

STRANGERS ON THE SHORE: MUSICAL ENCOUNTERS IN TERRA AUSTRALIS, 1802

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The Baudin expedition (1800–1804) enjoyed a number of significant cross-cultural exchanges on the Australian continent and its islands, not least because its commander, Nicolas Baudin, was attentive to the official instructions relating to the observation of indigenous peoples and to the peaceful conduct of his mission, instructions which were written by Georges Cuvier and Joseph-Marie Degérando and duly recorded in his journal (Baudin 2000, 47–80).¹ In fact, as a newly appointed correspondent of the Society of Observers of Man (Chappey 2002, 290), Baudin seems not only to have grasped the importance of managing such encounters with diplomacy, but genuinely to have warmed to the task of recording them. For this, we have the evidence provided both by Baudin's writings and by the journals of his fellow travellers. One such example is to be found in a report made to the commander by the mineralogist Depuch, who is at pains to inform Baudin how closely he has followed his 'philanthropic' instructions (Baudin 2000, 250). More famously, François Péron's detailed report on Maria Island was made in reponse to Baudin's explicit request that Péron establish a 'comprehensive relationship' with the indigenous inhabitants (Plomley 1983, 80–95).

French intentions to engage in and to record cross-cultural encounters thus feature prominently in the principal narratives of the expedition, as well as in the lesser known journals of its officers and scientists. These narratives have been examined by scholars such as Brian Plomley (1983) and Rhys Jones (1988), who, between them, have provided an inventory and an overview of the principal interactions which took place between the French and indigenous

¹ Contrary to the commonly held belief, Degérando's instructions were not specifically written for the Baudin expedition, although they were written at the time the voyage was being planned and Baudin did receive a copy of them with his set of official instructions. Degérando's instructions were also given to African explorer Levallant and were intended as a kind of manual for scientific travellers of the day.

Australians, in Tasmania, Sydney, Western Port and different parts of Western Australia. Nonetheless, although the innovative and ambitious nature of the anthropological instructions received by the Baudin expedition has rightly been noted, few commentators are convinced that Baudin's 'observers' actually did make systematic attempts to follow them, especially those relating to social and cultural anthropology, which were drafted by Degérando (Degérando 1969) and which Rhys Jones described as 'the most difficult to assess' of the works inspired by the Society of Observers of Man (R. Jones 1988, 38). In fact, while historians and anthropologists attest to the significance of the encounters that were recorded, not least because they were unmarked by bloodshed, they generally concur that the expedition failed quite comprehensively to conduct research of the type envisaged by Degérando. Degérando's modern editor and translator, F.C.T. Moore, is even quite scathing about what he calls 'the miscarriage suffered by a newly conceived science', or the ultimate failure of the expedition's anthropological project, a failure that he attributes largely to François Péron (Degérando 1969, 41–42).

Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that Péron, the zoologist who produced the expedition's anthropological results, owed first allegiance to his mentor, Georges Cuvier, who had also supplied instructions to the expedition on the collection and recording of data relating to indigenous peoples. Cuvier's emphasis on physical anthropology was seen to be in competition with the social and cultural imperatives emphasised by Degérando, and this competition, for both institutional and scientific reasons, rapidly became unequal. Fashionable as Degérando's ideas had been in 1800, it was Cuvier who was in the ascendancy by the time of the expedition's return in 1804 and who ensured Péron's rise to prominence in the scientific establishment (Chappey 2002, 466). This institutional context helps to explain the particular weight that Péron gave to a methodology of physical measurement when writing the official account of the voyage. Indeed, as a result, 'modern historians see Péron as a forerunner of the "medicalized" physical anthropology dominant in France in the second half of the nineteenth century' (Douglas 2008, 113). The other explanation for the perceived disregard for Degérando's instructions is that the Baudin voyage, as an enterprise in maritime discovery, had neither the opportunity nor the means to conduct all of the surveys of social and cultural customs that Degérando had recommended. The expedition was committed to the charting of unknown shores and was therefore destined, for the most part, to make short landfalls for

the purpose of renewing supplies and making essential repairs, a characteristic famously lamented by Alexander von Humboldt (1814, 2). In the case of the Baudin voyage, this meant that the brief encounters of the expeditioners with indigenous peoples were confined to the Australian littoral. This fact alone rendered the full implementation of Degérando's methodology impossible, since there was insufficient time to establish meaningful communication through the mastery of language (Plomley 1983, 81). However, the littoral is, by definition, one of those liminal or frontier zones where objects can be exchanged, objects, which Philip Jones has so vividly demonstrated, bear 'traces which one culture has left on the other' (P. Jones 2007, 7). In that sense, the French records, notwithstanding the brevity of the moments in time that they captured, contain traces of cultural exchange, for they too show the frontier as 'a more complex zone of encounter, one in which Aboriginal people had considerable agency and where accommodation was as much a part of the process as conflict' (Smith 2008).

