

## **Ethnic and Cultural Identity in Music and Song Lyrics**

*Edited by Kennedy V. and Gadpaille M.*

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Newcastle upon Tyne

2017

**Keywords** Identity, Music, Song lyrics

**Review DOI** 10.1108/AAM-03-2018-0003

There has been only limited attention paid in the literature to the way places are represented through song, and in particular to the role of song lyrics “in the construction and communication of place identities” (Skinner, 2017, p. 137). When considering how closely music is related to a sense of place and place identities, “the production of place through music” is often a highly “contested process” (Hudson, 2006, p. 627). Moreover, any research into national and cultural identity can also lead to negative connotations aligned with the rise of nationalism and identity symbols becoming re-purposed by extreme nationalist groups, although such research can also lead to fruitful explorations of ethnicity, gender and class within a national culture (Turner, 2002).

*Ethnic and Cultural Identity in Music and Song Lyrics* is the third so far in a series of edited texts by Victor Kennedy and Michelle Gadpaille that recognise the interdisciplinary nature of research into the relationship between words and music in song.

In the introduction to their first edited text in this series, *Words and Music*, Kennedy and Gadpaille (2013, p. xii) make the point that “the common thread running through the chapters of this book is that combining words with music enhances the effectiveness of the message”. Comprising 17 chapters, the first part of the book deals with “Opera and Musicals”, the second with “Popular Music”, the third with “Soundtracks” and the fourth and final part with “Using Words and Music to Teach English as a second language”. In their second edited text, *Symphony and Song: The Intersection of Words and Music*, Kennedy and Gadpaille (2016, p. 1) “explore the relation between words and music from a variety of critical and practical perspectives”. The book’s 15 chapters cover a range of music and song styles ranging across various operatic and classical genres, traditional songs styles, to contemporary easy listening, pop and rock.

Across 16 chapters, this third book in the series explores in depth the “multiplicity of the factors at play: lyrics, musical score, performer, performance, audience, language, paratext, and, above all, the ethnic national contextualised arena in which these factors combine” (Kennedy and Gadpaille, 2017, p. 1). The ethnic identities upon which the various chapters are focussed are not balanced in a global context. The first five chapters focus on various aspects of British national identity: Exploring the notions of Britishness expressed in mod and punk song lyrics; the pop music of Northern England; the articulation of Irishness through the music of “The Pogues”; British drinking songs; and the comparison between the Americanisation vs Cockney stylisation in the singing accent of Amy Winehouse. Two chapters then follow that deal with identity in North American music, the first focusing on the hip-hop musical “Hamilton”, the second focussing on the Leonard Cohen song “Hallelujah”. There are then five further chapters that explore the identity in the context of song lyrics from Slovenia, dealing with topics ranging from: The use of regional Slovenian dialects in song; songs of the Slovenian diaspora; the way Western bands have been received in Slovenia; and parallels between



the concept of the universe dancing in English and Slovene literatures. The final three chapters explore the songs and poetry of both ancient and modern China.

For the most part, the music and song lyrics chosen by each chapter's authors are purposively chosen, and few present any in-depth justification for the chosen sample or method of analysis. Thus, readers may find they disagree with the interpretations and arguments presented by the authors when confronted with works with which they are familiar. However, that said, the subjective nature of an audience's interpretation of the way ethnic and cultural identities are portrayed in music and song lyrics is also accepted throughout this text. The insights drawn by the contributors to the chapters in the book are offered in great depth and convey an interpretation of meaning that would be of relevance to others who chose to undertake such representational readings of a similar subject matter.

Other texts examining identity in the context of music and song lyrics tend to focus only on only one type of identity, for example "Performing Black Masculinity" (Alexander, 2006), or one type of musical style, for example rap (Krimms, 2000). A key strength of this book is therefore not only the breadth of identities and music styles that it covers, but also their temporal nature traced from ancient to contemporary songs.

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