

## ‘Strains from Flowery Land’: Responses to Chinese Musical Activity in Mid-nineteenth-century Ballarat

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When gold was discovered in south-eastern Australia in 1851 a rush of people from many countries of the world converged on the colony of Victoria in search of wealth. By 1857 there were approximately 40,000 Chinese people living and working in Victoria, most of whom were young men from farming families who, suffering from harsh social, political and economic conditions in their own land, had borrowed money in order to make the journey to Australia.<sup>1</sup> They came in the hope of acquiring wealth and returning home with a fortune.<sup>2</sup> Large numbers of those who went to the diggings were from Guangdong province around the Pearl River delta, while others came from Fujian and other provinces.<sup>3</sup> Many were attracted to the rich goldfields of Ballarat, where there were around 5000 Chinese people living in 1856, 7500 in 1857, and 9000 in 1858.<sup>4</sup> They formed part of a large mix of nationalities living and working in early Ballarat, the majority of whom were from English-speaking backgrounds. Census figures for 1854 show that most Ballarat citizens had been born in England, followed by those from Scotland and Ireland. By 1871 most had been born in Victoria, followed by those born in England, Ireland and Scotland respectively.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries-old Relationship with Australia: Flowers and the Wide Sea* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992) 139.

<sup>2</sup> Zheng-Ting Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia—Victoria: 1850s to Mid-1990s* (Melbourne: Australia Asia Foundation, 1997) 17–19.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria* (Melbourne: MUP, 1982) 17.

<sup>4</sup> Weston Bate, *Lucky City* (Carlton: MUP, 1978) 150.

<sup>5</sup> Census of Victoria (1854) Part 6, Table XXIV: 23; Census of Victoria (1871) Part 6, Table XIV: 20–2.

The Chinese brought their own musical traditions with them to the goldfields. However, the few remaining Chinese-language sources reveal little of their own perception of their musical activity after their arrival in Ballarat. A form of notation known as *gongche* was used widely in theatrical practices in China, but Wang Zheng-Ting failed to find evidence of notated music or librettos in his research into Cantonese opera repertoire in early Victoria. In fact, as he observes, Chinese opera actors were expected to know the basic repertoire by heart, while music education and folk song were based on an oral tradition, and it seems very unlikely that notated scores were actually used.<sup>6</sup> We do, however, know the types of musical activity practised by the Chinese people. As with other ethnic groups who came in search of gold, their music helped them to maintain contact with their home culture and religions. For these people, living without the accustomed support from their families, it provided an important framework within which they could establish and maintain relationships with compatriots.<sup>7</sup> We can surmise that the familiar cultural sounds of their own music helped them to relax after long days working in the mines, and that this helped compensate for the antagonism experienced in their day-to-day lives.

Previous studies of Chinese music in nineteenth-century Australia include notable works by Harold Love and Wang Zheng-Ting. A recent article by Wang Zheng-Ting and myself outlines the different types of music practised by the Chinese people, and the role music played in their lives.<sup>8</sup> The latter article also draws attention to the way music enabled the Chinese to participate in events within the wider community, to contribute to charities and public life, and to gain a certain amount of positive recognition from the rest of the population. And yet attempts to use music as a bridge between these very diverse cultures actually widened the perceived gulf between the Chinese people and those from European backgrounds. As shown in the above studies, European listeners did not engage sympathetically with Chinese music. Building on this previous research, and introducing further references to the reception of Chinese music sound, acting, costumes, decorative arts and acrobatics, this article discusses some of the reasons for the negative response to Chinese musical activity. It considers the nature of the human response to music, as well as the immense social and cultural barriers that divided the Chinese community from the rest of the Ballarat population.

### Music and Meaning

Ethnomusicologists have long asserted that meanings encoded in music practice must be sought within, and not in isolation from, society.<sup>9</sup> It would be futile to consider music sound as a form of universal language that can carry the same messages to people of

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Jones, 'Source and Stream: Early Music and Living Traditions in China,' *Early Music* 24.3 (1996): 382; Zheng-Ting Wang, 'Chinese Music in Mid Nineteenth-Century Victoria,' *Australasian Music Research* 2-3 (1997-98): 31; Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia* 32.

<sup>7</sup> Wang, 'Chinese Music in Victoria' 28.

<sup>8</sup> Zheng-Ting Wang and Anne Doggett, 'Chinese Music on the Victorian Goldfields,' *Victorian Historical Journal* 78.2 (2007): 170-86.

