

Sound and Cross-Cultural Communication: European Explorers and the Peoples of the Pacific in the Long Eighteenth Century

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SOME FORM OF COMMUNICATION lies at the heart of encounters between people or peoples. Where communication is poor, violence is more likely to arise. Communication offers at least the possibility of a “middle ground” (to use Richard White’s phrase)¹ on which some form of *modus vivendi*—based on reciprocal advantage and a sense of common norms—can be erected. But how is it possible to effect such communication when, as is very commonly the case, there is no shared spoken language? In many contact situations, sound takes the place of language. Some sounds have a very obvious universal register: when Governor Phillip arrived at Botany Bay in 1788, both sides had no difficulty understanding each other when, as David Collins wrote, “the natives every where greeted the little fleet with shouts of defiance and prohibition.”² Yet even the use of sound is culturally inflected, as sound, like spoken language, is used by different people to make sense of the world in different ways. Sounds that are significant to one culture may be difficult for another to interpret, and what is unfamiliar is likely to be interpreted as menacing. For example, when Captain Bligh heard men making sounds like “the cackling of geese” at Cape Frederick Bay in southwestern Tasmania, he took that (along with the removal of women) as conveying hostility.³

¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales: From Its First Settlement in January 1788, to August 1801: With Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, &c. of the Native Inhabitants of That Country*, 2nd ed. (London: A. Strahan, 1804), 8.

³ William Bligh, *A Voyage to the South Sea, Undertaken by His Majesty, For the Purpose of Conveying the Bread-Fruit Tree to the West Indies, in His Majesty’s Ship the Bounty, Commanded by Lieutenant William Bligh. Including an*

All European voyagers expected to enter new landscapes, but coming from a culture that privileged the sense of sight over sound, they were slower to realize the disorientating effects of moving to new soundscapes. The unfamiliar sounds of the natural world were more readily accepted than those of the human world, which spoke a language that could only be dimly understood. For, as Shino Konishi has recently reminded us, the senses make sense of the world in ways that are culturally determined—this shaped the interaction between Europeans and the peoples of the Pacific.⁴ Much of the rhythm of European life was enshrined in a system of familiar sounds, from church bells to the street cries of London, which were quite absent as European explorers entered the new world of the Pacific.⁵ As Diane Collins has pointed out, it was a natural instinct to equate unfamiliar sounds with the barbaric⁶—a mode of viewing the world that accorded with already-entrenched views of racial hierarchy. Through such a cultural lens, the guttural sounds of Aboriginal languages were perceived as instances of barbarism. In his generally negative account of his encounter with the Aborigines of the west coast of New Holland in 1688, William Dampier wrote, for example, “these People speak somewhat thro’ the Throat.”⁷ The absence of the sounds associated in the European mind with order and industry—such as that of the axe and other agricultural implements—heightened a sense of the unfamiliar, which, as Peter Denney has underlined, was frequently also interpreted as the inferior.⁸

Yet human cultures are not totally incommensurable, and some forms of sound can help to bridge the cultural divide. Certain basic emotions, such as fear or hostility, can be conveyed through sounds, like shouts, that have a universal register. More complex, however, are the messages conveyed by music, which are modulated by culture. In her innovative work on this subject, Vanessa Agnew stresses the culturally determined character of music, as of all forms of human communication. Yet she also argues that, unlike language, which is based on culturally agreed-upon conventions, “music has its own form of agency”⁹—it has at least some universalizing elements that can transcend different culturally determined ways of communicating. The central focus of this article will, then, be on the way in which music played a role in the dynamics of cross-cultural contact in the course of British and, to a lesser extent, French exploration of the Pacific in the age of the Enlightenment.

In this age of exploration, Europe had enough experience of cross-cultural contact to appreciate that the forms of music used on first contact could convey a very clear message, be it friendly or hostile. Atlantic voyagers had learned the possible uses of music in making contact

Account of the Mutiny on Board the Said Ship, and the Subsequent Voyage of Part of the Crew, in the Ship’s Boat, From Tofoa, of the Friendly Islands, to Timor, a Dutch Settlement in the East Indies (London: George Nicol, 1792), 50.

