

**Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest.** Dafni Tragaki, ed. 2015. *Europea: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc. xiv, 321 pp., photographs, figures, references, notes, index. Cloth, \$85.00; eBook \$84.99.

While the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), Europe's most popular musical institution and spectacle, asserts its immunity from politics, *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest* proves that this is not the case; Eurovision engages in politics and ideologies as well as constantly shifting and contested national, cultural, and gender identities. The book reveals that behind the kitsch and the sentimental and eccentric essence of Eurovision is a political institution that promotes common European awareness through culture. Eurovision and the EBU (European Broadcasting Union), reinforced by the European Union's discourse of harmonious unification, promote hybridity and inclusiveness; but they also act as supervisors, utilizing their assumed role as cultural trendsetters to incorporate the more "peripheral" countries into a collective "European" identity.

The different chapters of this volume, written by expert music scholars, embrace not only a miscellany of national representations in the Eurovision Song Contest, but also different foci. These range from corruption in the organisation of the Sanremo festival, which served as a model for ESC; to the negotiations and imaginations of national uniqueness in countries as remote as Turkey or Sweden; to the impact of dictatorships and economic changes, such as those influencing Portugal's and Ireland's participation; and finally to the topic of queerness, raised once again by Conchita Wurst's 2014 winning song. The authors reveal paradoxes and contradictions inherent in Eurovision. Conceived as a musical force to unite divided nations after WWII, nations compete with each other in this spectacle; while Europe is the natural habitat for wealthier western and northern European countries, for newly integrated countries or those aspiring to EU membership, Europe represents an ideal of superior political and economic bliss for which they strive. For these countries, Eurovision is a praxis through which they can prove their belonging to Europe.

*Empire of Song* raises questions that will appeal to those interested in the history and modernity of Europe as well as to ethnomusicologists and music experts who study popular music and the ways in which that genre participates in the production and articulation of politics and identities. How is "nation" expressed at an event that promotes a unified, borderless Europe? Can all nations, sometimes as geographically and culturally remote from each other as Sweden and Azerbaijan, have similar aspirations and advantages? Is it realistic to think that such diversity in identities and values can coexist in the new Europe? As the European Union expands, and with it also the number of Eurovision participant

At the other end of the continuum, as Dafni Tragaki's chapter exposes, Europe's Nordic countries have pursued their own dreams and fantasies. This is epitomized in the winning song "Hard Rock Hallelujah" by the Finnish band Lordi. Lordi's triumph invokes Europe's and Eurovision's ideals and myths in different ways. It appeals with its pluralistic and inclusive stance towards minorities, relative to both the rock genre's minority status in Eurovision and Mr. Lordi's Saami origins, as well as with the mysterious and timeless European antiquity embodied in its horror-glam rock style, seemingly inspired by neo-medieval narratives of the Dark Ages, their supernatural creatures and bloodthirsty warriors.

The discussion of Lordi brings the volume closer to another concern of Eurovision and its critics: the Contest's perceived tasteless music and silly atmosphere, in which the quality of music matters less than putting on an elaborate show. The fact that ABBA is the only group that participated in Eurovision and subsequently became an extremely successful international act only favours the critics' point of view. For Lordi and its supporters, the band's victory was a deviation from the Contest's usual bubble-gum pop style. The book's authors admit to the superficial aspect of the Eurovision aesthetic and to the reality that no one expects serious music (Luisa Pinto Teixeira and Martin Stokes, 236; Tony Langlois, 262–63), emphasizing the ways in which voting choices and a song's success are influenced by national biases and regional musical preferences more than by a song's musical merits; hence the entire voting process becomes a spectacle rather than a serious verdict.

Empire of Song draws attention to the connection between the politics of the European Union and the aesthetics of Eurovision, between the ESC's "staged and spectacularized cynicism, irony, doubt, and disbelief" on the one hand and neo-liberal Western Europe's utopian belief in transnational civility—essentially two sides of the same coin. This symptomatic cynicism is shared by the representative nations themselves as well. As Langlois's chapter observes, Ireland's "Dustin the Turkey" in Eurovision 2008 was an expression of cynical humour targeting both the event itself and Ireland's own national representations and stereotypes.

The book's lively accounts demonstrate that politics are the intrinsic feature of Eurovision, despite the contest's official mandate to avoid overtly political messages and displays. Heated political debates unfold around Eurovision's bold and subtle displays of liberal attitudes to sexuality and statements about political peace. The authors remind us of the Israeli group PingPong's performance in 2000, which made a statement about peace in the Middle East, and the Israeli government's official negative reaction to the group's waving of the Syrian flag during their performance. We are reminded that to appeal to the whole of Europe in a Eurovision Song Contest, a song performance needs careful diplomatic negotiation between the national and transnational levels, between the nation

and unified Europe. As Bohlman expresses it, if they wish to be internationally successful “political musicians must tread lightly, dancing their way towards their neighbors’ douze points” (293).

The twelve chapters of this book, equipped with a foreword and introductory chapter, will definitely interest a wide group of scholars and students of European music, history, culture, and popular music. It is evident that ethnomusicology within Europe has been maturing and producing vital insights into this much-debated musical spectacle. Most importantly, the authors demonstrate that whether tasteless or seriously sensitive, the Eurovision Song Contest is a praxis in which European modernities, ever shifting mindsets, and expanding borders are celebrated.

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