<sup>9</sup> John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974) 52 and 98; Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 6; Bruno Nettl, 'Studying Musics of the World's Cultures,' *Excursions in World Music*, ed. Bruno Nettl, Charles Capwell, Isabel Wong, Thomas Turino and Philip V. Bohlman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001) 3-6.

different backgrounds, or to use it in an attempt to facilitate some form of cross-cultural understanding.<sup>10</sup> The musics of the world present themselves in vastly different and often incompatible ways.<sup>11</sup> The transference of musical significance across, or even within, cultural boundaries is a complex process, in which music sound is only one of the contributing factors. Musicologists John Shepherd and Peter Wicke state, for example, that affect and meaning through music are found in relationships, in which the sounds are significant, and the meanings are mediated socially and culturally.<sup>12</sup>

If the meanings of music are located in the relationships people form with and through that music, they must therefore be dependent upon both the sound itself and the person who responds to that sound, together with the complexity of cultural, social, physical and emotional factors that each person brings to the listening experience. These factors differ from person to person and community to community, so there are multiple meanings encoded within any music act. Ian Cross observes that:

a piece or performance is simultaneously capable of bearing many different meanings ... Music is about something, but its aboutness—its intentionality—can vary from context to context, within a context, and from individual to individual.<sup>13</sup>

While recognising the impact of social and cultural factors on human responses to music, the significance of the actual music sound should not be underestimated. Sounds play a distinctive role in the generation of meaning that is not always recognised by scholars. When musicologist Bonnie Wade claims that it is not the lullaby that puts a baby to sleep, but something else, such as loving attention, she fails to acknowledge the direct relationships that can arise between the elements of music sound and the physical and emotional state of the individual.<sup>14</sup> The nature of the embodied and emotional human response suggests strongly that the actual sound does indeed have a direct bearing on the meanings of a musical experience, and that the response to that sound is neither entirely arbitrary, nor constructed solely by social or cultural forces. Shepherd and Wicke, in their study of music and cultural theory, have made strong claims that not all meanings are possible in all musics.<sup>15</sup> It seems, then, that it is only by recognising the differences between the musics of the cultures involved, by being aware of the social and cultural factors that impacted upon the musical experience, and by appreciating the nature of the human response to music, that we can begin to comprehend the negativity that greeted the musical ventures of the Chinese people in Ballarat during the gold rush.

### **The Chinese in Ballarat**

In 1856 the editor of the *Star* was happy to boast that Ballarat was a 'microcosm unique, an epitome of all humanities, civilised and savage,' but in practice this mix of cultures brought

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<sup>10</sup> Merriam, *Anthropology of Music* 10–12.

<sup>11</sup> Nettl, 'Studying Musics of the World's Cultures' 5–6; Ian Cross, 'Music and Bio-cultural Evolution,' *The Cultural Study of Music*, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton (New York: Routledge, 2003): 19.

<sup>12</sup> John Shepherd and Peter Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 15–16.

<sup>13</sup> Cross, 'Music and Bio-cultural Evolution' 23.

<sup>14</sup> Bonnie Wade, *Thinking Musically: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: OUP, 2004) 10.

<sup>15</sup> Shepherd and Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* 178.

immense problems.<sup>16</sup> Intolerance and unequal treatment had been practiced for certain groups of people since the establishment of the Australian colonies, but the Chinese who arrived in Australia during the gold rushes had to face new forms of racial hatred. Despite the efforts of some to treat them with dignity and consideration, the Chinese miners who came to Ballarat suffered appalling prejudice and discrimination.<sup>17</sup> Three anti-Chinese riots in Ballarat in February 1857, for example, resulted in the deaths of two Chinese people.<sup>18</sup> When a new joss house was officially opened in 1869, the *Ballarat Star* observed:

The place was much crowded during the day, and we are sorry to say that the Chinese were much put about by the visit of a portion of the European mining population, who made fun of them, and considering all that was passing 'bosh', did not hesitate to express that opinion to the devotees.<sup>19</sup>

Reasons for this lack of sympathy and respect stemmed from perceived threats to the safety and prosperity of the non-Chinese people, the distinctive appearances, lifestyles and habits of the Chinese miners, and the cultural backgrounds of the dominant British population who were convinced of the superiority of their own cultural heritage. As the Chinese population began to increase rapidly, concerns were expressed that they would soon overrun the colony, with one angry correspondent to the press protesting that Victoria would soon suffer 'complete subjugation by these Mongolian invaders.'<sup>20</sup> The diligent work habits of the Chinese and their readiness to undertake unpleasant tasks were regarded as unfair competition and a threat to living standards. There were few women living in the Chinese settlements, and this led to accusations of unnatural conduct and homosexuality.<sup>21</sup> Chinese were publicly accused of immorality, excessive gambling, opium smoking, luring children into lives of debauchery, evading taxes, unsanitary lifestyles, and neglect of fellow Chinese when in need.<sup>22</sup> The fear and suspicion with which they were regarded demoralised the lives of the Chinese people and led to immense social problems. Protectorates were established, ostensibly to protect the Chinese people, but they became, in effect, a convenient means of control. The Chinese were forced to pay a tax of £10 per annum for their protection, and had to live in segregated camps. Dropsy, chest infections and leprosy flourished in these overcrowded villages, and this resulted in further alienation from the rest of the population.<sup>23</sup>

Various efforts were made to reach out to this minority group in a spirit of acceptance. Robert Bell, nicknamed 'Chinese Bell' because of his interest in and support of the Chinese, acted as a go-between, and tried to ease the tensions between the Chinese and the non-Chinese.<sup>24</sup> James Oddie, a benefactor of the early community, was another who took an interest in the Chinese people and he organised their involvement in civic functions. Oddie also supported efforts

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<sup>16</sup> *Star* 4 Oct. 1856: 2; Catriona Elder, 'Immigration History,' *Australia's History: Themes and Debates*, ed. Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005) 103.

