

BOOK REVIEW

John Whiteoak. *'Take me to Spain': Australian Imaginings of Spain through Music and Dance*

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Kertesz

Writing in the late 1920s, J.B. Trend proclaimed that 'Spain, as we know it today, seems to be pre-eminently a country of the dance, and no interpreter of Spanish music can make us feel its full beauty or vitality unless he feel those vital dance-rhythms within himself.'¹ This connection between Spain, dance, and the rhythms of its music has long characterised perceptions of Spanish culture, fostering the enduring popularity of Spanish-styled entertainments. In *'Take me to Spain': Australian Imaginings of Spain through Music and Dance*, John Whiteoak traces this phenomenon through Australian history, from the early colonial era of the 1820s to the 1970s. His narrative concludes before the major changes caused in local Hispanic culture by mass migration from Latin America, the new policy of multiculturalism, and the emergence of world music.

Whiteoak describes himself as a 'scholar of early popular music in Australia and ... an historical musicologist with an equal interest in Australian social and stage dance history' (p. 10), and is a respected figure in the discipline. He is also a noted collector and archivist of historic sheet music, recordings, periodicals, and other ephemera relating to the Australian music scene, such as concert programs. In constructing his narrative, he has made full use

¹ J.B. Trend, *Manuel de Falla and Spanish Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), xv.

of the rich digital resources of the National Library of Australia's *Trove* database (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>), which brings together full-text online copies of a huge array of Australian newspapers and magazines (and much else besides), but his documentary research also draws on his unique collection, as well as some oral history.

Whiteoak's deep dive into the Australian press revealed 'a surprisingly diverse and richly complex Australian history of Spain-themed inflections in music and dance' (p. 1). The book's title '*Take Me to Spain*' suggests the thread of fancy that weaves its way throughout the narrative: the idea that the music, dance, and entertainments Whiteoak documents were able to transport their Australian audiences to an 'exoticised Spain' of the imagination, and that this was the essence of their appeal. Beyond his evocation of the effect of such performances on local audiences, the question of *who* was doing the entertaining and what style of 'Spanishness' they were performing remains elusive and complex. The nineteenth century saw several waves of fashion for Spanish-styled entertainment, each of which resulted in international success for a few Spanish artists, and the emergence of many 'fake' Spaniards, impersonating and imitating their stylings on the touring circuits. Similar parallels emerge where music written by Spaniards is sometimes eclipsed by *españolades* (Spanish-styled works by non-Spanish composers). Whiteoak also gives voice to Australian performers who became practitioners of Spanish music and dance, having sketched the context of the touring productions that inspired them.

In the introduction, Whiteoak outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the project. He raises thorny issues like the problematic concept of ethnicity, for which he delineates five categories, and the 'cultural decontextualization' specific to Australia that results in localised or mediated forms of Spanish culture. He problematises the silent nature of historic source material, especially the tendency of reviewers to skate over the aural element, and their frequent failure to pinpoint the precise characteristics of 'Spanishness' in any given performance. Whiteoak has my full sympathy in this shared frustration, as he attempts to reconstruct exotic entertainments from brief and often vague written descriptions, and occasional visual evidence. He does not skirt the question of where the elusive 'Spanishness' resides, nor the conclusion that it may not have been in the music at all, the frequent presence of castanets excepted. Notwithstanding his introductory discussion of theories of exoticism, which includes reference to the Spain-related work of scholars like Ralph Locke and James Parakilas, Whiteoak describes his work as 'densely descriptive, not densely theoretical' (p. 10). He declares his intention as having been 'to excavate and discover, document and describe the pre-multiculturalism-era Australian experience of Spain-themed influence in entertainment' (p. 10).

The book is divided into three parts, entitled 'Dance', 'Music', and 'Dance and Music', respectively. The wide scope of material results in both chronological and geographical leaps, as excursions into the background of Spanish genres are interpolated into the narratives of entertainment in Australia, and this disjunct structure is at times disorienting for the reader. The author's occasional reflections on his own experiences of Spanish music add rich colour to the narrative, especially the compelling anecdote of his first encounter with Spanish flamenco performed in a Sacromonte cave-dwelling in the hills above Granada.

Chapter 1 deals with Spanish dance traditions that predate flamenco, and introduces the important subject of the *escuela bolera* (or bolero school) styles of the first half of the nineteenth century. This sets the scene for an extended and contextualised case study of Lola Montez's celebrated Australian performances in the 1850s. The arrival of the *pasodoble* as a social dance

takes us to the 1920s in Chapter 2, which also introduces the varied influence of touring artists and companies, from the Cansinos (Rita Hayworth's parents) on 1920s vaudeville circuits, to the successor companies to the Ballets Russes—which played a significant role in seeding ballet in Australia during the 1930s, and featured Spanish dance and music in their programs—before the post-war appearance of flamenco dance recitals.