⁴ Shino Konishi, “Discovering the Savage Senses: French and British Explorers’ Encounters with Aboriginal Peoples,” in *Discovery and Empire: The French in the South Seas*, ed. John West-Sooby (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2013), 100.

⁵ Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 56–57; and R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1977), 52–67.

⁶ Diane Collins, “Acoustic Journeys: Exploration and the Search for an Aural History of Australia,” *Australian Historical Studies* 37, no. 128 (2006): 12.

⁷ William Dampier, *A New Voyage round the World* (London: Argonaut Press, 1927), 315–16.

⁸ Peter Denney, “Picturesque Farming: The Sound of ‘Happy Britannia’ in Colonial Australia,” *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 3 (2012): 98.

⁹ Vanessa Agnew, *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89.

with non-European peoples. There are accounts, for example, of bagpipes being used to good effect in the mid-fifteenth century in encounters on the African coast. Such Portuguese musical diplomacy was later emulated by the Spanish in the New World¹⁰ and their early ventures into the South Pacific. When Don Felipe Gonzalez arrived in Easter Island in 1770, he mirrored the way in which Álvaro de Mendaña, in the sixteenth century, had announced his arrival to the people of the Solomon Islands by playing musical instruments. On both occasions, the impromptu concert was well received and, as Gonzalez reported, the Pacific Islanders “began to dance, evincing great pleasure.”¹¹ The Dutch also used this tactic, such as on Abel Tasman’s South Pacific voyage of 1642–43. When the Tongans came near their ships, the Dutch crew danced to the music of trumpets, flute, and fiddle, “at which,” we are told in Surgeon Hendrik Haalbos’s account, “*the Southlanders* were so astonished, that [they] forgot to shut their mouths.”¹² A late seventeenth-century proposal to send French missionaries to the “Austral lands” included the suggestion that musicians be included.¹³

It was against the background of such experience that Lord Morton, president of the Royal Society, framed the instructions given to James Cook. He advised that, when making a landing among people unfamiliar with Europeans, “they should not at first be alarmed with the report of Guns, Drums, or even a trumpet.—But if there are other Instruments of Music on board they should be first entertained near the Shore with a soft air.”¹⁴ Quite likely, too, Morton was thinking of the telling counterexample recorded by Dampier (who had close links with the early Royal Society) in his account of contact with the Aborigines of the west coast of New Holland in 1688. Confrontation there was followed by the British firing a gun and then as a final aural statement: “at last the Captain ordered the Drum to be beaten, which was done of a sudden with much vigor . . . purposely to scare the poor Creatures.”¹⁵

On the other side of the frontier, there were also instances of sound being used to intimidate. When Cook was in New Zealand on his first voyage, some Maoris called out with a message that was interpreted as an invitation to land and then be killed—a message reinforced by the noisy haka that Cook and others described with some fascination.¹⁶ Generally, however, in the Pacific encounters of the period, music seems to have been largely used to achieve some sort of bond, which made further communication possible. When John Byron arrived at an island in the Tuomotus in 1765, the “venerable looking old Man . . . who seemed to be their King” performed a ritual involving a green bough and “a long Song which our People say was far from being disagreeable.”¹⁷ Until that was completed, the people of the island would not touch the presents pressed on them by the British. Ritual and, with it, music had to be performed before other

¹⁰ Ian Woodfield, *English Musicians in the Age of Exploration* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995), 95–96.

¹¹ Mercedes Carmino, *Exploring the Explorers: Spaniards in Oceania, 1519–1794* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 126.

¹² Andrew Sharp, ed., *The Voyages of Abel Janszoon Tasman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 45.

