Not Quite Postcolonial Paris: Imperial Voices, a Kiwi Café, and *Black Panther*

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In May 2017, I was in Paris. It was an odd trip. I had agreed, almost a year previously, to sing in a concert of restored Napoleonic music. The program consisted of music commissioned by Napoleon, written about him, or loved by him. Most of the music had lain untouched in the archives for many years, until Peter Hicks, under the auspices of the Fondation Napoléon, located it and transcribed it, painstakingly reconciling different versions.[1]

The project brought together my personal practice as a singer with my professional identity as a historian. A choir singer since the age of seven, I have often seen my passion for music as articulated to my historical work. They are linked but distinct. I sing classical music and study popular music. They differ, but my understanding of music as a form and language opens up an array of sources. I can "read" them (which sometimes means hearing them), and I understand the practices and processes that produce them. But I have never quite connected my personal practice and my professional discipline. The concert offered an opportunity to do that.

I was asked to sing in the concert of Napoleonic music because I had sung with Hicks, who would be conducting the program, while on a Chateaubriand dissertation fellowship. His choir had, in fact, helped keep me grounded and given my life structure during the long, sometimes lonely and disorienting months of delving into archives and libraries. My thesis examined the influence of jazz music on black communities in Paris in the 1920s. My choral life was in an expatriate Anglican community that worshipped in a curious and wonderful church almost hidden below ground just around the corner from the Arc de Triomphe.

The concert was a fascinating project, aiming to bring forgotten musical favorites of the Napoleonic era to life again.[2] It followed the progress of Napoleon's life to his exile and death. One of the final songs was Berlioz's setting of the nostalgic poem "Le cinq mai" (set to Pierre-Jean de Béranger's "Ode on the Death of Napoleon"), in which a soldier, described as "the humble remains of empire," returns to France after years over-

[1] See "Fondation Napoléon Concert 2018 'Les voix impériales': Three Questions for Peter Hicks, Conductor," https://www.napoleon.org/en/magazine/interviews/fondation-napoleon-concert-2018-les-voix-imperiales-three-questions-peter-hicks-conductor/.

[2] The concert program is available at https://www.napoleon.org/en/magazine/whats-on/imperial-voices/.

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seas. He is devastated by the sight of the black drapes on St. Helena marking the death of Napoleon. He reflects that at least he, a poor soldier, will return to France, and upon his death, his eyes will be closed by "a son" of France. It was a haunting moment in a worthwhile project of reclamation.

I traveled to Paris, excited at the prospect of the project, ready to rehearse for a week, then perform in the imposing Hôtel national des Invalides. I brought the kids along for part of it—the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and plenty of *pain au chocolat* to wash the Napoleonic melodies down. The kids loved it. And the rehearsal schedule allowed me to get in some time at the archives. Double win. But it was at that point that I found myself unable to turn off my "historian brain"—more particularly my postcolonial way of seeing (and hearing). In rehearsal I was proclaiming Napoleon's greatness and glory. In the archives I was researching how, in the 1920s, music became a battleground for cultural and social inclusion just over a century after Napoleon reinstated slavery. It was an odd, discomforting disjunction.

At one stage during rehearsal, I almost stopped singing. The line that stopped me was "Sooner death than slavery—that's the motto of the French."[3] The sentiment, in less direct words, was reiterated in at least two numbers. Frenchmen would rather die than be slaves, subject to the rule of "tyrants."

My head snapped back when I first sang that line. Even as I was singing the notes, following the conductor, beginning to insert dynamics and musical shape, and reading ahead for the next line of music, I experienced a moment of analytic shock. Napoleon reinstated slavery. This was some serious imperial propaganda. This lyrical "slavery" of political philosophy wasn't the lived and embodied slavery that formed the implicit (and sometimes explicit) backdrop of the stories and songs I was finding in the archives. The French Caribbean men and women I study also celebrated the French for ending slavery—but not Napoleon. They celebrated the man he imprisoned and betrayed, one of the greatest independence fighters of the Atlantic revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture. They celebrated Abbé Grégoire (abolitionist and French revolutionary leader) and Vincent Ogé (leader of the Haitian revolution)—both names I had seen honored, repeatedly, in the archives of black anticolonial organizations founded in the 1920s.

