

Predicting the Future of Foster Songs

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I thank Prof. Howe for her careful documentation of American and western music's earliest introduction to Japan, and particularly the musical performances by the sailors on Commodore Perry's ships. She notes that "American music was brought to Japan when the 'black ships' came with military bands in 1853 and 1854," and that the sailors performed "minstrel shows" in the style of the most famous minstrel theater group of those years, Christy's Minstrels. Christy's minstrels included musicians who had traveled through Pittsburgh in 1847 and 1848, where they first learned Foster's songs before some of them were published. Christy was among the first groups to perform his songs in public and they popularized his songs in New York and on their tours to England. His shows included Foster's songs more often than any other composer's music.

In neither his American nor Japanese publications did Luther Whiting Mason use Foster's songs, but he did use Scottish folksong melodies with new words designed to teach students proper moral lessons. Some of Foster's song tunes were very similar in structure and harmony to Scottish folksongs, and Foster's songs were used in schools and churches in the United States in ways similar to Mason's arrangements of Scottish tunes. Foster also wrote many hymns, but these were not popular in the United States and I doubt that they were used in Japan.

I am grateful to Prof. Miyashita for documenting the first appearances of Foster songs in Shoka songs. She has told us that Foster's "Old Folks at Home" (Way down upon the Swanee River) first appeared in Shoka song with new words as "A Girl in Misery" in 1888, and it later appeared with other new sets of words by Japanese lyric poets. She has listed several Foster tunes and the Japanese titles of words written for them, both as songs and as hymns. And she reported the research of Minako Sugimoto, who found Foster songs in 30% of Japanese school textbooks from 1949 through 1986. That is amazing to me. This is, therefore, a question for further research: were they any other Foster tunes used, in addition to what she has documented? If so, when did other Foster tunes first appear in all genres of print in Japan for Japanese students, musicians, or the public? Is it possible to create a full list of Japanese publications that use his tunes? And what social or political movements, like the postwar attitude of "iki-iki to," found Foster songs to be helpful for their cause?

We know that the Osaka region was the primary industrial center for Japan, just as Pittsburgh

(Foster's hometown) was for the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. It became a crowded city, just as Pittsburgh did. And "The noisier the industrial metropolis of Osaka became, it seems, the more its residents yearned nostalgically for the serenity of Naniwa,"¹⁾ the city's ancient historical name from a quieter time. To help recapture this serenity, Foster's melodies had two major advantages over other minstrel and popular songs from the U.S. Many of their lyrics and melodies reflected pastoral scenes, the beauty of nature. Perhaps Foster's songs had an appeal to urban dwellers in Japan, just as they did for families in the 1850s in American cities, who used them within their quiet living rooms to provide a buffer, a defense against the noise and bustle of the city. And second, Foster's melodies and lyrics are so well written that they appealed not only to uneducated performers and audiences, but to highly educated people as well. The most famous opera singer during Foster's lifetime, the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, performed his songs during her vocal recitals in western Europe and the United States. Many other trained opera singers, pianists, orchestra conductors, violinists, and other concert virtuosos performed Foster's songs in the 1850s, and continue to do so to this day.

So after the Meiji Restoration, when leaders wanted "to prove that Japanese music was just as sophisticated and worthwhile as Western music,"²⁾ they favored Western classical music instead of popular music. Because Foster's songs had become part of the repertoire of classical singers, violinists, and other musicians, they remained in the repertoire for the Japanese musicians as well. We heard evidence of this in the opera-style recording by Yoshie Fujiwara that I played in my lecture, and we know of Japanese records of Foster songs at least as early as the 1930s.

After the great 1923 earthquake, Japanese began to experience music by radio, electric recordings, and sound films. Foster's songs were part of the radio programs imported from the United States. One piece of information provided by Prof. Miyashita that is very surprising to me is that Foster's tunes ranked 23rd in frequency in Japanese radio broadcasting between 1926 and 1930. Hearing this makes me wonder whether it would be possible to document when and how Japanese radio, television, film, and electronics used Foster's tunes, and by which performers. We know there was a big increase of dance bands in Japan, and some of them played arrangements of Foster tunes. American sound recordings had strong sales in Japan; it was not until 1967 that sales of Japanese artists' recordings outnumbered foreign ones for the first time.³⁾

And so, by the time modern electronics were being developed in Japan, Foster's music had already been an accepted part of Japanese elite, popular, and folk culture. It was natural to include it in television, film, and anime, because it was already familiar and it lent itself to adaptation for many new uses.

Prof. Miyashita said that Foster and American music were forbidden to be performed in public

during the Pacific War. This is true; however, some Japanese continued to sing these songs. I have talked with Japanese men who fought for Japan during that war, who told me that they were singing Foster songs for themselves and each other during the fighting.

As we study and bring better understanding to the Japanese legacy of Stephen Foster songs, we must not forget that the songs continue to change, even as the media by which we share them changes. Just as Prof. Miyashita pointed out the use of Foster tunes in songbooks, would it be possible to document his tunes being used on mobile consumer applications—ringtones and mobile downloads of music? Is Foster a part of “chaku-uta,” ringtones sampled from original recordings, or even “chaku-uta full,” downloads of full songs? ⁴⁾

Thank you again to Professor Keiko Wells for setting the framework for this symposium and bringing us together, and to Professors Howe and Miyashita who have given us much to think about, suggesting much new research that would contribute to understanding of Stephen Foster’s legacy in Japan.

Notes

- 1) Jeffrey E. Hanes, “Aural Osaka: Listening to the Modern City,” p. 47, in Hugh de Ferranti and Alison Tokita, eds., *Music, Modernity and Locality in Prewar Japan: Osaka and Beyond* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2013), pp.27-50.
- 2) Gerald Groemer, “Popular music before the Meiji period,” p. 278, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*, ed. Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), pp.261-79.
- 3) Christine Yano and Hosokawa Shuhei, “Popular music in modern Japan,” p.355, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*, ed. Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 345-62.
- 4) See Noriko Manabe, “Ring My Bell: Cell Phones and the Japanese Music Market,” pp.257-67, in E. Michael Richards and Kazuko Tanosaki, eds., *Music of Japan Today* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