<sup>17</sup> Cronin, *Colonial Casualties* 42; Eric Rolls, *Sojourners* 121.

<sup>18</sup> Cronin, *Colonial Casualties* 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Ballarat Star* 6 Feb. 1869: 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Star* 17 July 1856: 3.

<sup>21</sup> Bate, *Lucky City* 150; Rolls, *Sojourners* 126.

<sup>22</sup> Bate, *Lucky City* 150–6 and 177.

<sup>23</sup> Bate, *Lucky City* 151–2; Cronin, *Colonial Casualties* 46.

<sup>24</sup> Bate, *Lucky City* 150–2.

to establish a Chinese day and evening school in 1869.<sup>25</sup> A Chinese chapel was established at Golden Point and, despite a certain amount of opposition, some Chinese people attended Christian services.<sup>26</sup> In 1860 the editor of Ballarat's *Star* newspaper urged people to treat the Chinese with tolerance, and spoke out strongly against the unfair taxes imposed upon them. The Chinese camps, he felt, were merely pens for the easier enforcement of those taxes.<sup>27</sup>

It was not easy to approach the Chinese people on a practical level. Their manners, customs and language precluded them from participating in community functions such as meetings, discussions, banquets or balls. As there appeared to be no option of interacting socially, offering the Chinese a performative rather than a shared social role in public must have seemed a sensible way of encouraging them to take part in community life. Their cultural performances enabled the Chinese to contribute to the community in many ways, and their efforts brought a certain amount of positive recognition. As documented below, however, people were far more negative about the Chinese music they heard than they were about Chinese costumes, acting, embroidery or acrobatic displays. This music appeared to hinder, rather than foster, any form of sympathetic understanding, and it set up further opportunities for ridicule and contempt.

The following sections consider some of the principal areas in which people from non-Chinese backgrounds encountered Chinese musical activity in Ballarat. Chinese music was also reported in the local press, and so, for the literate population at least, perceptions were shaped by both the actual experience and the detailed accounts that regularly appeared in local portage.

### Theatrical Entertainment

Much of the population was very aware of Chinese music, even when performances were intended solely for Chinese audiences. In 1858 a large tent theatre capable of holding around one thousand people was erected in the Chinese camp on Golden Point, and Cantonese opera companies visited regularly to perform their lively theatrical entertainment. Chinese people in Ballarat attended in large numbers, and the tent theatre was often crowded.<sup>28</sup> Non-Chinese people living in the vicinity frequently wrote letters to the press complaining of the sound of the musical instruments, particularly when performances exceeded the agreed finishing hour. Their complaints sometimes resulted in the cancellation of theatrical licences.<sup>29</sup>

Cantonese opera, a form of popular theatrical entertainment, was a spectacular combination of music and drama. It also incorporated a good deal of acrobatic fighting, a form of martial arts accompanied by music. Actors at the time were almost exclusively male. Professional companies from China toured the goldfields from 1858, and gave performances in the various mining centres, sometimes, possibly, in conjunction with some local Chinese talent.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Star* 20 Jan. 1858: 2–3; 5 May 1869: 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Star* 12 Dec. 1868: 4; 23 Dec. 1868: 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Star* 24 Jan. 1860: 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Star* 18 Dec. 1858: 3; 30 Dec. 1859: 3; 11 Nov. 1861: 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Star* 5 Feb. 1861: 2; 9 Feb. 1861: 2; 12 Feb. 1861: 2; 5 Sep. 1861: 2.

<sup>30</sup> Harold Love, 'Chinese Theatre on the Victorian Goldfields 1858–1870,' *Australasian Drama Studies* 3 (1985): 47–86; Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia* 21–31.

As well as being a means of social contact and an enjoyable form of musical and dramatic entertainment, Cantonese opera is also said to have performed an important moral and ethical function. The operas were based on ancient Chinese stories that professional actors and musicians were expected to know from memory. A band of instrumentalists would play throughout the performance, accompanying the songs, providing a musical commentary, and highlighting the movements of the actors.<sup>31</sup>

Non-Chinese people sometimes visited the Chinese theatre, and many more witnessed theatrical presentations when Chinese players performed in general venues such as the Alfred Hall. In 1858 a reporter found his visit to the Chinese tent theatre so interesting that he encouraged readers to go and see at least one performance. The interest, however, lay largely in the bewilderment that anyone could regard such entertainment seriously. Chinese monarchs were said to 'swagger about in dresses which would look like bed curtains if they did not still more resemble ornamental shower baths,' comic men to 'jest in a manner which painfully reminds one of a man who is attempting to dance the "Tarantella" without music or knowing anything about the steps,' and soldiers to 'want nothing but crinolines to make them look like women.' Even the delight shown by Chinese audiences became a matter for ridicule: 'Their high cheekbones almost touched their chins as they chuckled when, for our part, we thought the principal performer was becoming an amateur Banshee.'<sup>32</sup>