Having dealt with dance in Part I, the four chapters of Part II constitute the main body of the book, addressing Spanish music in theatrical entertainment, in concert, as part of popular song culture, and in the sound of the guitar. Chapter 3 delves back into the colonial era with intriguing passing references to Spanish fashion at fancy-dress balls and drunken fandangos in the 1830s. The ensuing narrative adduces fascinating evidence of a wide variety of Spanish-themed works on Australia's nineteenth-century stages, from long-forgotten works to more substantial case studies of much-performed shows such as William Wallace's *Maritana* and Bizet's *Carmen*.

Whiteoak enters confusing territory here, as many writers have conflated flamenco with one of its precursors, the Andalusian genre (or *género andaluz*), especially in relation to *Carmen*, an opera that predated the emergence of flamenco onto the international scene. Likewise the habanera is often uncoupled from its identification as a clear marker of Spanishness in the nineteenth century (until 1898 Cuba was seen as part of greater Spain).² Susan McClary is responsible for perpetuating some of these misconceptions in her influential book on *Carmen*.³ Ralph Locke has explored the likely sources for Bizet's Spanish style in detail, and his study confirms that the habanera was more a salon genre than a risqué item connected with the cabarets, as claimed by McClary.⁴ He explains that Sebastian Iradier's popular habaneras were accessible to Bizet in 'sheet music of 1863 that graced the piano racks of many middle- and upper-class music lovers.'⁵ But Whiteoak's detailed account of Australian responses to *Carmen* offers rich commentary on perceptions of Spanish colour and makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the international reception of this key espagnolade.⁶ It effectively draws out the relationship of early productions to arrangements and band excerpts, and leads in to the nuanced discussion of Spanish topics in silent film accompaniment that closes Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 considers Spanish and 'Spain-themed' songs and instrumental works performed in concert up to the 1920s, repertoires greatly popularised by the advent of recording and broadcast technologies. The evergreen popularity of Spanish marches is dissected to reveal the elements of 'Spanish theatricality' in an analysis of the 1920s *pasodoble* hit 'España cañí'

² For information on the *género andaluz* and the broader genre of Romantic Spanish song, see Celsa Alonso, *La canción lírica española en el siglo XIX* (Madrid: ICCMU, 1998). The complex cultural relationship between Cuba and Spain is explored in Maria Teresa Linares and Faustino Nuñez, *La música entre Cuba y España* (Madrid: Fundación Autor, 1998).

³ Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).

⁴ Ralph P. Locke, 'Spanish Local Colour in Bizet's *Carmen*: Unexplored Borrowings and Transformations,' in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830–1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 316–60.

⁵ Locke, 'Spanish Local Colour,' 359.

⁶ This discussion of Australian *Carmen* reception could profitably be read in conjunction with Kerry Murphy's 2020 essay 'Carmen in the Antipodes,' released the year after this book. Kerry Murphy, 'Carmen in the Antipodes,' in *Carmen Abroad: Bizet's Opera on the Global Stage*, ed. Richard Langham Smith and Clair Rowden (Cambridge: CUP, 2020), 171–85. For further reading on international responses to *Carmen*, see also Michael Christoforidis and Elizabeth Kertesz, *Carmen and the Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Époque* (New York: OUP, 2019).

by Pascual Marquina Narro. Turning to more elite settings, Whiteoak reveals the piano's significance in disseminating the music of the modern Spanish school in Australia (particularly Isaac Albéniz, Enric Granados and Manuel de Falla). After a century of being considered more entertaining than serious, this music is identified by Whiteoak as beginning to consolidate 'a perception of "Spanish music" as "art music" or, at the very least, as high-class "light music"' (p. 124), and he notes Percy Grainger's championing of such repertoire.

Whiteoak's profound knowledge of popular song styles of the early twentieth century underpins Chapter 5's extensive—and generously illustrated—examination of sheet music for 'Tin Pan Alley-style Spanish music' during its heyday in the 1920s. A nice distinction is drawn between the 'trashy' syncopated dance styles of the new 'jazz' music and the 'relief' offered by *pasodobles*, Spanish waltzes, and that old favourite, the habanera. Whiteoak's monumental project, *The Tango Touch*,⁷ adds depth to his interpretation of this material, as changes wrought by the Great Depression and the inauguration of the sound era in the cinema are inflected by an increased interest in European musics, the beginning of the 'Latin' craze and the importance of Italian performers in creating the 'continental' café music of which the Hispanic element was an important component. From the early 1930s, these bands projected a homogenised ethnic or exotic image that enabled them to perform a blend of Spanish and Latin dance and song styles, including Argentine tango and the newly popular rumba alongside older genres like the *pasodoble*.

