Review: Musical Passage

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Project
Musical Passage: A Voyage to 1688 Jamaica

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Project URL
http://www.musicalpassage.org/

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Project Overview
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Musical Passage: A Voyage to 1688 Jamaica tells the story of an important record of early African diasporic music. In this site we offer a careful interpretation of a single artifact, from Hans Sloane’s 1707 travel narrative and natural history, Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and Jamaica. The book contains several pieces of music that portray performances by enslaved people in 1688 Jamaica. We aim to shed light on this unique document and to further the ongoing effort to understand the early history of Black Atlantic musical traditions.

Our site presents preliminary recordings of the music along with contextualizing information that we hope lends insight into how this musical notation was produced. The larger aim is to spur continued study of the pieces and the performers who inspired the music. We imagined several potential audiences including scholars and students of all stripes interested in learning more about the histories and cultures of early African diasporans and performers, especially in the Caribbean. Some of these potential audiences would not be able to read the music; others may not be aware of this source. We saw our efforts as the beginning of a conversation that would make it possible for a greater variety of people to engage with the unique source material and to memorialize and honor the legacy of enslaved musicians whose influence was documented in Sloane’s book.

When developing the project, all three collaborators were at Duke University, where Laurent Dubois was Professor of History and Romance Studies. Mary Caton Lingold was working towards a degree in English and David K. Garner in music composition. Garner took the lead on the musical recordings and interpretation. Lingold brought expertise in digital sound scholarship, and she and Dubois both contributed knowledge of Caribbean cultural history and music. We also enlisted a professional designer Marc Harkness and developer...
Dave Mello to achieve the vision for the site. It was built using HTML5, CSS, and libraries such as JQuery, Bootstrap, and FullPage.js. The project was funded jointly by the Franklin Humanities Institute and the Forum for Scholars and Publics at Duke.

Since the project’s launch in 2016 ensembles in Jamaica have performed the music using our website. In 2017, the Jamaica Music Museum and the University of West Indies, Mona hosted a workshop with Early “Chinna” Smith, his band Inna da Yard, and other special guests. The following year, the UWI-Mona University Chorale had a workshop exploring one of the pieces, “Angola,” and later performed it during their 10th Anniversary Concert.

The project also has been adopted in college classrooms in the US and the UK. In 2020, Dyrham Park, an historic site in the United Kingdom launched an exhibit reflecting on the colonial legacies of the historic home that incorporates material from our website. We continue to do research on the source material and have published several articles and given papers and podcast interviews on the topic. The project was reviewed in the first issue of the journal archipelagos, and then was the focus of an experiment in digital annotation sponsored by the journal. Both of these experiences shaped the existing site and will inform our future work on it.

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**Project Review**

**Anna E. Kijas**

Musical Passage: A Voyage to 1688 Jamaica is a Black Atlantic digital scholarship project funded by the Franklin Humanities Institute and the Forum for Scholars and Publics at Duke University.

The introduction to Hans Sloane’s 1707 *Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*, Vol. 1 contains two pages of musical transcriptions of African music. The project collaborators, Laurent Dubois, David Garner, and Mary Caton Lingold, who have combined expertise in African Atlantic history, music, and sound studies, consider this to be the earliest, if not the first, transcription of African music in the Caribbean and the Americas. This project, based on a copy of Sloan’s manuscript housed at the Rubinstein Library at Duke University, is centered around these transcriptions and provides a narrative about the time, place, and people described in this text.

From the site’s landing page, the reader enters a soundscape of waves in motion and recorded excerpts of the African music transcribed in Sloane’s text. This sonic experience greets the reader and entices them to explore the early musical practices of Black musicians in 1688 Jamaica and to engage with this text and music. The project collaborators’ focus on the musical experience of the Black people Sloane encountered, rather than on the volume in its entirety, amplifies the importance and value of Black people’s music and culture. They take an archival artifact, produced by a white European colonialist, and ask the readers to collectively interpret and
imagine what the music may have sounded like, rather than claim an authoritative and single interpretation. This is one of the ways in which the project contributes to existing efforts to decolonize the archive and provides open access to early Caribbean material, addressing the institutional silencing of Black voices and perspectives in the archives. One helpful addition would be to identify a license and preferred citation so the project can be properly attributed by users.

Visitors to the site, which is built with HTML5, CSS, and jQuery, Bootstrap, and FullPage.js, can interact in several ways with the project content. One option, which is more interactive, is to explore the two-page spread by viewing and reading the original text as well as clicking on the hyperlinked words (in red font) to read the narrative or to hear the recordings of each musical transcription. Hovering over the hyperlinked text generates a prompt that guides the user as they explore the content. The second option is to read the narrative in a linear fashion with the option of simultaneously listening to the soundscape of waves and musical excerpts. One suggestion that may make it easier for those who are interested in reading the narrative linearly and also listening to each musical transcription in full is to include the sound clips within the narrative so that users don’t have to jump back to the “Explore” section, interrupting the linearity of the experience.

Although the project focuses on the two pages with musical transcriptions, there is content preceding and following these pages based on Sloane’s descriptions of the musical instruments used by the musicians. The narrative includes details from these descriptions, but providing a transcription of the original text or images of these pages might give additional context to readers interested in organology or performance practice.

The interpretive recordings and descriptions of each transcription makes this project accessible to non-academics, including folks who may not read music notation. To make the content even more accessible, the collaborators may wish to explore some accessibility considerations, particularly for visitors who have color vision deficiencies or contrast sensitivity loss or issues. The two pages at the center of the project are a static image with a Javascript overlay that enables visitors to interact with specific elements, which works for engagement but does not make the content accessible to someone using a screen reader, or for folks who may have lower broadband connectivity. Providing plain-text or XML encoded files of the original text, music, and narrative that could be downloaded or read offline would truly amplify the Black voices and music in Sloane’s text by making it more accessible and discoverable on the web. This would also make the project easier to maintain while preserving the underlying data and content.

Digital scholarship projects, such as this, require enormous effort, time, expertise, and often invisible labor to develop and maintain. In addition to sound scholarship and research, projects require careful consideration related to aspects including design, infrastructure, technology, sustainability, and preservation. Providing project documentation is a way to capture the process and decisions made during the development, inform promotion and tenure committees, and influence future scholarship and projects. Clear plans for maintaining the site, managing the data and content, as well as the ongoing role of the library or archives, if any, would be an important addition to this project.