¹³ Abbé Jean Paulmier, *Mémoires touchant l’établissement d’une mission chrestienne dans le troisième monde: Autrement appelé, la Terre Australe, méridionale, antartique et inconnüe*, ed. Margaret Sankey (Paris: Champion, 2006), 215.

¹⁴ J. C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Journals of Captain James Cook on His Voyages of Discovery* (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1956), 1:515.

¹⁵ Dampier, *New Voyage*, 315–16.

¹⁶ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 1:281.

¹⁷ Robert E. Gallagher, ed., *Byron’s Journal of His Circumnavigation, 1764–1766* (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1964), 102.

forms of human interaction could take place. In another part of the South Pacific, music again helped to provide a bridge across the cultural divide. On his 1780–81 voyage across the Pacific, the Spaniard Francisco Mourelle visited Tonga and began by demonstrating his power by firing “a few cannons against the rocks.” More pacific means of communication followed, with the chief ordering a woman to sing, which, Mourelle wrote, she did with such animation “that she might have been taken for an actress declaiming on a theater.” This smoothed over the encounter and “the ties of friendship being now drawn so close between us . . . that the tabou [chief] even called me his *hoax*, that is to say his son.”¹⁸

In the Pacific Northwest, the greeting of ships with song occurred frequently and came to be expected. George Vancouver wrote of his arrival on the west coast of Vancouver Island in 1792 that “agreeably to the custom of Nootka . . . a conference was held, followed by a song.” Vancouver bestowed some tepid praise on the song: “though expressed by simple notes only, [it] was by no means destitute of an agreeable effect.” As in the case recorded by Byron, trafficking between peoples could not take place until this ritual had been performed. Once the song that accompanied the paddling around the ship was concluded, writes Vancouver, the Nootkans “came alongside with the greatest confidence.”¹⁹ A similar incident occurred nearby at Port Stewart on Prince of Wales Island, British Columbia, in 1793. Once the ritual was performed and they were on board Vancouver’s ship, the visitors again made themselves very much at home using song, which accompanied what Vancouver described as “the most rude and extravagant gestures that can be imagined.” By this time, the ice had been broken and other forms of interaction could take place, including giving Vancouver a sea otter skin.²⁰ Song was also used to greet other tribal groups, as Vancouver observed at the Russian settlement at Kodiak Island. This friendly contact was cemented by a gift and further songs and dancing. Similarly, when the Spanish explorer Jacinto Caamaño ventured into Bucareli Bay in southeastern Alaska in 1792, the “demonstrations of friendship” led to the local chief being allowed to come on board, where he “began chanting one of his songs; which, taken up by the others in chorus, then produced a terrific, though not altogether displeasing noise.”²¹

Music could also be used to reconcile and heal grievances between peoples. The Pacific Northwest trader John Meares records that after an altercation with the people of Tootch near the Gulf of Juan de Fuca in 1788, they provided a concert that made amends. “But offended as we might be with the people,” wrote Meares, “we could not but be charmed by their music,” for such “perfect union and exact measure from four hundred voices, found its way to our hearts.”²² Less mutually agreeable—but nonetheless still an instance of musical diplomacy—was the experience of the Spaniard Tomás de Suría in Alaska in 1791, who fell afoul of a local chief when cutting down a tree for firewood; despite the lack of a common language, the displeasure of the chief was

¹⁸ M. L. A. Milet Mureau, ed., *The Voyage of La Pérouse Round the World, in the Years 1785, 1786, 1787, and 1788* (London: John Stockdale, 1798), 1:194.

¹⁹ W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Voyage of George Vancouver, 1791–1795* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1984), 2:546.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:1042.

²¹ H. Wagner and H. Newcombe, “The Journal of Jacinto Caamaño,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 2 (1938): 287.