The acrobatic feats in Chinese theatrical performances were said to be amazing. 'Horrible noises, startling costumes, not unskilful acting, clever acrobatism,' commented the *Star* after a large number of Chinese and non-Chinese spectators had witnessed a performance of Cantonese opera in 1858.<sup>33</sup> Later in the year it was reported that the vaulting and tumbling in a theatrical performance was 'of the most extraordinary kind.' The music, however, was clearly not appreciated. The singers, wrote the *Star* reporter,

shriek Chinese by the hour, in any tone but their natural one. As an accompaniment to all this, a band of musicians ceaselessly ply their trade. One draws something like a bow across something that is not like a violin; another beats a bell that has no clapper, and it is a point of honor between him and a man with an enormous gong, that the latter shall sound at every second stroke of the former. Luckily, all this confusion, this Babel of sounds, this complete collection of what a European does not like, pleased somebody. The Celestial enjoy it hugely.<sup>34</sup>

Costumes used in theatrical entertainment were also noteworthy:

The get-up of the characters generally really was in truth astonishing. One of the serenest of the Celestials was resplendently attired in garments of many colors, and had a forehead of azure. Another with robes as beautiful, seemed to be a sort of arch-Druid, with an extremely florid complexion and magnificent beard, his cheeks vermillion, and his forehead purple. Another wore a black beard, grand and glowing, and surmounted by a face brilliant in many 'loud' hues. Others were painted in comic masks, while

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<sup>31</sup> Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia* 21, 24, 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Star* 18 Dec. 1858: 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Star* 16 Aug. 1858: 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Star* 18 Dec. 1858: 3.

all the leading characters had beautiful dresses, and were glorious with crowns, and feathers, and dragons' heads, and flags, and fans, and spears and swords, and one lady had a chignon so splendid, big, and glossy, that many a fashionable European would have been desolée at the ravishing vision.<sup>35</sup>

Comments about the costumes and action, even when patronising, never became as disparaging as did those about the music, and neither did they mask the fascination of these exotic aspects of the theatrical performances. Indeed, many such reports were highly commendatory. But apart from its novelty value, there was never any suggestion that the music had anything to recommend it, nor that it might have any form of appeal to non-Chinese listeners. A typical report after a performance in 1861 announced that the acrobatic feats were very good and the agility extraordinary. The costumes were gorgeous, though uncouth, but the music was 'not the sweetest in the world, and an instrument that seems to be a sort of a cross between a fiddle and the bagpipes, is almost unbearable.'<sup>36</sup>

### Celebrations

Music was very prominent during Chinese festivals and religious ceremonies. On festive occasions people would hear the sound of percussion instruments in the Chinese camps, and see Chinese people processing through the streets accompanied by bands of instrumentalists.<sup>37</sup> The Chinese New Year and the Feast of Lanterns were regularly reported in the press, together with comments about the noisy and unusual music. Ceremonial music accompanied the opening of new joss houses, having quite an impact on people living in the vicinity.<sup>38</sup>

An awareness that music was an important part of Chinese entertainment and ceremony led influential citizens to seize upon the idea of utilising their music practices to involve Chinese people in aspects of general community life. The exotic and colourful costumes no doubt offered an attraction to organisers of public events.<sup>39</sup> In 1858 James Oddie arranged for a large body of Chinese to participate in Ballarat's welcome to the governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly. An 'almost interminable band of Celestials, numbering nearly three thousand' took part in the procession. Several years later the Chinese community helped to farewell Sir Henry, the newspaper reports on both occasions making disparaging remarks about the Chinese musical contributions.<sup>40</sup>

Sir Charles Darling, the new governor, visited Ballarat in December 1863. There was a large Chinese contingent in the welcoming party. 'The Celestial turn-out was most respectable,' announced the *Star*. 'First came a coach and four horses with a band of instrumentalists, making all sorts of horrible noises. The musicians were followed by eight two-horse vehicles, each of which was laden with well-dressed Chinese, while Mr Ah Coon, the Government interpreter, and others sported their Celestial figures on horseback.'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Star* 16 May 1868: 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Star* 11 Nov. 1861: 5.

<sup>37</sup> For example, *Star* 2 Mar. 1857: 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Star* 24 Jan. 1860: 2; 4 Feb. 1860: 3; 6 Feb. 1869: 2.

<sup>39</sup> Bate, *Lucky City* 155.

<sup>40</sup> *Star* 20 Jan. 1858: 2-3; 24 Sep. 1863: 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Star* 10 Dec. 1863: 2.

