followed it, were—and remain—colossal undertakings. They take years of planning, attract millions of visitors, and serve a variety of cultural and political purposes. These Expos are built and designed to ‘dazzle’—a word that Sarah Kirby uses in her book to describe the at times overwhelming effect of Expos on the senses (p. 52).

The exhibitions examined in this book include Sydney, Melbourne, London, Kolkata, Liverpool, Adelaide, Glasgow, and Edinburgh, held between 1879 and 1890. Some of these were exhibitions of a general nature, while others were themed, such as the International Fisheries Exhibition and the International Health Exhibition, staged in London in 1883 and 1885 respectively. These later nineteenth-century exhibitions imitated yet expanded the scope of the inaugural Great Exhibition of 1851. They became statements of national pride and were hallmarks of the successes and spoils of the British Empire. Since the nineteenth century, of course, the Exhibition has gone truly global.

These exhibitions constitute complex institutional histories. As Kirby notes, the archival records are often incomplete, absent, or mediated through an anonymous array of press articles, some of them unreliable and patchy. Furthermore, no two exhibitions are alike; each has its own localised purpose, management structure, and politics, and all these issues need untangling. Music is not always centre stage in these endeavours either. Indeed, as Kirby notes in Chapter 5, the London Inventions Exhibition of 1885 was ‘the only exhibition of the late nineteenth century to have an entire division devoted to music’ (p. 109). Extracting the musical

lives of these Exhibitions only take us so far in getting to grips with any exhibition, and Kirby has done a great job indeed of unravelling the many historical strands of these enterprises: musical, social, political, cultural, and economic.

The book is approached thematically through topics such as rational recreation, music for leisure and entertainment, nationalism, and non-Western music. It is not a comparative history, exhibition by exhibition, which is a relief, for this would have afforded a repetitive and dull read. Instead, this topical approach allows the author—and reader—to traverse the exhibition sites, drawing on a variety of rich examples, many of them illustrated with photographs. It is almost as though the reader had travelled back in time; the author walks us through the exhibitions, giving us a guided tour. It is very clever writing with complicated material.

Kirby argues these Exhibitions were products of, and agents for, Empire. These expressions of identity are highlighted throughout the book, for example, where biblical terms are used in advertising to suggest the Christian nature of the Exhibitions. Kirby also highlights the uses of propaganda in drawing in the punters. The careful reading of advertisements and press reports provides often fascinating and amusing accounts of these and other tensions. One particularly entertaining episode involves a commentator all worked up over—and puzzled by—a dismissive attitude by Australians on the wonders of British piano manufacturing. What is this, an antipodean snub to Britain? In part, probably.

There is so much good work in this book that it is difficult to know where to begin with its highlights: the book is brimming with accounts of fascinating and at times bizarre events. For example, there are many references to instruments that were probably experimental, such as the Vocalion (p. 69) and the Rock Harmonicon (p. 88). There is good coverage in the book of music by women, including piano recitals by Cecilia Summerhayes in Sydney (p. 80), who gave an astonishing number of recitals—125, all up. Summerhayes was a protégé of Hallé, Thalberg and Julius Benedict, and championed the use of the Brinsmead piano. Kirby also discusses the Vienna Ladies' Orchestra that performed in Liverpool in 1886, and provides a photo of them (p. 165). The orchestra was the subject not only of misogyny in the press (concentrating more on what they wore than what they played), but outrage over their fee: £2,000. The ladies were accused of ripping off the system. Chapters on the presence of non-Western music deftly position their place in exhibition culture, and tropes of Darwinism, exoticism, and otherness, for example, are expertly analysed. Illustrations and examples include music and musicians from Japan, China, and Siam. The discussion of the differing reception of the Chinese and Siamese bands, drawing on the work of David Cannadine—as well as the author offering her own reading of this reception—is very successful in examining the interplay of tropes of exoticism, otherness, and racism.

There is much in the book to commend. The relating of exhibition culture to religion, empire, and nation is well done, and themes of class, taste, condescension, and cultural imperialism are also well handled. The positioning of music as an art, as a science, and as a mode of recreation amongst a host of other activities such as tobogganing (p. 23) richly illustrates the diverse range of activities and exhibits offered at the Exhibitions, giving a clue to the many activities with which a music loving person might also engage over one or many visits. The book is extremely thoroughly researched, very well written, and an absorbing read. Sarah Kirby has put before us a book of immense detail with a keen eye on the many byways in which the late nineteenth-century Exhibition permeated British musical life and that of its Empire.

**About the Author**

Paul Watt is Dean of Music and Professor of Musicology at the Australian Guild of Music, Adjunct Professor of Musicology at The University of Adelaide, and Director of Research at the Busking Project, Berlin. He is a scholar of nineteenth-century studies with interests in musical, literary, religious, and intellectual history.