²² John Meares, *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the Northwest Coast of America: With an Introductory Narrative of a Voyage Performed in 1796, from Bengal, in the Ship Nootka, to which are Annexed, Observations on the Probable Existence of a North West Passage, and Some Account of the Trade Between the North West Coast of America and China; and the Latter Country and Great Britain* (London: Logographic Press, 1791), 1:252.

conveyed aurally, with mutual comprehension, by his “imperious tone.” Some measure of reconciliation followed, with de Suría joining in after the Indians “formed a circle around me and danced around me knives in hand singing a frightful song, which seemed like the bellowing of bulls.” De Suría’s punishment took the benign form of having to “sing their songs which according to the gestures which they made I understood as ridiculing me. In such a situation I feigned ignorance and shouted louder making the same contortions and gestures.” Mutual goodwill followed since “they were very much pleased at this.”²³

On occasion, however, the European strangers could perceive that the song was not intended for them but rather was part of a religious ritual. In New Zealand on Cook’s second Pacific voyage, the astronomer William Wales recorded an instance of the Maoris singing and gesturing in a manner that suggested that what was occurring “was a conversation which they held with some Being above the Clouds.”²⁴ The only clue that the protoanthropologist George Forster had about the religious beliefs of the peoples of Tanna Island (Vanuatu) was “the *solemn song*,” which, he surmised, was associated with “a place of worship in the woods thereabout.”²⁵ On his voyage to the northwest coast of America in 1785–86, Alexander Walker could perceive that there “music is often connected with religious rites.” This did not, however, heighten his appreciation of the Indians’ music. He was surprised that they liked European singing, since “their own Songs are devoid of Art or variety, and are all plaintive and Melancholy.”²⁶ When Jean-François La Pérouse landed on the coast of Alaska in 1768, he was greeted in a ceremony that he perceived as involving “praying to the sun . . . ended by some fairly pleasant songs.” Interestingly, he saw some parallels with Catholic ritual, describing the Indian songs as “bearing quite some resemblance to our religious plain chant.”²⁷

Music, then, could impart basic messages across the cross-cultural divide: whether it be defiance, welcome, or even a sense of religious awe. How much further could music go to achieve a kind of cross-cultural conversation? There were instances of music being used reciprocally to create a cross-cultural bond. On Tanna, Forster sang some English and German songs, though he thought that the fact that what the Vanuatians most appreciated were the Swedish songs of Dr. Sparrman was an indication that musical tastes varied from culture to culture; as Forster put it: “their judgement of music was not influenced by the same rules which regulate the taste of other countries.” Nonetheless, when the Vanuatians responded with their own music, it did have enough universal appeal for Forster to find it “harmonious.” Evidently, however, he did not respond to the music of other South Sea islanders quite so positively, for he considered the Vanuatians’ music to be “superior to the music of all the nations in the tropical part of the South Sea, which we had hitherto heard.”²⁸

²³ Henry Wagner, ed., “The Journal of Tomás de Suría of His Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America in 1791,” *Pacific History Review* 5, no. 3 (1936): 250.

²⁴ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 2:780.

²⁵ George Forster, *A Voyage round the World*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Oliver Berghof (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000), 2:555.

²⁶ Alexander Walker, *An Account of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America in 1785 and 1786*, ed. Robin Fisher and J. M. Burnsted (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982), 118.

²⁷ John Dunmore, ed., *The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse, 1785–1788* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1994–95), 1:106.

²⁸ Forster, *Voyage*, 2:534.

As with language, the degree to which both sides could communicate with each other depended on the extent to which the forms of music made sense to both cultures. On occasion, there was a surprising degree of appreciation on both sides of the beach—giving support for Agnew’s arguments about the universalizing character of music. At Nootka Sound on Cook’s third voyage, his ship was greeted in the customary way by indigenous singing. The English were so pleased with the sound that they responded with some music of their own using the fife and drum. The response was so positive that an encore followed using French horns.