I sang on. But it was an odd experience. I was, for historical purposes, embodying propaganda that I challenge in my work. A postcolonial historian singing as a member of the "Imperial Voices."

As I sang, I was reproducing the myth of the French Republic—that it was colorblind, that it brought democracy to the world, that the Revolution ended "slavery" in terms of granting a say in government to those being governed. But the myth that the French Revolution really brought "liberty, equality, brotherhood" to the French is deeply flawed. The National Assembly consciously excluded women. The republic had, and has, a complicated relationship to religious freedom. The assembly's abolition of slavery was grudging and just as strategic as it was idealistic. I could go on. In fairness, Napoleon reinstituted religious freedom in Europe and granted civil liberty to Jews. He had heroic victories. I could see why the French audience would feel buoyed up by the promise of liberty and by the drama of Napoleon's life, which was also a national drama.

[3] "Plutot la mort que l'esclavage / C'est las devise des Francais." From "Veillons au salut de l'Empire," lyrics by Adrien-Simon Boy (1791), set to a melody by Nicolas Dalayrac (1787).

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Many of the songs emphasized the glory of empire and portrayed France as the bearer and bastion of civilization. "Veillons au salut de l'Empire" (Watch over the Salvation of the Empire) warns listeners that the fate of the universe depends on the "Patrie" (homeland/fatherland), and if France is enslaved, the whole world will be in chains. "Le chant du retour pour la Grande Armée" (The Song of Return for the Grand Army) advises "happy women" to be proud of their sons and brothers, who are "conquerors." The pronatalist ring of this line was loud and clear to me. I could cite more. In "Chant triomphal pour la paix et l'anniversaire du sacre" (Triumphant Song of Peace and the Anniversary of the Coronation), France is the mother of sages and soldiers and governs the fate of the world through her laws and battles. This may have been true of significant parts of Europe and the Mediterranean on December 4, 1809, when the song was written. But the postcolonialist in me cried out—"Was this a good thing? For those being ruled against their will?" My heart melted a bit at the sweetness of the melody and the vision of a cooing baby in the song dedicated to Napoleon's son, the infant "Roi de Rome." Yet as the lyrics detailed how his birth guaranteed the glories of both sons and ancestors, and how he would re-create Rome on the banks of the Seine, I began to analyze how those lines enshrined Frenchness and empire.

So, there I sat singing. Rehearsing. Thinking. An imperial voice. When it came time for the concert, I knew the music. I could "deliver." And that was even stranger. Because what is involved, for a singer, in performance is that you inhabit the music. It's physical. Your whole body produces the sound. You're active in reproducing the message. And good singers—and good performances—engage their audience. Conviction and delivery are part of that. At times the choir was almost overpowered by the orchestra, and some of the pieces were quite repetitive. I felt even more of a duty to the audience to "sell" the songs and to inject life and enthusiasm into them. I breathed, I supported, I projected, I lifted my head out of the music and tried to express on my face some of the earnest intent behind the words. At the same time, I couldn't quite shut off the nagging voice in my head wondering what it meant to sing these pieces so enthusiastically. I wondered how the first singers of these songs felt. In the dress rehearsal, I had asked Hicks whether he thought the soldiers, drained after a long campaign, felt the triumph that "Le chant du retour" suggested. He said some of their letters showed they did and others didn't.

Incidentally, the program also contained a delightful quartet advising a young couple on how to please each other in love and marriage—apparently a favorite of Napoleon's. The lines counseling the young woman to anticipate her husband's every wish and remain charming at all times generated a few chuckles in the choir. Yet I could sing those lines about obedient wives secure in the conviction that my fellow singers, and the audience, would probably "read" them as antiquated, out of date, belonging to a different time. The Napoleonic rhetoric of freedom and French greatness was more discomforting. It still has popular currency.