Chinese performers also participated in the 1864 Caledonian games. They presented a show that was described as 'stage fighting with swords, long poles, and a Chinese trident, the fighting being oddly mixed up with acrobatic feats of no little merit.' The somersaulting and leaping were impressive, but not the music, which was described as a 'hideous noise on gongs and some pipes about as musical as bagpipes badly handled.' The Chinese performance, however, was 'one of the most applauded portions of the programme.'<sup>42</sup>

In December 1864 a group of Chinese musicians took part in the annual Boxing Day fete. They 'made the welkin hideous with their horrible "music", [but] made the full theatre delighted with a series of extremely clever acrobatic feats.'<sup>43</sup> The popularity of the act led the organisers to invite the Chinese to perform again in the following year, but they changed their minds when the performers demanded too high a fee.<sup>44</sup>

The arrival of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, in December 1867 was the occasion for extensive festivities and celebrations by the whole of the Ballarat community. While the *Star* noted the 'novelty and remarkable excellence' of the Chinese demonstration, and the large amount of money the Chinese had spent on their preparations, it had nothing good to say about the music:

The Chinese, a numerous group, struck up a Celestial concert of whistle-pipes, tomtoms, and other excruciating instruments. The grandees of the group were fearfully and wonderfully attired. Long blue gowns were worn by some, who also carried long javelin like weapons. Others more superb, sub mandarins perchance, were clothed in gorgeous garments, brilliant with barbaric ornaments, and they shouted, and waved fans, and opened wide their almond eyes, as if the son of the moon himself was making imperial progress through the flowery land.<sup>45</sup>

A Chinese arch was erected at Red Hill, with low side arches on which the musicians performed, and the trees in Sturt Street were festooned with many coloured Chinese lanterns.<sup>46</sup>

### Contributions to Charity

Chinese contributions to the wider community often involved some form of musical activity. The Chinese helped to support Ballarat's charitable and civic institutions, and raised money for several other worthy causes. Even while complimenting the Chinese on their generosity, however, the press made no attempts to promote any form of tolerance for their musical endeavours. Among the many references to these monetary, musical and otherwise supportive gestures was a report of a promenade concert held in October 1863 in conjunction with a Grand Auction Bazaar in aid of the Mechanics' Institute. The Chinese vocalists and instrumentalists, observed the *Star*, 'made the night hideous with their well-intentioned efforts to charm the barbarian ear':

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<sup>42</sup> *Star* 2 Jan. 1864: 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Star* 28 Dec. 1864: 2. 'Welkin' is an Old English word for firmament or sky, but this is no doubt a seasonal reference to the Christmas carol, 'Hark, how all the Welkin Rings,' now better known as 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing.'

<sup>44</sup> *Star* 28 Dec. 1865: 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Star* 11 Dec. 1867: 3; 10 Dec. 1867: 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Star* 10 Dec. 1867: 3; 24 Dec. 1867: 5-6.

With Chinese music and musical instruments our readers are somewhat familiar, but we dare say they will not be sorry to have the contents of an explanatory paper handed to us on Saturday evening by the President. From this we learn that Ge Sin played on the *Kong-wai*. The drums covered with buffalo skins were played by Ah Kow, and the gong by Lee Tak. The Chinese guitar or *moot-kem*, a flat circular instrument with four strings played on by means of a small piece of bone, was manipulated by Lee Sem. Wee Pin played with bone the *Sam-yen*, a guitar-like instrument of three strings—the sounding board being covered with snake-skin. The *pan-ewoo*, a flat disc of wood for the purpose of keeping time, was beaten by sticks. The *shap-ar*, a small oblong piece of hardwood six inches by three, was also used for marking time. Wee Pin played the cymbals or *cha*, well known to dwellers in Ballarat East. Lee Tak also played the gong, or *laur*, ‘very effective,’ as Mr Lang says, ‘in producing loud music.’ Lee Yeng and Lee Chok played the *tee-uh* or *tuk-tie*, ‘which produced sounds similar to the Scotch bagpipes or Scotch organ, as Ah Coon calls the instrument.’ As we have before stated, Mr Ah Coon did not sing, but Lee Tak and Kong Wai did. The first sang in his natural voice and the second in falsetto, but owing to the ponderousness of the accompaniments, neither could be heard. At the conclusion of the songs the party returned amidst the applause which courtesy if not appreciation demanded.<sup>47</sup>

In July 1866 three Chinese theatrical performances were organised in aid of the Ballarat District Hospital. The dramatic troupe was said to be ‘just arrived from Hong Kong,’ and the performers were numerous. The piece chosen was entitled *The Invasion of the Tartars*. A large audience watched the performances, unable to understand the language, but impressed by the splendid dresses, several of which were ‘really exquisite pieces of art and were beautifully worked and richly ornamented, and were, as already remarked, fit objects of study in themselves.’<sup>48</sup>

On other occasions Chinese musicians took part in concerts together with other members of the community. When in February 1868 many people lost uninsured property in a fire, some of Ballarat’s most respected musicians organised a concert of vocal and instrumental music in the Alfred Hall. One of the items was a performance given by a band of Chinese instrumentalists playing on ‘cymbals, drums, horns, and fiddles.’ A Chinese vocalist sang in a ‘piping falsetto.’ The music was said to resemble ‘a lovely congregation of bagpipes playing at discords.’ The conclusion, as also many of its preceding passages, was greeted with loud applause, amidst which, it was reported, the performers retired saying ‘welly good.’<sup>49</sup>

In the same year Yet Sing’s ‘Grand New Chinese Theatrical Company’ gave a performance in the Chinese Theatre, Golden Point, in aid of the Benevolent Asylum. ‘The presence of European Ladies and Gentlemen is respectfully solicited,’ read the advance notices in the press. The show, advertised as ‘tragedy, farce, opera, conjuring and tumbling,’ represented historical events said to have occurred twelve hundred years earlier.<sup>50</sup> The funds raised for charity through this performance were much appreciated. ‘For the good spirits of the Chinese,

<sup>47</sup> *Star* 5 Oct. 1863: 2. The names of the Chinese musical instruments are not those in general use, and although several Cantonese speakers were consulted they did not recognise the terminology. It is possible that the names of the instruments were given to the reporter in a local dialect.

