
BOOK REVIEW

Helen J. English. *Music and World-Building in the Colonial City: Newcastle, NSW, and Its Townships, 1860–1880*

London; New York: Routledge, 2021

ISBN 9780367077648 (Hbk)/9780367495640 (Pbk)/9780429022678 (eBook). xii+216pp., 33 ills

Reviewed by Samantha Owens

As Helen English rightly acknowledges early on in her wonderfully detailed study of music making in nineteenth-century Newcastle and its surrounds, while the area's European settlers engaged enthusiastically in 'building individual and collective worlds,' their 'world-building' simultaneously (and violently) destroyed the country and lifestyle of the local Awabakal people (pp. 2, 29). In stark contrast, the locations covered in this book—the coalmining city of Newcastle, the pastoral settlement of Maitland, and a number of small towns nearby (among them Lambton, Wallsend, and Waratah, now all suburbs of Newcastle)—were all thriving by the 1860s. While there was a certain degree of demographic diversity between these settlements—Newcastle, for example, was chiefly home to miners, tradesmen, and itinerant port workers, compared to Maitland's landowners and small-scale farmers—one feature they all shared was the significant amount of music-making that occurred within their communities.

Drawing chiefly on the rich resources available through the National Library of Australia's Trove database in the form of digitised historical newspapers, English makes a compelling argument for the importance of music as 'a useful, accessible and valued resource that settlers could draw upon to create their world,' both individually and collectively (p. 2). As she explains in an introductory chapter ('Music-making at the Coalface of the Empire'), the region's migrants came overwhelmingly from three key British coalmining regions: North-East England, South Wales, and South-East Scotland. Each of these groups employed music as a powerful means of asserting key aspects of their identity, despite living far away from 'Home'. Furthermore, the agency of music as a significant civilising practice made it particularly valuable to coalminers, who were often denigrated in nineteenth-century Britain, being characterised as 'unclean, ignorant and even sub-human ... in a language of dehumanization' (p. 51).

In Chapter 2 ('The Sights and Sounds of the Coalopolis') English provides a vivid picture of the wider soundscape of Newcastle and its townships, where music-making featured alongside the clanking of machinery and noise of whistles and bells that punctuated the working day of the bustling wharves. Particularly striking is the amount of vocal and instrumental music that was heard outdoors: at fairs and picnics, and as an integral component of community excursions (by train and boat) and public processions (by day and torchlight). By the mid-1870s, following a successful bid by the miners for the right to have every second Saturday afternoon off work, a number of new venues began to be built. These provided the location for what was to become the chief type of public musical performance: the benefit concert. Modelled after similar entertainments common in North-East England, their aim was to raise money for the ill, permanently injured, or widowed; as English points out, this was vital in mining communities, where work was routinely hazardous.

A key theme that runs throughout the book is the importance of music as a marker of identity, with different types of ensembles or modes of music-making helping to fulfil the 'pressing need felt by migrants to recreate identity in a new place' (p. 67). Brass bands remain a central part of musical life in Newcastle to this day, and Chapter 4 investigates the origins of this tradition. As English points out, unlike in Britain, where such ensembles tended to be supported by colliery management, in the Newcastle region brass bands were generally funded by, and represented, their local communities. Thus, they were more closely tied to the miners' identity than to that of their employers. English provides some fascinating detail concerning the programmes presented by these bands, although very occasionally I would have liked a little more analysis of their repertoire. Arrangements of English, Welsh, Irish, and Scots songs clearly allowed audience members 'the opportunity to connect to their past' (p. 68); however, it may also have been interesting to provide more commentary on some of the other compositions the bands performed. At times, pieces are simply left unidentified in the programme listings for specific concerts. For example, 'Galop—Der Sturmvogel' (p. 64) is presumably the work of Prussian military musician Carl Faust, while 'Galop—"Presto" (Krien) [*sic*]' (p. 76) is surely a piece by Luxembourgger Michel Krein. At the same concert (given at Newcastle's Asylum Gardens in 1876), a 'Slow March—"Brigade" (Neutzerling)' was probably by the Nassau-born bandmaster of the 68th Light Infantry Regiment, William Neutzerling. What can the inclusion of such pan-European works tell us about the repertoire of British-influenced brass bands established in the colonies?

In Chapters 5 and 6, English explores the role of singing within these communities, looking first at the significance of choral societies. Importantly, 'choirs were more accessible and inclusive than brass bands, which called for instrumental skills and were all-male' (p. 88). Congregational singing was central to the nonconformist church traditions of the Welsh, Geordie, and Scottish settlers who formed a significant proportion of the region's population. As English notes, 'the high standard of many nonconformist church choirs made it possible for secular, working-class choirs to develop quickly' (p. 90). Local choral societies were formed along British lines—with regulations and committees—and their performances of 'art' music helped to raise the social status of their lower-class members.

