



Beyond the Question of Morale: Popular Song around the World during World War I

“Popular song is not an illustration of real history which takes place elsewhere, in muddy trenches or oak-panelled offices, it is a series of mass activities which are themselves part of the history of society.”

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What creates the audiences?

Urbanization: masses of people moving to the city (in Germany, Spain or elsewhere), wanting “modern”, daring and cheap entertainment in variety theatres, café concerts etc.

Pianos: massive production. In the US, 300 000 are sold every year, in Britain there are three million pianos at the start of the war, a piano for every 15 inhabitants, children and infants included. This is not an elite instrument.

Sheet music publishers rush to meet the demand.

What influences the industries?

Concentration of capital

 In highly urbanized Britain, theatre chains swallow up independent music halls and build three-thousand seater halls, with lavish decoration and special effects. They are highly profitable, quoted on the stock market, and are present in dozens of towns.

 In Paris, *café concerts* with a couple of hundred seats predominate. Across France only a small number of towns have a few big variety theatres.

 In Portugal, a far more rural country still, we see “a business without an industry” (Pedro Felix).

What influences the lyrics?

What do people want to sing along with? For most countries, statistical analysis of song themes is not available, but for Britain we know that three quarters of popular songs did not refer to the war in any way. People continued wanting to sing about love, escaping and knockabout comedy, but new themes were added which could express popular anxieties, generally without threatening a fragile consensus about the necessity of the war, in Britain, France and the US, for example, a large number of songs expressed deep anxiety about women’s new roles (without directly opposing them). “Where are the Girls of the Old Brigade” is one British example.

French “realistic” songs deal far more with intimate questions of sexuality (infidelity and impotence, for example) which in Britain are limited to humorous treatment, if any.



What influences the song repertoire?

Technology



There are no microphones on stage, so it is very hard to sing with an intimate voice in a large theatre. For the same reason, getting the audience to sing along is crucial to the entertainment. Singalong imposes consensual themes. If only half the audience sing along, the singer might find they have no work the following week!

Genre traditions and constraints



Jollity is almost obligatory (so no songs about hating Germans, for example). Melodramatic, tragic songs have become rarer since 1900.



In Paris, a singer often stays in one venue of café concert, and so can develop a repertoire which keeps their specific audience happy. The tradition of *chanson réaliste* is strong.

The structure of the shows



In British music hall and US vaudeville, the singer has a spot of fifteen or twenty minutes – perhaps between an acrobats’ act and an elephant act: the audience’s attention must be captured quickly. Novelty and the use of stereotypes can help.

What about the rest of the world?

Recently, First World War historians have been moving towards a global understanding of the conflict, beyond the half a dozen European and Atlantic powers involved. This initial exploration has been based on established Western academic networks. We will need information about popular song in the countries of Africa and Asia, Japan, India, China, Russia and elsewhere if we are to build a truly global view. **Email us if you have contacts or ideas!**

What effect do the songs have?

“...music in wartime produces a complex web of pleasure, power, and identity.” Christina Gier

Pleasure

Singalong is central, singing in working class accents about everyday life is important in many countries. Daring or suggestive content is also a key pleasure, especially in Britain where “respectability” is a national obsession.

Dreaming of home, of a far-off paradise, or of idealized love are central to the repertoire.

Power

Many songs reinforce power structures of gender or of other conduits of inequality.

GB – Racist and anti-semitic songs are included in the repertoire (e.g. *Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein* or *John Bull’s Little Khaki Coon*) and cause no public controversy at the time.

Large numbers of songs, in Britain and in France especially, express anxiety about the new roles which women have been able to take on during the war.

Identity

Masculine and feminine identity are central to many songs. US songs like “Private Flynn” and “Percy Prim” explore what it means to be “too feminine” a man; some French songs reassure severely wounded men that they are still real men.

Newly urbanized Berliners are keen to explore a sophisticated Berliner identity, as for example in the singing of Claire Waldoff.

Songs showcasing “typical” peasants or regional characters, or denigrated outsiders are very common. Racist Blackface turns negotiate White identity differently in Britain and in the US.

Famously, Harry Lauder performs Scottishness, George Formby performs the Lancashire working class man, and endless showmen and showwomen perform Irishness.

How was music consumed?

This is the last period when live performance is at the centre of the popular music industry. Although the future belongs to the gramophone, (and its use in military hospitals is for many wounded soldiers the first time they have seen one), for the moment it is not a mass market. In 1916, in Britain, for the price of the cheapest gramophone, you can buy 220 cheap tickets to go to the music hall. A hit in the US could sell over a million copies in sheet music. Sheet music and theatre tickets are at the centre of a web of consumption which includes thousands of street singers, millions of home pianos, middle-class musical evenings and working-class family singsongs.



What influences the music?

Musical tradition in each country



Portuguese Fado



German Lied



Spanish Cuple etc.



French “chanson réaliste”



In Canada, popular entertainment is closely structured around the shows available in London

International innovation as ragtime sweeps the world after 1901, and jazz after 1916.

What people must do with it: Songs meant for singalong by mass audiences are rarely musically complex.



In Britain most singers are touring, and it is too expensive to tour with your own musicians. The house orchestra must learn the music on Monday morning for the first show Monday night. Innovative music was not welcomed!



New Zealand: “The music was generally derivative or amateur or both” (Chris Bourke).