

Firebrand Folklore: Musical Memory and the Making of Transnational Networks

Ann Rigney¹

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Abstract

What is the place of music and specifically of collective singing in political mobilization? This article builds on Joep Leerssen's work on the role of choral societies in romantic nationalism to examine the role of singing in radical, internationalist circles in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on two songs in the socialist-anarchist repertoire – the traditional Scottish love song *Annie Laurie* and the *Marseillaise* – it examines the role of musical performance in mobilization around a common cause. It argues that music helped in creating embodied communities at particular locations while also connecting people transnationally across time and space.

Keywords

embodied communities; cultural memory; internationalism; connective action; *Annie Laurie*; the *Marseillaise*.

On the evening of 30 November 1888, a crowd gathered on the platform of St Pancras station in London to bid farewell to Mrs. Lucy Parsons. She was the widow of American anarchist Albert Parsons and had been visiting Great Britain for various commemorative events marking the first anniversary of the execution of her husband and the other 'Chicago Martyrs.' She had been invited to Great Britain by the Socialist League and had been hosted by William Morris, editor of the *Commonweal: The Journal of the Socialist League*, which for several years had been denouncing the execution of the Chicago anarchists as a miscarriage of justice and an attack on civil liberties. There had been huge publicity around Lucy's visit within radical circles although her firebrand, anarchist-inflected rhetoric had also created some tension with her socialist hosts.² Nonetheless, the visit seems to have been a success and the report of her leave-taking, as she set off for home through the port of Liverpool, makes no mention any visible rifts between her and her hosts.

According to the *Commonweal* (8 December 1888) the platform was crowded 'with Socialists of all opinions and nationalities' who, among other expressions of allegiance to

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² Keeble, "William Morris meets Lucy Parsons."

Mrs. Parsons and the workers' cause, sang *Annie Laurie* together. Subsequently, as the train left the station 'amid cheers' the 'strains of the *Marseillaise*' could be heard. Why did the crowd in London choose these particular songs, a traditional Scottish love song and the anthem of the French Revolution? And what does this tell us more generally about the role of singing in bringing together activists 'of all nationalities', including the pre-eminently American Lucy Parsons, a former slave who claimed mixed-race Mexican and native American ancestry?³

Long before the 'We shall Overcome' of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s, music was an important feature of political assemblies in the nineteenth century; and, as we shall see, an important vector of networking. Singing had an added value as a mobilizing tool in an era of limited literacy, while it also provided a lingua franca in contexts where people 'of all nationalities' were mixing and matching - as they were in radical circles in London where, thanks to political exile and immigration, German, Yiddish and French were commonly heard alongside English in political meetings. Reflecting the importance of music as well as speechifying in political movements, meetings of socialists, anarchists, and related groups included choral performances (at regular intervals the *Commonweal* mentioned choir practice or advertised for new singers) and they were almost invariably closed off with collective singing in a show of unity and common purpose that was not only politically effective, but also pleasurable.⁴

As Joep Leerssen has shown in extensive detail, choral societies and collective singing were an important element in nation-building in nineteenth-century Europe.⁵ Singing in harmony was a way of achieving the sense of an 'embodied community'⁶ at particular locations and hence provided an important counterpart to the 'imagined communities' linked to print culture.⁷ In the multi-scalar process of nation-building, music helped to linking the intimately personal and physical experience of music to the sense of belonging to a larger community. This insight, as the present essay will show, can be extended beyond nationalism to other social movements in the nineteenth century. Precisely because of its ability to link the personal to the social, music had an important role to play in political mobilization more generally. Music, especially when it takes the participatory form of collective singing, extends the boundaries of individual selves in a physical and pleasurable way.⁸ Physically sharing melody, rhythm and harmony, be this as singer or as listener, helps both to forge new relations and to reinforce existing communities. In this way, music is an agent of networking and answers to what Bennett and Segerberg, with respect to digital media, have called 'connective social action.'⁹

Musical performances in political assemblies did not just link people in the here and now, however. They also served to link contemporaries with predecessors through memory.

³ Jones, *Goddess of Anarchy*.

⁴ For an attempt to recruit new members for the choir, see for example, *Commonweal*, 7 July 1888; the phrase 'propaganda through song' was also used.

⁵ Leerssen, "Romanticism, Music, Nationalism."

⁶ Rigney, "Embodied Communities."

⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁸ Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*; on how music connects the individual and the collective see also Halbwachs' "Chez les musiciens" in his *La mémoire collective*, pp. 168-201. I am grateful to Daniele Salerno and Marit van Warenburg for our discussions on the role of musical memory in activism.

⁹ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*.