Rather than giving their own concerts, such choirs appeared frequently in community benefit concerts, which (as discussed in depth in Chapter 8) aimed to attract a wide range of audience members and cut across class divides due to the fact that their production required

close collaboration between individuals from diverse backgrounds. Generally structured in two parts, these concerts typically featured a mixture of instrumental and vocal items and, as English also notes, tended to give equal status to all performers involved. Her analysis of the sizeable body of benefit concert programmes advertised in local newspapers reveals strong evidence of certain key community ideals: 'democracy; cooperation; public life and reputation' (p. 155).

The second chapter to focus solely on vocal music—Chapter 6, 'Singing, Eisteddfodau and Identity'—provides an absorbing look at the influence of the musical traditions of the region's Welsh migrants. Eisteddfods began to be held not long after the arrival of the first Welsh settlers and English explores these events 'primarily as vehicle[s] of expression of "Welshness",' and 'as part of a response to an ongoing prejudice from the English' (p. 106). Although run solely by men, in common with the regularly held community benefit concerts these competitions also provided opportunities for women to perform (as both vocalists and instrumentalists). Over time, the success of the eisteddfods in the wider community led to their increasing Anglicisation, as can be seen, for example, in the decision of the Wallsend Eisteddfod committee to change its name to the Wallsend Literary Society in 1876.

In Chapter 7 English examines amateur blackface minstrelsy in the region, covering the 1850s until around 1870. Noting that 'the first African American troupe to tour Australia actually premiered in Newcastle, NSW, on Boxing Day, 1876' (p. 133), she explains that these early minstrel tours offered colonials not only an escape 'into an unknown plantation world of African American slaves,' but were also occasions upon which they could 'feel superior to the characters being portrayed as befuddled, irrational music-makers' (p. 134). In stark contrast to many other forms of music popular in the Newcastle region during this period, the adoption of blackface minstrelsy by local performance groups was far from being morally improving; indeed, as English points out, 'it was purely entertainment underpinned by racism' (p. 131). In a telling parallel, however, 'some of those rehearsing and performing blackface were miners who were themselves vilified as primitive, even degenerate, with their coal-stained faces seen as symbolic of their difference' (p. 134).

Throughout this volume there is a varied and valuable selection of illustrations provided, including reproductions of contemporary photographs, postcards, and excerpts taken directly from historical newspapers (generally advertisements for concerts). While these undoubtedly add an important pictorial dimension to the material being discussed, at times they are a little unclear—due either to the poor quality of the original image, or possibly also because of the quality of the book's printing. For example, the 'Map showing Newcastle, Maitland and Cessnock, 1924' (Figure 1.2, p. 5) includes some text that is so small that it is illegible. Equally frustrating is the lack of detail provided on occasion regarding individual images. The view of Newcastle in the 1860s presented as Figure 2.1 (p. 19) is a prime example: where is this image taken from? Is it a postcard? From a newspaper? Or copied from a book? Furthermore, is the photographer known? A similarly frustrating example (of many throughout the book) is the photograph of the Black Diamond Hotel (Figure 4.1.2, p. 85): is Ralph Snowball, who is described here as the 'Author,' the photographer? What is the approximate date of this image? Or, if no date is recorded, what were Snowball's dates?

A common thread that emerges throughout the course of the book is the 'use of familiar music to mediate environment and context,' which, as English argues in the final chapter,

remains a key strategy in migrant communities today (p. 182). In paying such close attention to the rich musical lives of these townships, as well as considering their social and political contexts, her research provides fascinating detail regarding many of varied ways in which music was used in the Newcastle region during the second half of the nineteenth century to promote ‘understanding and empathy’ between diverse members of local communities. Importantly, English also recognises ‘the social benefit of belonging to a music ensemble’ as being of great significance to settlers (pp. 184–85): a benefit that, of course, remains equally valid today.

About the Author

Samantha Owens is Professor of Musicology at Victoria University of Wellington – Te Herenga Waka, where her research centres on the reception of German music and musicians in New Zealand and Australia, 1850–1950, as well as on early modern German court music. Recent publications have included two edited books, *J. S. Bach in Australia: Studies in Reception and Performance* (with Kerry Murphy and Denis Collins, Lyrebird Press, 2018), and *Searches for Tradition: Essays on New Zealand Music, Past & Present* (with Michael Brown, Victoria University Press, 2017).