<sup>48</sup> *Star* 10 July 1866: 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Star* 3 Feb. 1868: 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Star* 14 May 1868: 2; 15 May 1868: 3.

who have given this substantial benefit to one of our most useful charities, we have only commendation,' commented the *Star*.<sup>51</sup> Parts of the performance were of real interest. The semblance of women by the two female impersonators was very creditable, and the costumes astonishing. The music, however, was said to be 'excruciating':

There was hardly a moment's respite from the infernal din of the orchestra. One jolly old buff at one end of the stage would now and then blow a tremendous blast with a trumpet, and once another mounted a stool at the opposite end, and blew a vigorous salute from a bullock's horn, while in the centre, near the orchestra proper, kept up a concert [sic] that sounded like chaotic mingling of bagpipes and fiddles out of tune, with two or three lunatics for ever beating upon gongs and cymbals in a hopeless endeavor to drown the wind and string music.<sup>52</sup>

In the following month it was announced that the Chinese had donated the proceeds of a week's dramatic performances to the Ballarat Hospital, amounting to nearly £100.<sup>53</sup> A few days later the Chinese gave three performances in the Alfred Hall in aid of the Benevolent Asylum. The performances were well attended, despite the wet weather, with three hundred people in the audience on the first night. They watched a play entitled *The Good Prince, the Bad Prince, the Emperor, and the Murdered Princess* given on a decorated stage in front of the dais. The effect was said to be very pretty, and the costumes picturesque. Some were rich in embroidery and colour. The performances involved a great deal of Chinese music, dialogue, acrobatic feats and fighting. 'The eye is of course vastly more pleased than the ear in such an entertainment,' commented the *Star*, in an attempt to explain the diverse reactions to the different features of the Chinese spectacular.<sup>54</sup>

There are many missing voices in the sources related to this early period of Chinese musical life in Ballarat. No letters or diaries offering insights into Chinese musical activity have been found, and it is largely from the dominant English-language press that we must draw our picture of the way Chinese music was received. The most favourable receptions reported were those in which audiences applauded the performances and reacted with courtesy, in spite of their dislike of the actual music. Racism alone could not explain the severity of the criticisms, when acrobatic performances regularly elicited admiring comments and costumes appealed because of their exotic and colourful designs. A reporter was very impressed by the 'Magnificent Chinese Table Cover' displayed at the annual Easter Fair in 1866. The cover was 'exquisitely embroidered.' The cloth was 'scarlet, the prevailing colors of the ornaments blue and green, with rich interlacings of gold thread.'<sup>55</sup> At no stage did any such comment suggest that Chinese music could be anything but discordant and unpleasant. Percussion dominated much of the Chinese ceremonial and theatrical music, and the loud noises were a constant irritation. Strings and wind instruments were felt to be discordant, strident and out of tune. It seems that, in the case of music, strong personal reactions carried such an impact that any form of unbiased judgement was placed in total suspension.

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<sup>51</sup> *Star* 16 May 1868: 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Star* 16 May 1868: 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Star* 6 June 1868: 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Star* 12 June 1868: 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Star* 29 Mar. 1866: 3; 3 Apr. 1866: 3.

### Experiencing Chinese Music

Published evidence from newspapers in Ballarat accords with observations from other Victorian locations during the same period, and thus raises the question of why, when other Chinese cultural pursuits were perceived by outsiders as interesting, or even beautiful, Chinese music became an object of ridicule, even among those who were promoting tolerance among the wider community.<sup>56</sup> Merely stating that the music was unfamiliar or different does not begin to explain the harshness of the reactions and judgements, particularly when one considers the great fascination with difference displayed by people living in the nineteenth century, their general interest in the remote and the exotic, and the way they were intrigued by the 'oddities' that were regularly displayed for people's entertainment, in Ballarat as well as in other Australian cities.<sup>57</sup>

It was not simply because it was different that this music was rejected. Further insights into that rejection must come from an understanding of the nature of the musical experience itself, rather than merely claiming racism, or unfamiliarity. To look more closely into *why* the strangeness of the music resulted in such intense reactions, it is important to begin by recognising the human body as the site of musical response.<sup>58</sup> Musicologist Sally Macarthur advocates the affirmation of music as a 'body' experience, stating that 'music and the body are intrinsically linked, for the human body—moving, vibrating, breathing, talking, shouting, whispering, clapping, singing, dancing—is always in a state of music.'<sup>59</sup>

Many of our vital bodily processes and activities resonate directly with the elements of music sound. As well as the involuntary rhythm inherent in our heartbeat, we display a naturally regular rhythm as we walk, run, swim or carry out other activities. We, together with people in all other human societies, use vocal pitch as part of the process of communication. The variations in tone, and the dynamic changes, that we produce vocally may reflect our emotional or our physical state.