Music, like history, reinterprets as it presents. Yet sometimes the reinterpretation isn't evident, and as musicians we seek to carry the audience with us into the emotion or appeal of a song. In the service of historical recovery, I found value in the concert. But as I sang, I could see how the rhetoric of triumph, of democracy, and of greatness in these songs is beguiling for today's populists. Very little in the program contextualized or explained the complex legacy behind the rhetoric. I think a Le Pen supporter would have found a lot to be proud of in the concert. Perhaps my own bias is evident in

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FIGURE 1: In rehearsal, May 24, 2018. From the personal collection of the author.

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the unexamined notion I had that my fellow singers reflected a slightly amused distance or a more reflective French patriotism than that of the songs—that Macronistes or French socialists would have a more nuanced understanding of the patriotism than populist French nationalists. Even so, if I sang that concert again, I would want to see an explicit program note addressing how this music functioned as propaganda in its time. (This was done on the website but not in the program.)

Each morning before heading to rehearsal, or to the archives, I would stop and get coffee. On the very first day, I had scoured the Internet for "best espresso" in Paris. The existence of "Matamata coffee" struck me as so incongruous, I had to go and see it for myself. Matamata is a small town in New Zealand. What was it doing in Paris? Well, that's a different story, involving travel, the quest for love and good coffee, a Frenchman, and a wedding in rural New Zealand.

But while I was sipping my excellent flat white, I got to chatting with a barista. I was musing about my archive/rehearsal dichotomy. He ended up telling me that he, a Parisian Frenchman, has ancestors in France, Senegal, and Mauritius, and probably Réunion as well. His grandfather was a soldier, in the employ of the French army, and was prodigal with his amours. A little like the narrator of the Berlioz ode "Le cinq mai." The genealogy was complex; it ranged all over the world, but the barista ended by saying that while he is connected to all of these places, ultimately he is French. His father, born in Senegal, had felt French—except when they got to France. And his father's illegitimate birth barred him from access to full French citizenship. That story is truly French. More French, maybe, than the Napoleonic homage of our "Voix Imperiales."

In the course of our conversation, I asked the barista what he thought of the film *Black Panther*—something I had been reflecting on a lot. I had heard from Dutch, from Americans, and I had looked at a variety of South African responses. But not many Francophone ones.

His face lit up. He had seen it three times. He said it was revolutionary.

Black Panther's portrayal of black excellence, black heroism, and a complex black anti-hero has, indeed, been hailed as revolutionary by audiences and critics. Its central premise is the existence of an African nation that has never been colonized, and that has developed scientific and technological excellence. Some commentators have linked it to the once-possible but never fully realized vision of Haiti immediately following the French Revolution. *Black Panther* is also a crowd-pleaser that trades on popular narratives. Some have accused its vision of liberty of being neoliberal, and the film of reinforcing stereotypes about inner-city black youth and violence. Unlike the Napoleonic music, it seduced me on first viewing. Yet it also shows the double-edged appeal of popular culture, which can slide beneath our defenses as it presents gripping, viscerally engaging experiences that offer a version of the past, present, and possible future that pleases and inspires us.

Black Panther is not the revolution I usually associate with France. And the Napoleonic music invoked an equally imaginary revolution. But in some ways, my conversation with the barista made sense of the tension between my musical and archival lives that week. France (to borrow from Walt Whitman) is large and contains multitudes. The trip was a global, local, discomforting, ethically challenging confrontation with the past and how we handle it in the present. Postcolonial Paris. I'll be back.

Rachel Gillett is an Assistant Professor in Cultural History at Utrecht University, teaching modern Europe and empire. Her research focuses on race in France, on popular culture, and on the black Atlantic from a French perspective. Her current book, under contract with Oxford University Press, is entitled *Begin the Biguine: Race, Music and Cultural Activism in Interwar Paris*. She has also written about

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World War I and anticolonial initiatives. Her next research project will examine the role of popular culture in expanding the reach and visibility of anti-racist protest. After graduating from Northeastern University with a Ph.D. in World History, she taught and served as the Assistant Director for Undergraduate Studies in the History and Literature Concentration at Harvard University. She received her undergraduate degree, a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in English and Honours in History, from the University of Otago, New Zealand.

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