Such musical extravagance reflected the delight felt by Cook’s crew that indigenous peoples had responded to European music so appreciatively. Indeed, as European voyagers frequently observed, the appeal of music (and particularly instrumental music) did not always transcend the cultural divide. Indeed, Lieutenant King wrote of the Nootkans: “these were the only people we had seen that ever paid the smallest attention to those of our musical Instruments, if we except the drum.”²⁹ King probably had in mind the earlier experience on the same voyage in Tonga. There, wrote Cook, “not one of our musical instruments, except the drum did they hold in the least esteem, and even the Drum they did not think superior to their own.” In contrast to the mutual appreciation of musical cultures at Nootka, the Tongans and other South Sea islanders “very seldom would attend to” the French horns.³⁰ The universal appeal of the drum underlines an unsurprising message: cultures respond most enthusiastically to forms of music most familiar to them. As a consequence, generally Pacific cultures did not respond warmly to European instrumental music. But there were exceptions: the playing of the fiddle by members of the Bruni d’Entrecasteaux expedition in 1793 at Buka Island (now part of the northern Solomon Islands) provoked a very enthusiastic response, wrote Jacques Labillardière, the naturalist on board; the islanders “were unable to contain their joy; while various motions of the arms, which perfectly accompanied the time, and a great agitation of the whole body were unequivocal markers of their feeling.” These French voyagers also had some success in coaxing the Tongans into an appreciation of the guitar accompanied by singing, but they had a more enthusiastic response to the novelty of the bird-organ, an instrument used to teach birds to sing. The Tongan response was to display their talents as singers, which gained the applause of the Frenchmen.³¹

By contrast, later on the same voyage, the Tasmanian Aborigines responded to the French playing of the violin with indifference and even aversion. After the success on Buka, the violinist was again called into service, but “his vanity was completely mortified by their indifference.” This led Labillardière to reflect on the way in which indigenous peoples often failed to respond to some forms of European instrumental music, writing that they were “in general little affected by the sounds of string instruments.” Earlier, however, the flute had been better received. Reluctant to accept the indifference of his audience, the violinist tried with a livelier tune, but this time there was no mistaking his audience’s appraisal; he actually dropped his bow, as the Tasmanians were seen “stopping their ears with their fingers, that they might hear no more.”³²

²⁹ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:1395.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

³¹ Jacques Labillardière, *An Account of a Voyage in Search of La Pérouse, Undertaken by Order of the Constituent Assembly of France, and Performed in the Years 1791, 1792, and 1793, in the Recherche and Esperance, Ships of War, Under the Command of Rear-Admiral Bruni d’Entrecasteaux*, trans. M. Labillardière (London: B. Uphill, 1800), 1:44, 120.

³² Edward Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière: A Naturalist’s Life in Revolution and Exploration (1755–1834)* (Carlton South, Vic: Miegunyah Press, 2004), 151.

As so often, singing proved a more reliable means of cross-cultural communication, and the French responded well to the Tasmanians' songs in part "from their great analogy to those of the Arabs of the Asia Minor." They were struck that such singing was more than a simple tune, since one of the singers sang "constantly a third above the other, forming this harmony with the greatest exactness."³³ Other French voyagers were, however, less appreciative of Aboriginal music. While at King George's Sound, on the southern coast of western Australia, François Péron, the naturalist on board the Baudin expedition of 1800–1804, recorded some of the indigenous songs, but he regarded them as "more like chants, the songs being almost always in the same tone, having little rhythm and varying mainly in the time intervals of their notes."³⁴ His traveling companion Louis de Freycinet was a little more sympathetic. When he returned to Australia in command of his own expedition (that of *Uranie*, 1817–20), he credited the Aborigines with an exact ear but again regarded their singing as monotonous.³⁵