The final, and most substantial, chapter in Part II is devoted to that 'instrument of romance', the 'Spanish guitar'. Up to the 1920s this term was widely used to indicate finger-style playing associated with repertoire and styles later denoted by the term 'classical guitar'.⁸ As Ken Murray explains, 'during the nineteenth century the Spanish guitar became the most prominent version of the instrument in London and throughout Europe',⁹ and in 1921 J.B. Trend noted the instrument's intimate connection with Spain: 'One is inclined to look upon the guitar as a piece of romantic stage furniture, or as the instrument for expressing or accompanying a way of life which is essentially "Spanish".'¹⁰ This chapter explores several fascinating strands of the instrument's history in Australia, from its status as a 'ladies' instrument' in early colonial times, to the explosion in plucked string ensembles seeded by the 1890s tours of the Spanish Students (*estudiantinas*) and their successors, which linked to the emerging BMG (Banjo, Mandolin, Guitar) movements. The author proceeds to differentiate this from the flamenco guitar and even flamenco-inflected classical guitar styles, tracing the growth of the Australian classical guitar scene from visiting artists to an important section on the growing number of Australian guitarists performing Spanish music from the mid-twentieth century.

Part III concludes the book by combining the threads of music and dance in a reflection on what Whiteoak dubs 'The Luisillo Era, 1958–76', after the three tours by Luis Pérez Dávila's Spanish Dance Company from the late 1950s into the 1960s. He demonstrates how this period introduced Australian audiences to various conceptions of Spanish dance in stage spectaculars

⁷ John Whiteoak, 'The Tango Touch: "Continental" and Latin Influences on Popular Music and Dance in Australia Before "Multiculturalism"', *Australasian Music and Dance Research*, 2015, <http://www.ausmdr.com>.

⁸ Whiteoak notes the term 'classical guitar' entering Australian usage in the 1940s. See p. 177.

⁹ Kenneth James Murray, 'Spanish Music and its Representations in London (1878–1930): From the Exotic to the Modern' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2013), 29–30.

¹⁰ J.B. Trend, *A Picture of Modern Spain: Men and Music* (London: Constable, 1921), 240.

that encompassed flamenco, but also embraced other styles like regional dance, *escuela bolera*, and modern choreography, to *españolades* and music by important Spanish composers like Falla. Innovations like long-playing records, television, and increased air travel, plus the growth of local Spanish communities, set these tours against a rapidly changing social context. The narrative is animated by Whiteoak's blend of stories about touring companies and artists with information about the home-grown Spanish dance and music scene, drawing on interviews and first-person accounts.

I was particularly engaged by the numerous micro-histories scattered throughout the book, particularly in these later chapters, in which Whiteoak offers brief biographical sketches of selected performers. Encompassing both visiting artists and Australian-born practitioners of Spanish styles, these narratives add colour and life to the detailed, fact-rich text. The stories from the second half of the twentieth century open up the field for future scholarship on Spanish-styled entertainment in Australia, and suggest the urgency of undertaking further oral histories or ethnographic studies.

The front cover of the book features a striking image of the great Argentine-born Spanish dancer La Argentina, dancing with castanets accompanied by two guitarists, taken from a linocut by Australian artist Dorrit Black. The brief glossary is useful, but a bibliography is sorely missed, as the notes that follow without heading after each chapter do not allow the reader to follow the breadcrumbs of the research across the whole book. The text is further enhanced by ten musical examples and a series of useful tables, but the reader is hampered by the absence of pagination in the lists of illustrations and musical examples that follow the table of contents. Thirty grey-scale illustrations provide visual content for the narrative in images from the contemporary press and sheet music covers, many of which are drawn from the author's own extraordinary collection.

This unique study maps hitherto unknown terrain in the great story of cosmopolitan Spanish-themed entertainment that stretches from the long nineteenth century well into the twentieth. Whiteoak has written Australia into this colourful tale, contributing richly to our understanding of the nation's cultural history since European colonisation, and inviting his readers to join past audiences in imagining an exotic Spain through the prism of its music and dance.

About the Author

Elizabeth Kertesz is a research fellow at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne. She has written extensively on the English composer Ethel Smyth, and in 2018 published a monograph with Michael Christoforidis entitled *Carmen and the Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Epoque* (OUP). Her current research interests focus on Spanish-themed music, entertainment and film from the Belle Epoque into the first half of the twentieth century, and the engagement of visual artists with music in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.