As the human body resonates with the vibrations of music, we engage directly with the rhythm, pitch, timbre, and dynamics of music through our own embodied processes and activities. This is commonly observed when people absent-mindedly tap their feet, click their fingers, hum or whistle, demonstrating an almost unconscious tendency to engage physically with the rhythm and pitch of the music.

The embodied response readily leads to changes in the emotional state of the listener. Abandoning oneself physically or emotionally to music with strong rhythmic, tonal and dynamic intensity may result in a heightened sense of excitement, whereas music with more moderate levels of pitch variation, dynamic change, and rhythmic activity tends to inspire calm. A conscious or unconscious desire to engage physically with heavily accented or syncopated music may lead to a sense of restlessness and tension for someone who, for any reason, remains immobile.

<sup>56</sup> Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia* 32; Wang, 'Chinese Music in Victoria' 29, 34, 35.

<sup>57</sup> For example, *Star* 8 Jan. 1859: 3; 18 May 1863: 3; 22 June 1863: 2.

<sup>58</sup> Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* 111; Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) 161.

<sup>59</sup> Sally Macarthur, 'Keys to the Musical Body,' *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*, ed. Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1995) 121.

A physical embodied engagement is most readily achieved in familiar listening situations. It is difficult to move with the rhythm, or articulate the pitch, if the music carries completely unexpected and unfamiliar sounds. For the non-Chinese people of early Ballarat, their inability to predict any of the musical elements such as pitch, rhythm, tonal nuance, or dynamic change, meant that Chinese sounds they heard were not those with which they could readily relate.

Chinese music was based on an unfamiliar tonal framework. It did not correspond to any of the familiar Western scales, and incorporated notes that sounded unusual and out of tune. A wide variety of tonalities was used, including pentatonic scales and a heptatonic scale with some notes tuned a quarter of a tone lower or higher than in Western music.<sup>60</sup> Rhythms in Chinese music were sometimes regular, and sometimes free, their unfamiliarity making it harder to feel the rhythm physically as people could customarily do in their own music.<sup>61</sup> Unfamiliar timbres were described in the English-language press only in derogatory terms, suggesting that there was little enticement to feel any sort of empathetic engagement with this music. Because people were accustomed to responding physically to their own music, music that did not offer the same opportunities carried messages of exclusion and alienation.

It was not easy to 'feel oneself into' this music, so it was looked upon from an outsider's perspective, and experienced as a curiosity, offering little prospect of personal involvement. Yet the very nature of music detracted heavily from even this form of experience. When observing visual art we can choose to look away from an unpleasant sight, or move our attention at will from one image to another. Music offers no such opportunity. It travels through walls, around corners, and surrounds us with its intensity. As well as the discomfort of finding themselves unable to engage with Chinese music, the only way people could avoid it was by removing themselves from the location. It became an imposition rather than a choice.

It would be flying in the face of experience to suggest that no-one can relate positively to music that is very different from their own, or that they cannot like music unless they engage with it in a physical way. Physical response is just one, although a prominent, factor in the relationships that give meaning to music.

Without denying the immanence of musical features that relate directly to human physicality and emotion, it is also clear that the same body of music sound can bring very different messages to people of different cultural backgrounds. It was claimed earlier that the meaning of music is found in relationships, and that those relationships depend on music sound, the person who hears it, and the social and cultural features that impact upon the musical experience. People make complex connections to their world through music, and in any person's background lie a multiplicity of culturally and personally established associations constituting certain sights and sounds as representative of particular emotions and concepts. Using music to achieve any form of cross-cultural understanding is thus fraught with problems. Even those from similar backgrounds will not understand the same things in a musical performance, for not everyone establishes similar relationships. Most people know that they respond very differently to a particular musical work when the conditions under which it is heard vary. Cultural background, current emotional and physical state, and the total environment in which the music is heard,

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<sup>60</sup> Zheng-Ting Wang, personal communication, 15 April 2002; Bell Yung, *Cantonese Opera* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989) 15.

<sup>61</sup> Wang, *Chinese Music in Australia* 26–7; Yung, *Cantonese Opera* 26.

all have a bearing on the meaning of any particular musical event. When cultural backgrounds are similar, however, there is more likelihood that musical responses will share some form of commonality. As Christopher Small observes, ideas held about relationships by members of the same social group whose experiences are broadly similar will themselves tend to be broadly similar, and thus tend to reinforce each other.<sup>62</sup>

The enormous amount of music that permeated Britain in the nineteenth century was a prominent aspect of the past lives of the majority of Ballarat citizens, who, through their experiences of music as an integral part of their entertainment, worship, family and ceremonial lives, would have already formed many well-established relationships with their world. Certain types of music were related to their own particular concepts of beauty, while other types represented the spiritual, or brought sad or comic associations. The relationships and associations these people had already established through their own music practices were not discarded when listening to a new type of music. Surviving comments about Chinese vocal and instrumental sounds suggest that people associated those sounds with unpleasant non-musical phenomena, or what were defined in their own culture as extreme instances of sub-standard musical efforts. Typical words selected from a few contemporary accounts include 'shriek,' 'infernal din,' 'out of tune,' 'chaotic,' 'discordant,' 'almost unbearable.'<sup>63</sup>