Europeans tended to respond more warmly to Polynesian singing, since the forms of harmonizing were more familiar to them: on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, Cook thought the singing had "a pleasing and tender effect." On the other hand, the visitors were often dismissive of indigenous instruments, just as the peoples of the Pacific often showed little appreciation of European instruments. On Kauai, Cook recognized a form of drum but dismissed it as something that "can scarcely be called an instrument of music . . . a small gourd with some pebblestones in it, which they shake in the hand like a child's rattle."³⁶ David Samwell was even more dismissive of the Tongan accompaniment of sticks upon reeds of bamboo, describing them as "instruments, if they may be called such," though he acknowledged (with faint praise) that the singing "formed a plaintive Melody which was not disagreeable."³⁷

As Cook's and Samwell's comments underline, singing traveled more comfortably across the cultural divide than instrumental music, with its high degree of cultural overlay. Polynesian singing attracted high praise from a number of European travelers. In 1819 surgeon Gaimard on board Louis de Freycinet's Pacific voyage of 1817–20 was entranced by Hawaiian singing: "some sixty women and young girls started singing at the entrance of a nearby cave; it sounded like the hymn of Hymen. I have never enjoyed a more charming concert." So enraptured was he that the episode revived for him the myth of the South Seas as a virtual new Eden, which had taken root in France following the descriptions of Tahiti after Bougainville's visit there in 1768: "the novelty of the spectacle and its strangeness reminded us of the piquant stories of Bougainville's stay at Tahiti, which until then we had thought exaggerated."³⁸ Earlier, Cook had written warmly of Tongan singing, Cook being of the view that "such a performance would have met with universal applause on a European Theatre." The Tongans, by contrast, were not so appreciative of British singing since, Cook added, in this area "they seemed to pique themselves in the superiority they

³³ Labillardière, *Account*, 2:39, 44.

³⁴ Colin Wallace, *The Lost Australia of François Péron* (London: Nottingham Court Press, 1984), 127. On the Baudin voyage and music, see Jean Fornasiero, "Strangers on the Shore: Musical Encounters in Terra Australia, 1802," *Encounters* 50 (2011): 4–15.

³⁵ Louis de Freycinet, *Voyage autour du monde: Entrepris par ordre du roi . . . exécuté sur les corvettes de S.M. l'Uranie et la Physicienne, pendant les années 1817, 1818, 1819 et 1820* (Paris: Pillet Aîné, 1824), 774.

³⁶ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:284.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁸ Marion Kelley, ed., "Hawaii in 1810: A Narrative Account by Louis Claude de Freycinet," trans. Ella Wiswell, *Pacific Anthropological Record* 26 (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1978), 10.

had over us.”³⁹ As a way of redressing the balance, Cook resorted to another form of sound (and light) with a fireworks display.

Tongan singing, particularly, had a natural appeal to the English because there was significant common ground. Both sides appreciated part singing and harmonizing. As James King later informed Lord Sandwich, the patron of the by-then-deceased Cook, in 1784, the observations of Lieutenant James Burney, the son of the famed musicologist, while at Tonga had established that “the separate parties, sound together in different notes.”⁴⁰ As Agnew points out, this was something of a puzzle to the British, since polyphony was supposed to be unique to Europe.⁴¹ In this instance, the Tongan music subverted the assumption that musical sophistication was a mark of cultural advancement. Hence, Lord Sandwich was skeptical about the reports of Tongan part singing: “there is great improbability that any uncivilized people should . . . arrive at this degree of perfection” when it came to music. Thus, he concluded, the issue of whether the Tongans employed polyphony was “undecided.”⁴² Confusion was heightened by the way in which Burney’s attempts to record Tongan music were impeded by its unfamiliarity. Music, like other forms of cross-cultural interchange, could be both familiar and strange. Burney thought that Tongan music was sufficiently close to European to make the observation that it “is mostly (but not always) in the minor key or flat 3d.” Yet, he added, it was “so uncommon in stile that I could never get hold of more than half a dozen following notes.”⁴³