Given the existence of these material traces and the signs of renewed interest in the anthropological record of the Baudin voyage (Douglas 2008, Sankey 2010, Fornasiero 2010), the time seems now ripe to return to the question of Degérando's instructions, and to the relation they bear to the records of the encounters of the French with indigenous Australians. Whilst a full examination of the problem is not within the scope of this paper, our intention here is to commence this process by drawing attention to the series of cultural exchanges and French observations which took place on Australian shores in 1802. The exchanges in question relate to the musical performances that took place during the expedition's sojourn on Bruny Island and the recordings of indigenous music that were made later that same year in New South Wales. Although eye-witness information on these musical encounters and reproductions of their artefacts are readily accessible, the events and products of these artistic encounters have rarely been explicitly related to the detail of the instructions that the expeditioners had received as 'observers of man'. A notable exception is provided by Philip Jones who describes other aspects of the expedition's approach to making cultural observations as echoing Degérando's methodology, notably Péron's description of Aboriginal tombs (P. Jones 2002, 166–167). For the musical episodes themselves, the debate has still to run its course. As Nicole Saintilan points out in an insightful thesis which expertly analyses the musical notations of the Baudin expedition, 'the

documentation of “contact zones” in musical terms has been seldom studied’ (Saintilan 1993, 94). Indeed, for a number of reasons, and despite Saintilan’s own contribution, the debate has rarely been framed in these terms.

On the one hand, despite an ever-increasing amount of published documentation, the musical encounters of 1802 have not always been assigned their rightful place in Australian contact history. Inga Clendinnen, for example, in an otherwise luminous work, misrepresents both the events and French intentions entirely when she speculates that ‘Baudin’s expeditioners, either in a burst of patriotic fervour, covert imperialism or sheer mischief, taught “La Marseillaise” to Western Australian people in 1802’ (Clendinnen 2003, 292). On the other hand, Skye Krichauff rightly points to the significance of the musical exchanges on Bruny Island in 1802 and convincingly demonstrates the agency and control of the indigenous inhabitants over a complex set of social interactions (Krichauff 2003, 45–47). However, when she affirms that the French viewpoint has been given undue weight by historians (48), we would argue that, for these particular episodes, the French viewpoint is still in need of substantial clarification, as Clendinnen’s misapprehensions reveal. Surprisingly, too, the musical episodes do not form part of Plomley’s extensive analysis of the anthropological record of the Baudin expedition in Tasmania, although the details had been minutely recorded in much earlier studies (Ling Roth 1899, 134–137). Where due consideration has indeed been given both to Degérando’s influence and to the methodology adopted by the French ‘observers’, as in Saintilan’s study, her conclusions about the complete neglect of Degérando’s advice were drawn on the basis of a restricted access to primary sources which has since been largely overcome.² Given these issues, a return to primary sources is thus clearly indicated. In this respect, both the well known accounts of the voyage by Baudin (1974 and 2000) and Péron (Péron 1807; Péron and Freycinet 2006) and the lesser known journals kept by officers such as Pierre-Bernard Milius (2009), can still offer insights into the ambitions of the French to enter into cultural exchanges with the indigenous peoples they encountered.

² The publication of key documents relating to the Baudin expedition has greatly accelerated since the celebrations of the bicentenary of the voyage in 2002. This process will be further enhanced by the imminent publication of the journals of the officers and scientists of the expedition, in French and in English, on the website of the Baudin Legacy Project, financed by the Australian Research Council (2003–2009).

As earlier records have shown, artistic performance could offer forms of cross-cultural exchange that were particularly fruitful. Among those studies dealing with the close spatial and temporal contexts that concern us here, Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) provides ample proof of harmonious musical exchanges even within a colonial context, while, on the French side, the d'Entrecasteaux voyage (1794–1796) produced some meticulous observations by naturalist La Billardière on musical encounters with Tasmanian Aborigines (La Billardière 1799, vol. 2, chapter X). However, the variety and number of the traces that Baudin, Péron and their companions recorded of the musical activity that existed within the populations of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and Port Jackson point to a set of aims that were arguably more systematic than those of their predecessors. The most obvious explanation is that the Baudin expedition was following the detailed advice on participating in and recording musical encounters that can be traced back to Degérando's instructions. In particular, Degérando urged travellers to document cultural and artistic exchanges with the intention of understanding 'the ideas attached to them' and the 'reflective' or emotional needs to which such activities respond (Degérando 1969, 97–98, 87). Firstly, there is no doubt as to the zeal of Baudin's men as collectors. In a methodical way that in itself suggests Degérando's influence (Sankey 2010, 185), they collected artefacts, drew portraits of Aboriginal subjects and scenes of their ceremonies, and noted their observations in journals, letters and reports. Most famously, during the five-month stay of Baudin and his men in Sydney in 1802, they collected the first known examples of Aboriginal music and of Aboriginal artwork composed using European materials.³