As reports of political assemblies show, participants drew on a song repertoire which, while showing some deviation over time, by and large drew on a limited number of familiar songs and melodies - perhaps inevitably so since the idea was that everyone could (learn to) sing along. The role of music as a carrier of cultural memory is still an under-researched topic,¹⁰ but it is already clear that music creates a powerful link between past and present which, in operating through rhythm, melody, and lyrics, allows past iterations of a song to be physically re-enacted and not just cognitively recalled. In the context of political mobilization, those earlier iterations could be a matter both of personal memory (individuals recalling their participation in earlier performances) and of cultural memory: the shared sense of being part of a longer tradition of singing. The fact that other groups at other moments had already sung these songs (a fact known through hearsay as well as through print) could give an extra intensity to the present by rooting it in the past.

This leads us back to that November evening in 1888: what memory was being carried by *Annie Laurie* and the *Marseillaise*? At first sight, the love song *Annie Laurie* was an odd choice for a political meeting. Purportedly based on a seventeenth-century poem, but with the murky origins characteristic of much of nineteenth-century folklore collections, the lyrics of *Annie Laurie* were first recorded in Charles Sharpe's *Ballad Book* (1823) and subsequently put to music by Alicia Spottiswoode (Lady John Scott) in 1834. The song entered the US repertoire of parlour music through the hugely popular performances of the Swedish singer Jenny Lind in the 1850s. So well-known did it become that it lent its name to the *Annie Laurie Melodist*, a compilation of eighty-four songs from 1860. There is evidence that it was one of the most popular songs during the Civil War, joining other sentimental ballads evoking memories of singing in domestic settings to become a staple in the repertoire of the troops.¹¹

It was perhaps in the context of the Civil War, where he served for the Confederacy, that the future Chicago anarchist Albert Parsons became acquainted with the song. The only sure thing is that Parsons, on the night before his execution, sang this love song in his prison cell. There are several different versions of the story extant as, in the manner typical of folklore, it went on to have a life of its own in anarchist hearsay. By all accounts, Parsons also sang *Marching to Liberty* to the tune of the *Marseillaise* during that long evening; he also read out some political work to his fellow prisoners. But it was his singing of *Annie Laurie*, as it echoed across the prison cells, that came to define the memory of his last evening.¹² This was presumably because it helped to highlight the innocence of this victim of 'legal murder', as his execution was called, by associating him with domesticity and romantic love rather than with the dynamite of which he had been accused (and which indeed had figured largely in his own writings and speeches). In line with the aesthetics of the period, the melodramatic combination of a love song in Scots dialect with the imminence of death, of private love with a political persona, had an enormous sentimental appeal. It certainly kept on coming back in the afterlife of Parsons – to begin with during his funeral when, despite a police prohibition on music, a band struck up the tune of *Annie Laurie*, followed by the *Marseillaise*, in the presence of an estimated crowd of two hundred thousand supporters.¹³

¹⁰ Erll, "Vorwort."

¹¹ Kelley and Snell, *Bugle Resounding*, pp. 159-160.

¹² Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, p. 266; for variations, see Parsons, *Life of Albert R. Parsons*, p. 220; Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 381; Avrich and Bateman, *Anarchist Voices*, p. 479.

¹³ Green, *Death in the Haymarket*, p. 275.

Fast-forward a year to the scene at St Pancras station. By that point, the traditional Scottish song had been re-imported into the British Isles from the United States and, while never losing its value as a timeless carrier of romantic love, it had also accrued a new meaning in its transatlantic crossing as a specific evocation of a highly sentimental, almost mythical moment in the memory of anarchism. It was sung at a meeting in Norwich attended by Lucy Parsons, as reported in the *Commonweal* on 1 December 1888, before being repeated at her farewell in St. Pancras. And on that occasion, as during the funeral in Chicago, the lyrical *Annie Laurie* resonated alongside the martial *Marseillaise*.

There was in fact nothing surprising about singing the *Marseillaise* in the London railway station. To be sure, methodological nationalism (the widespread belief that the nation is the natural framework for the study of culture and society) has meant that the afterlife of the *Marseillaise* has above all been linked to its vicissitudes as the national anthem of France or, as in the famous scene from Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), as emblematic for the French spirit of resistance.¹⁴ But it also had a rich afterlife in other national and political frameworks. There is evidence that, already in the 1790s, it had provided a model for a Greek nationalist version using the same melody in combination with locally inflected lyrics composed by Rhigas Velestinlis. Its appropriation within the Greek context illustrates the principle at the heart of Leerssen's *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism*, namely, that national cultures across Europe were produced transnationally through a process of borrowing, adaptation, and imitation.¹⁵