More puzzling still was the fact that the Maoris also seemed to perform polyphonic singing even though they were often classed by European travelers as being below the level of civilization achieved by the Tahitians. On Cook’s second voyage, while at Queen Charlotte’s Sound at the top of the South Island, George Forster commented on the complexity of their singing, with its use of different parts. For Forster, their music was indeed “superior in variety to that of the Society and Friendly Islands” and bore comparison only with that of Tanna. For Forster, such musical sophistication indicated a degree of human feeling that qualified the prevalent view of the Maoris as being a thoroughgoing warlike people—that “their superiority in this respect to other nations in the South Seas, are to me stronger proofs, in favor of their heart, than all the idle eloquence of philosophers and cabinets can invalidate.”⁴⁴ But musical appeal was in the ear of the beholder: on his first voyage, Cook summarily dismissed Maori singing as being “harmonious enough but very dolefull to a European Ear.”⁴⁵

Though Tahitian and, still less, Maori singing might not be readily accommodated in the stadial models of the progress of civilization, such stadial assumptions about music did shape some European responses in their Pacific encounters. In his account of Cook’s third voyage, Surgeon David Samwell accompanied his very negative review of the music of the Nootkans with the observation that it “strongly marked the barbarous & uncultivated State of the People.”⁴⁶ Scottish Highlanders often had a starring (if negative) role in stadial accounts of the advance from

³⁹ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:109.

⁴⁰ James King, letter to Lord Sandwich, Woodstock, January 30, 1784, MS7218/30, National Library of Australia.

⁴¹ Agnew, *Enlightenment Orpheus*, 174.

⁴² Lord Sandwich, “Rough Draft by Sandwich of Footnote Referring to Opinions of Lieutenant Burney and Lieutenant Phillips on Singing of South Sea Islanders,” MS7218/36, National Library of Australia.

⁴³ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:1340.

⁴⁴ Forster, *Voyage*, 2:615–16.

⁴⁵ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 1:285.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:1089.

barbarism to civilization, which helps to account for the fastidious George Forster's marking down of the Tahitians for their love of the bagpipe music provided by a Highlander on board ship: "its uncouth music," he wrote censoriously, "though almost insufferable to our ears, delighted the king and his subjects to a degree which we could hardly have imagined possible." In fact, such music had helped to establish such a degree of cross-cultural rapport that it went some way toward achieving "an unreserved confidence" on the part of the king.⁴⁷

Sound, and particularly music, then, provided other forms of language that could shape contact between both sides of the beach in the Pacific. Like any language, music was culturally inflected, which meant that it could also serve to divide rather than unite. When, for example, the Tahitian Mai was in London, having been brought there as a result of Cook's second voyage, he found opera so foreign to his musical repertoire that, as Fanny Burney reported, when asked how he liked it: "his answer was a violent and ear-jarring squeak, by way of imitating Italian singing." But, like all languages, opera became more accessible with greater contact and familiarity, for, added Fanny Burney, "he said that he began to like it a good deal better than he had done at first." Musical incomprehension and even contempt could, however, be observed on both sides of the cultural divide. Fanny Burney thought his singing was "a mere queer, wild and strange rumbling of uncouth sounds." Her father, the eminent musicologist Dr. Charles Burney, thought the same, though adding that "his music . . . was all that he had about him of savage."⁴⁸ This grading of civilization by European responses to indigenous music reflected the same aural sensibility that regarded other non-European sounds (such as Aboriginal languages) as being so different from the European soundscape as to denote barbarism. At Nootka Sound on Cook's third voyage, Surgeon Samwell rendered a judgment similar to Dr. Burney's: Samwell regarded the Indian dancing accompanied by "shaking a small Bow or an wooden image of a bird filled with pebbles which made a rattling noise as an accompaniment to the Voice" as being "as wild & uncouth a Performance as any we had ever seen and what strongly marked the barbarous & uncultivated State of the People."⁴⁹