Other aspects of the performances were simply read as comical to non-Chinese observers. In a culture in which all music was performed live, watching the actual sound production was nearly always part of a musical event, and many of the unusual sights evoked humour rather than any form of sympathetic resonance. To those from European backgrounds, the embodied performances of the Chinese musicians were closer to scenes from comedy than to the concerts or other musical events of their own culture. One can imagine the typical European response when 'the individual with the "sticks" struck right and left, beat time, and motioned most malignantly with his head, as if in ecstasies with the melody which he sent forth.'<sup>64</sup> On another occasion, observed the *Star*, 'there was grotesque comicality in the surroundings. The members of the orchestra, for instance, smoked serenely while they played their music, sometimes the leading performers took a "nip" to keep themselves in trim.'<sup>65</sup>

The absence of pleasurable features people enjoyed in their own music must have heightened the sense of dissatisfaction they already felt in the presence of the unfamiliar Chinese sounds to which they did not relate physically or emotionally. European audiences were accustomed, for example, to a certain sense of expectation when entering a familiar venue for a musical performance. They would enjoy the anticipation of seeing the musicians preparing their music and tuning their instruments, of watching a choir process into the church, or of experiencing the pregnant hush that preceded a great choral masterpiece. They were indulged with none of that expectancy in Chinese performances. Neither was there any chance to make the connections that they usually made through music. Ballarat, in the mid-nineteenth century, was a place in which nearly everyone's past had been formed elsewhere, and much of their own music offered something from that past, whether this related to genre,

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<sup>62</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998) 131.

<sup>63</sup> For example *Star* 18 Dec. 1858: 3; 5 Sep. 1861: 2; 11 Nov. 1861: 5; 16 May 1868: 2.

<sup>64</sup> *Star* 30 Dec. 1859: 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Star* 16 May 1868: 2.

content, or practice. In contrast with the musical sounds that dominated public and private life, European listeners found no memories embedded in Chinese music. Neither did they find any beauty. A cultural expectation that music should be beautiful, when they actually found it just the opposite, would bring to non-Chinese listeners a sense of disorientation and inappropriateness.

Because of the intimate relationship between music and people's physical and emotional makeup, reactions to music were likely to be more intense than those established through other cultural creations, such as visual art works or physical spectacle. Many of our sources come from local newspapers, but other contemporary observers have also noted this intensity. In a similar, though unrelated incident, French writer Antoine Fauchery reported that in the 1850s, when a tribe of Aborigines near Ballarat first heard the music of a European band, they were seen 'laughing, foaming, twisting in a general fit of epilepsy.'<sup>66</sup>

Although the Chinese people of Ballarat appear to have co-operated willingly in sharing their music with the rest of the population, we cannot know how they reacted to the music of the general community. There were some Chinese-language papers in Ballarat, and it is unfortunate that they have not revealed anything that would throw light on this aspect of Ballarat's musical life.

The non-Chinese citizens of Ballarat seem to have recognised the importance of Chinese musical culture. However, the relationships that people had already established through their own music practices, as well as the nature of the human response to music, meant that European reactions to Chinese music were unlikely to foster any form of empathy. As seen above, Chinese acrobatics, acting, embroidery and costumes were often greatly admired, but their music brought only scorn and sarcasm, and served to distance, rather than to encourage any feelings of tolerance towards, the Chinese people.

In May 1868 a concert was held in the Alfred Hall to raise money for a peal of bells. Between 500 and 600 people attended a performance given by some of Ballarat's leading amateur musicians. Among the items was a satirical number entitled 'Strains from Flowery Land,' described as 'a Celestial solo and response.' The 'Chinese' performers included 'Sing Em Song,' 'Ta Y La,' 'War Ging,' 'Ah Pli Ding Dong,' and 'Kee No Pull.'<sup>67</sup> Popular entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century frequently included musical parodies, and audiences were accustomed to laughing at exaggerated representations of respected works from their own musical traditions. Extending the practice to Chinese music, however, added one more layer to the negativity that already confronted the Chinese people. Despite efforts made by Ballarat authorities to encourage acceptance of the Chinese, there was no intention here to foster any form of empathy, nor to encourage a sympathetic engagement with Chinese culture. In addition to any unintentional alienation effected by the use of Chinese music in the wider Ballarat community, it seems that prominent citizens saw no reason to refrain from further belittling the Chinese people by deliberately parodying their music and encouraging people to look upon them as objects of fun. That they chose to do so through music suggests a conscious or unconscious awareness of the close link between music and the strong human reactions they were setting out to achieve.

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<sup>66</sup> **Antoine Fauchery**, *Letters from a Miner in Australia* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1965) 98.

<sup>67</sup> *Star* 26 May 1868: 2.