The *Marseillaise*, however, was not only adapted in the production of national identities. It also figured prominently within international socialism and other related movements that were self-consciously internationalist in orientation, cutting across national and linguistic borders to make common cause around the rights of workers and the quest for a new society based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Within this framework, the *Marseillaise* was a key point of communal reference. Until it was replaced by the *Internationale* towards the end of the century, it was *the* signature tune of international socialism and other related left-wing movements who traced their genealogy to the French Revolution. Despite its militaristic overtones and its association with France in particular, the *Marseillaise* had become the 'song of fraternity' (*chant de fraternité*), as Jules Michelet had memorably called it. It was a vector not just of multiple nationalisms, but also of transnational internationalism.¹⁶

Studies of the loose network of socialist-anarchist movements in the second half of the nineteenth century all show that the *Marseillaise* was a regular feature of the activist soundscape. During the eight years of its existence the *Commonweal*, for example, made at least 109 references to the singing or playing of the *Marseillaise* at various political gatherings in Great Britain; it also published an English translation by J. A. Andrews of the original lyrics (8 August 1889). While it is not clear from the reports if the song was sung in French or in English, or indeed which version of the lyrics was used on any given occasion, it is evident that the melody provided a rallying point and identity marker for a wide-range of left-wing groups, allowing them to enact their shared affiliation with the French Revolutionary tradition. At the same time, later movements, most notably the Paris

¹⁴ Wimmer and Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism". On the history of the *Marseillaise* as the national anthem of France and its contested status across different regimes, see Fiaux, *La Marseillaise*; Vovelle, "La Marseillaise."

¹⁵ Dascalakis, "The Greek *Marseillaise*"; Leerssen, *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism*.

¹⁶ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, vol 1, p. 734: 'If it had only been a song for war, it wouldn't have been adopted by the nations. It is a song of fraternity' ['Si ce n'était qu'un chant de guerre, il n'aurait pas été adopté des nations. C'est un chant de fraternité'; translated AR].

Commune of 1871, adapted the original lyrics to suit their particular causes and to mark their difference from the militarism of the original.¹⁷ Indeed, the text of the *Internationale*, composed in 1871 by Eugène Pottier, a leading Communist, had originally been intended for singing to the melody of the *Marseillaise*. Across all these different versions and iterations, the song provides a fascinating example of how a cultural artefact can travel across different linguistic, national, and political borders while being adapted *en route*. Because of its associations with so many earlier iterations, the playing of the *Marseillaise* on any new occasion could build on the momentum and political capital generated by the memory of earlier usages in different locations.

The case thus provides a prime illustration of the importance of studying not just the production, but also the reception of cultural artefacts: it is only by looking at reception that we gain insight into their mobilizing and ‘connective’ power at different locations and in different historical contexts. Studying the subsequent procreativity of texts and songs is crucial to understanding their social impact.¹⁸ If we were only to study these songs in relation to the national context in which they were produced we would fail to understand their cultural and political role as agents of networking. A song which originated within a particular national context and served to bolster a sense of national identity within that framework, as this has been studied across Europe by Joep Leerssen, could also be appropriated within a quite different ‘social framework,’ to recall Halbwachs’ term.¹⁹ In the case we are looking at here, the ‘socialists of all opinions and nationalities’ actively resisted in a spirit of international fraternity the compartmentalisation of culture and society into national groups. Making common cause for a better future prevailed in such cases over the desire to defend national boundaries. The role of cultural memory in creating a sense of community remained constant, but the ‘social frameworks’ of memory were defined in relation to a community of purpose rather than in relation to ethnic origins, and those involved drew on a mnemonic repertoire (of events, heroes, songs) that crossed national boundaries. Future research will hopefully address in more detail the entanglement between the competing frameworks of national and internationalism in the production of identity, memory, and social engagement.

When on that November evening in 1888 at St Pancras, the playing of the *Marseillaise* followed the singing of *Annie Laurie* by ‘socialists of all opinions and nationalities’ it brought a richly layered memory into play and brought the highly specific story of Albert Parsons in all its romantic sentimentalism into the same frame as the international struggle for labour rights and the century-long tradition of Revolutionaries. The two songs had travelled a long way – across time, languages, and space -- before they came together in London to bring their memory to bear on a singular moment. The combination itself of such different songs exemplified the complex ways in which music operates at the interface between the personal and the collective, past and present, here and elsewhere.

The event in St. Pancras Station marked the end of Lucy Parsons’ visit, but it did not in itself mark an endpoint. It was a particularly intense and memorable episode in the ongoing circulation of songs and mobilisation of political actors within different constellations. *Annie Laurie*, despite its Scottish origins, became the carrier of a mythical moment in Anglo-American anarchism. The *Marseillaise*, despite its French origins, had long been associated with socialism and, both in Great Britain and the United States, with specifically European traditions. In retrospect, their highly public convergence in London on 30 November 1888 masked a growing divergence between anarchism and socialism, and arguably also a tension in British political culture between a North American and a European orientation.

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