

Music of the Antebellum Period: Stephen Foster (1826-1864), Our National Composer?

Morrison Foster's story of their family's slave taking young Stephen to a black church where he "was fond of their singing and boisterous devotions" has stoked the imaginations of scriptwriters, whose scenes have given rise to the false impression that Foster copied and sold for his own profit the traditional music of its unrecompensed creators. Events in Foster's life might have suggested ideas for his songs, but he transformed them from the specific to the universal. His sentiments crossed boundaries of race and social standing and transcended barriers of class and political power throughout the United States and abroad.

A chronological survey of Foster's output reveals his foresighted approach to racial conciliation. His early song *Nelly was a lady* (1848, published 1849) was among the first songs by a white author or composer to portray a black husband and wife as a loving, faithful couple, and to insist on the term 'lady' for the woman. The dialect in Foster's minstrel lyrics, often exaggerated in later editions and in imitations of his work by other songwriters, is limited in his authorized editions mostly to selectively substituting 'd' for 'th', 'b' for 'v' and 'a' for 'e' ('whar' instead of 'where'). Foster abandoned these along with race-specific terms in the early 1850s. His first minstrel song published without dialect is *My old Kentucky home, good-night!* (drafted in dialect in 1852, copyrighted in 1853), and the illustrated sheet-music covers of his authorized editions lack the cartoon caricatures of black Americans or black-face performers that proliferated on other minstrel music and on pirated and foreign editions of his songs. He admonished Christy (of the Christy Minstrels) to perform his tragic plantation songs 'in a pathetic, not a comic style' which would engender pity and compassion rather than derision.

Whether or not Foster sought to redress the injustice of insensitive caricatures of black Americans in popular culture, his tragic minstrel songs conveyed universal human emotions that were embraced by black and white alike. Early stage productions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prominently employed *My Old Kentucky Home, good-night!* and *Old Folks at Home*. Clearly Foster sought to reform minstrels songwriting: at the start of his career Foster felt he could unite with Christy 'in every effort to encourage a taste for this style of music [minstrelsy] so cried down by opera mongers' (letter, 23 February 1850). Two years later, after Christy had paid Foster to name him as the composer and author of *Old Folks at Home*, Foster expressed himself more clearly (letter, 25 May 1852): As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name on my Ethiopian songs, owing to the prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as a writer of another style of music, but I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order. Foster wrote frolicking tunes that entered oral tradition as instrumental numbers, such as *Nelly Bly*, *Camptown Races*, *Angelina Baker* (all 1850) and *Ring, ring de banjo!* (1851), but his minstrel songs, usually written as solos with four-voice chorus, increasingly portrayed sympathetic, dignified, compassionate, even tragic characters: *Oh! Boys*,

carry me 'long and *Old Folks at Home* (both 1851), *Massa's in de cold ground* (1852), *My old Kentucky home, good-night!* and *Old Dog Tray* (1853).

The estimation of Foster as a composer varies widely. Within two months of his death Harper's New Monthly Magazine proclaimed that 'The air is full of his melodies. They are our national music'. Contemporary reviews noted that his songs sounded distinctively American, and were unprecedentedly popular. The American songwriter George F. Root credited Foster with creating the 'people's song', seemingly simple words and music combined in such a way 'that it will be received and live in the hearts of the people'.

The appraisal of Foster has also shifted with changing social views. In the late 19th century, the post-Reconstructionist recasting of minstrelsy as 'coon songs' coincided with a condescending view that Foster's songs elevated and ennobled the crude music of uncultured peoples; simultaneously, black Americans' sense of ownership is reflected in the assessment by W.E.B. Du Bois that *Old Folks at Home* and *Old Black Joe* were different from the debasing minstrel songs. By the second quarter of the 20th century, Foster's songs were freely performed on radio and in films, and he was acclaimed as 'America's troubadour'; *My old Kentucky home, good-night!* was adopted as the official state song of Kentucky (1928) and *Old Folks at Home* as that of Florida (1935). In 1940, Foster was the first musician elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. Between 1939 and 1952 three Hollywood biographical films appeared.

Following the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, which heightened sensitivity to minstrelsy's racism, many schools in the USA abandoned Foster's songs. In the 1980s and 90s, however, they gained new currency, partly through scholarly research into the songs' history of interpretations and significance for racial conciliation, partly because of their continued circulation among American country and folk-music performers, partly through worldwide interest in Americana, and partly because the American entertainment industry continued to use them as iconic melodies in cartoons, films and television shows. Ethnomusicologists have recorded them along the Tibetan border in China; black South Africans taught them in their schools under Apartheid; since the 1880s when Luther Whiting Mason created a system of music education for Japan, all Japanese children have sung the music of Foster along with Mozart and Schubert as part of a mandatory eight-year music curriculum. In the 1850s Foster's songs were the first significant body of identifiably American song; by the end of the 1990s, a handful of Foster's songs still remained among the best-known music in the world.

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