

Musical Passage

<http://www.musicalpassage.org>

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For centuries, the silence surrounding colonialist encounters in the Americas has been deafening. From native and enslaved people alike, colonizers collected instruments without bothering to learn how to play them, described ceremonies and performances without transcribing the musical repertoire, and observed differences without absorbing cultural context. There are many tantalizing reminders of the musical aspect to cultural encounters throughout the Americas in prose, but comparatively few transcriptions or repertoire collections.

The new website *Musical Passage* reminds us how Digital Humanities projects can help us use those remaining documents to imagine earlier ways of making and hearing music. On the landing page, two pages of musical fragments found in Hans Sloane's 1707 *Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and Jamaica* are presented in a beautiful, multi-faceted way, enabling scholars, musicians, and other interested parties access and insight impossible in other media. The two-page scan of notation on the website has embedded hyperlinks allowing visitors to click on musical passages of interest. Upon clicking a window, one finds two versions of each melody, each performed on historically appropriate instruments. The first version is invariably straightforward with very little interpretation; the second is more inventive in comparison, sometimes more adventurous in instrumentation choice, perhaps adding annotated harmony, improvisation, or percussion. Users find short narrative descriptions in the pop-up windows. The narratives chronicle each musical fragment and observe some of the similarities and differences among fragments.

The creators were able to provide this level of access and detail by leveraging their various areas of expertise in this collaborative endeavor. Laurent Dubois is a professor of Romance studies and history at Duke University specializing in Caribbean culture, particularly during the Colonial period. David K. Garner is an assistant professor of composition and theory at the University of South Carolina with a particular interest in banjo and bluegrass. Mary Caton Lingold is assistant professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University; she focuses on the music Digital Humanities. In addition to the three core collaborators, Marc Harkness and Dave Mello were hired to design the website, producing an aesthetically appealing and seamless online experience.

Such projects respond to the growing awareness that, as Jeannette Bastian has stated, “it is the minor narratives, the untold stories, the traces, the whispers, and the expressions of marginalized identities that people yearn to find in the archives.”¹ As archivists working with the scholarly community, it is our responsibility to illuminate these interstitial narratives, despite nearly two centuries of a professional practice emphasizing *respect des fonds* and original order. That is, by following along pre-established institutional priorities, our practices naturally obscure “minor narratives” of all kinds. It would be unusual to look toward a book on botany for African melodies performed in the New World, but as *Musical Passages* demonstrates, that is exactly where we find these pieces. This collaboration allows access to material otherwise hidden, and embarking on projects like this one is one way to allow old systems and new interests to co-exist.

This site is so beautiful and informative that my greatest wish is for it to remain a part of the conversation. New additions to the site, including an embedded video of Jamaican musicians interpreting the melodies, make me optimistic about the creators’ continued investment in it. As a community, archivists can participate by commenting on Twitter or interacting creatively with the source material. The creators themselves could also expand the site, perhaps by connecting to similar documents and narratives from elsewhere in the Americas. Although the scan of Sloane’s entire book and the associated metadata will remain online regardless, the connections drawn by *Musical Passage* between the melodies found in *Voyage to the Islands* and the history of music in the New World will slip back into obscurity if contributors and visitors do not actively enrich the site’s online presence.

Beyond our identities as archivists, *Musical Passage* responds to our instincts as curious humans, allowing us to explore a vital document to recreate a distant time and place mentally. Because that time and place traffic in ways of being that resonate through the present moment, *Musical Passage* serves as a reminder to be inclusive as we observe and preserve our sonic environment, recognizing that the cultures and works that are peripheral to our mode of inquiry now may become central in the future.

¹ Jeannette Bastian, “‘Play Mas:’ Carnival in the Archives and the Archives in Carnival: Records and Community Identity in U.S. Virgin Islands,” *Archival Science* 9, no. 1–2 (2009) 113–125.