

The Social Agenda of Stephen Foster's Plantation Melodies

Author(s): Steven Saunders

Source: *American Music*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Fall 2012), pp. 275-289

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.30.3.0275>

Accessed: 27-02-2016 16:53 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.30.3.0275?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Music*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

STEVEN SAUNDERS

The Social Agenda of Stephen Foster's Plantation Melodies

One of Stephen Collins Foster's first published songs, "There's a Good Time Coming," offers one of the composer's clearest statements on nineteenth-century culture and politics.¹ The text—not by Foster, but by the Scottish-born poet and writer Charles Mackay—catalogues many of the chief cultural barriers of the nineteenth century, including ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and gender. Its text proclaims hopefully:

Worth, not birth shall rule mankind.
Shameful rivalries of creed shall not make the martyr bleed.
And a poor man's family shall not be his misery.
Let us aid it all we can, ev'ry woman, ev'ry man.

The song presents a progressive, utopian vision of a not-too-distant future, the "good time coming," where barriers of religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status will come crashing down and where war and child labor will vanish. In choosing to set this text, Foster seems to have taken one of his few clear public stances on social issues.² Few of Foster's published songs are so openly political, yet the idea of Stephen Foster as a composer with a progressive political agenda has become widespread, particularly among scholars of American music. This perspective is usually articulated through one of two narrative tropes about Foster and

Steven Saunders is Charles A. Dana Professor of Music at Colby College. His research centers on sacred music of the early seventeenth century and nineteenth-century popular song. His complete critical edition of the works of Stephen Foster, edited with Deane L. Root, was published by Smithsonian Institution Press, and his books on music in Vienna have been issued by Oxford University Press and A-R Editions. He is general editor of A-R's *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era* and serves on the editorial board of *The Complete Works of Alessandro Grandi*.

American Music Fall 2012
© 2013 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

his music. The first might be called "the musical melting pot," which asserts that Foster skillfully amalgamated musical styles of various ethnic groups, forging a polyglot, yet nonetheless recognizably American musical language. The ability of listeners of diverse ethnicities to identify with the various stylistic features of Foster's music not only allowed it to become one of America's first widely shared cultural experiences, but also contributed to American acculturation and assimilation.³

The second trope is one that Jennie Lightweis-Goff has dubbed "Stephen Foster's conversion narrative."⁴ According to the conversion narrative, Foster, after penning several early songs that contained deplorable racial stereotypes of blacks, sought to impart a more elevated tone to minstrelsy. Perhaps influenced by Charles Shiras, an ardent abolitionist and close friend, he penned increasingly sympathetic portrayals of African Americans living under slavery, shed the use of dialect, and had African American characters express subtle, complex emotions, using the musical gestures that typified the more genteel parlor song. In songs like "My Old Kentucky Home," "Old Black Joe," and "Old Folks at Home," Foster created a hybrid genre, sometimes called the "plantation melody," that melded elements of minstrel song and parlor ballad. Through this process, he humanized rather than caricatured blacks, thereby promoting racial tolerance and understanding.

These tropes intersect in a number of ways, but the second, dealing with the volatile issues of racism, slavery, and black subjectivity, is both the more prevalent and the more widely contested. The tenets central to this reading of Foster's music appeared as early as the antebellum era. Foster family friend Robert P. Nevin, for example, wrote that: "the art in [Foster's] hands teemed with a nobler significance. It dealt, in its simplicity, with universal sympathies, and taught us all to feel with the slaves the lowly joys and sorrows it celebrated."⁵ Even earlier, in 1855, Fredrick Douglass conceded similarly that

it would seem almost absurd to say it, considering the use that has been made of them, that we have allies in the Ethiopian songs; those songs that constitute our national music, and without which we have no national music. They are heart songs and the finest feelings of human nature are expressed in them. "Lucy Neal," "Old Kentucky Home," and "Uncle Ned" can make the heart sad as well as merry, and can call forth a tear as well as a smile. They awaken the sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root and flourish.⁶

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the theme of Foster's empathy for African Americans living under slavery was taken up and amplified by some of the major figures in the burgeoning field of American music, and Foster's intent to articulate a political program

was increasingly emphasized. Charles Hamm, for example, describes "Nelly Was a Lady" as an instrument of white "consciousness raising." Dale Cockrell calls "My Old Kentucky Home" Foster's strongest statement to that point on the issue of slavery and evidence of Foster's "commitment to radical change." Foster biographer Ken Emerson sees Foster rescuing the minstrel song from its overt racism and reconciling black and white. Deane Root describes Foster's lyrics as containing: "the kernel of social philosophy that . . . gave popular voice to a growing segment of northerners uncomfortable with slavery." And lest I seem to be casting stones, I too have told a version of this tale, writing that in some of Foster's later songs "African Americans tell their stories eloquently, investing southern black culture with a dignity that was new to minstrelsy. In these songs, it is African Americans living under slavery who give voice to the most elevated and widely shared human sentiments." The Public Broadcasting System website associated with the *American Experience* television biography *Stephen Foster* neatly encapsulates this view, labeling the songwriter "a man with a mission to reform black-face minstrelsy."⁷

This scholarly emphasis on the ideas that Foster sought to carry out racial "consciousness raising," to articulate a progressive social philosophy that expressed discomfort with slavery, and to do the cultural work of "reconciling" and "rescuing . . . from overt racism" in order to effect "radical change" is both striking and understandable. It is idealistic, positive, and meshes with the aspirations of many of the pioneers in the field of American music who were reconsidering Foster's biography, casting him as an American icon and the nation's first great songwriter, a necessary corrective to prevailing hazy notions of Foster as a tipsy, tragic apologist for the Old South.

Needless to say, this picture of Foster as a progressive social reformer has not met with universal acceptance; the lyrics of several of the songs that are sometimes presented as paradigmatic examples of Foster's positive portrayals of African Americans have at times been targets of heated public criticism. In 1996, for example, the Yale Glee Club withdrew three Foster songs, including "My Old Kentucky Home," from their program at Lincoln Center because of objections to the songs' perceived historical inaccuracies, derogatory language, and glorification of slavery.⁸ More recently, there were efforts in Florida to replace "Old Folks at Home" as the state song. That debate again placed two of the most controversial aspects of Foster's output squarely in the crosshairs; those who urged the state to jettison "Old Folks at Home" argued that it was unsuitable because of racially offensive language and because its text can be read as valorizing plantation life under slavery.⁹

Among scholars skeptical of Foster's progressive ideological program, objections have been more nuanced, but hardly less vigorous. Tellingly,