Music, however, could, as Agnew has argued, transcend the cultural divide and appeal to a "common humanity." On Cook's second voyage, the Tahitians and the British seemed to be able to achieve a rapport, which was expressed in music and dance. Both sides had come to know each other well enough for the Tahitians to feel sufficiently at ease to turn what had been sources of tension into sources of shared humor. In the course of the singing, wrote George Forster, "we could plainly understand the name of Captain Cook, and of several of our shipmates mentioned." More daringly, the singers also referred to that bane of Pacific cross-cultural contact, theft, for "they seemed to represent a theft committed by their people." What Forster considered was the most "curious" performance depicted something that goes to the heart of all human societies, the birth of an infant—for "it represented a woman in labor and provoked immoderate pearls [peels] of laughter." The British, too, seem to have shared the amusement and fellow feeling, for, wrote Forster, "we could not refuse joining in the plaudits which his countrymen bestowed upon him [the performer]."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Forster, *Voyage*, 1:171.

⁴⁸ Frances Burney, *Memoirs of Dr. Burney Arranged From His Own Manuscripts, From Family Papers, and From Personal Recollections by His Daughter* (London: E. Moxon, 1832), 2:4, 7.

⁴⁹ Beaglehole, *Journals of Captain James Cook*, 3:1090.

⁵⁰ Forster, *Voyage*, 1:393.

Here sound was joined with mimicry, another rich source of cross-cultural communication.⁵¹ European explorers often remarked on the ability of indigenous peoples to reproduce exactly the sounds and gestures made by those on the other side of the beach. When at Port Palin in the Solomon Islands, Lieutenant Pottier de l'Homme, on the Surville voyage of 1769–70, remarked how the islanders “imitate perfectly the sound of the songs our sailors sing.”⁵² Later, another French explorer, the anthropologist François Péron on board the Baudin expedition of 1800–1804, remarked on how a Tasmanian woman both imitated and parodied the singing of a French sailor: “she began to mimic his gestures and tone of voice in an extremely original and very droll manner, which greatly amused her friends.”⁵³ Along with sound, Aborigines could capture with extraordinary precision the mannerisms of Europeans, so much so that one visitor to Sydney at the beginning of the nineteenth century thought “their mimicking of the oddities, dress, walk, gait, and looks, of all the Europeans whom they have seen from the time of governor Phillips downward, is so exact, as to be a kind of historic register of their several actions and characters.” Mimicry extended to sounds as well as gestures, so that they were also “great proficient in the language, and Newgate slang, of the convicts.”⁵⁴

As part of coming to terms with the arrival of the Europeans and the establishment of Sydney, Aborigines were using both sound and gesture as ways of crossing the cultural divide. Living in Sydney required becoming acquainted with a new soundscape, which was quite foreign to them but could become more familiar through their remarkable ability to reproduce its sounds. Such a process meant an acceptance of the new realities of European power,⁵⁵ though it was modulated through indigenous ways of responding to new experiences and environments. As Bruce Smith writes, “in the merging of two soundscapes, in the clash of two acoustemologies, there are always political factors at work.”⁵⁶ Throughout the Pacific, cross-cultural contact drew from human beings every part of their repertoire of communication: where language would not serve, then gesture and sound were also employed. Though there was ample room for misunderstanding and suspicion, sometimes a common humanity could be glimpsed across the cultural divide. The surprise is not that the two sides did not understand each other but that, at least on occasion, they did. In achieving such a recognition of a common humanity, sound played a significant role. A

⁵¹ Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79.

⁵² John Dunmore, ed. and trans., *The Expedition of the St. Jean-Baptiste to the Pacific, 1769–1770: From Journals of Jean de Surville and Guillaume Labé* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1981), 87.

⁵³ François Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands*, trans. Christine Cornell (Adelaide: Friends of the State Library for South Australia, 2006), 1:199.

⁵⁴ John Turnbull, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804; in which the Author Visited the Principal Islands in the Pacific Ocean, and the English Settlements of Port Jackson and Norfolk Island* (London: Richard Phillips, 1805), 1:63.

⁵⁵ Schafer, *Soundscape*, 77.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Acoustic World*, 289.