It is true that for these particular notations and drawings we lack any form of accompanying documentation that could enhance our understanding of these cultural artefacts and the context in which they were collected or

³ Several versions of the 'Drawings done by Natives', including those prepared for publication in the *Atlas* of the second edition of the *Voyage aux Terres australes* (Lesueur and Petit 1824, 33), are to be found in the Lesueur Collection in the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre (16045–16054). Some anthropologists contest whether the drawings were actually done by Aborigines, even though their titles would tend to indicate that this was the case. Philip Jones, Jacqueline Bonnemains and Andrew Sayers argue the point that the drawings were done by Aborigines using an unfamiliar European medium (P. Jones 2002, 172). For a different viewpoint, see Howard Morphy (2002, 155).

recorded, a situation which Saintilan laments, suggesting that the absence of contextual information meant that the ‘observers’ of the Baudin expedition had ‘ignored’ Degérando’s methodology (Saintilan 1993, 16). Such an absence is indeed regrettable, but it does not provide evidence *per se* of methodological oversight, for a great number of essential documents which are known to have existed upon the expedition’s return have effectively disappeared. These include, for example, the original journals of key figures such as the geographer-hydrographer Boullanger, and the officer who was closest to Baudin, Bonnefoi de Montbazin. The journals of both men were known to have been consulted by Louis Freycinet during the writing of the official account, since he is at pains to acknowledge his debt to these and other journals (Freycinet 1815, vii). It is most particularly to be regretted that very little remains of the astronomer Pierre-François Bernier’s writings, other than his astronomical observations, since the archival records reveal that he is responsible for the musical notations recorded in Port Jackson in 1802, and not Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, or Louis Freycinet, who are often wrongly credited with their authorship.⁴ Since Bernier was a respected intellectual figure amongst the scientists and since he did not survive the expedition, his premature death no doubt contributed just as much to the silence of the records on his musical notations as did any other gaps in the records through various accidents of history. In short, in the state of our present knowledge of the Baudin archives, very few conclusions can yet be drawn from the absence of documentation about the expedition’s observations or lack of them during the stay at Port Jackson in 1802.

In terms of the expedition’s approach to recording and interpreting musical encounters, we are far better informed by the sojourn in Tasmania in 1802. The records of the expedition’s encounters in D’Entrecasteaux Channel are eloquent on the topic of exchange and communication and are of interest as much for the intentions of the French ‘observers of man’ as for their achievements. In their mission to enter into the cultural and intellectual life of the Aboriginal, the expeditioners do indeed use language and song as means of judging the qualities of concentration, attentiveness and emotional receptivity

⁴ Different versions of musical pieces notated in Timor and New South Wales are to be found in the records of the Baudin voyage, as well as in the *Atlas* (Lesueur and Petit 1824, 32). The handwritten notation in the Lesueur Collection of the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle du Havre (16507) informs us that the New South Wales music was notated by Bernier.

that are recommended to their attention in Degérando's instructions. The commander comments more than once upon the quick understanding of the French or English languages that the Aborigines displayed. Baudin recounts in D'Entrecasteaux Channel: 'We said various words for them, which they repeated very clearly, and I was amazed, even, at the small amount of trouble they had.' (Baudin 1974, 321) Similarly, in Port Jackson he notes 'that they have made more progress in the English language than the English have made in theirs.' (Baudin 1803, 421) That they had a good ear and capacity for mimicry is also recorded in the narrative of Pierre-Bernard Milius, who comments admiringly on the English pronunciation of Bennelong (Milius 2009, 179), and in the official account by Péron, when he describes how a young woman imitated the singing of the doctor of *Le Naturaliste*, Jérôme Bellefin, 'in an extremely original and very droll manner', before confidently launching into a song of her own (Péron and Freycinet 2006, 200).

Music was clearly the factor that enabled the most pleasant and mutually satisfying encounters, in contrast to the tense moments when other forms of exchange, notably of weapons, were no doubt seen to be unequal. Further, the musical performances executed in Tasmania by either the French or the Aborigines, were not necessarily part of a ritual or ceremony, performed as a show, and implying distance between performer and spectator. Such ceremonial performances were later witnessed by the French in Sydney, and inspired pictorial records which are little different from, if not influenced by, similar scenes from English records of the time.⁵ On the contrary, the songs which the Frenchmen heard immediately upon making landfall in D'Entrecasteaux Channel seemed to accompany the unpremeditated events of everyday living, as the entry in Baudin's journal suggests:

As soon as they came up, Mr Leschenault took them by the hand, embraced them and gave them some presents. Mutual trust was

⁵ The sketch by Lesueur of a corroboree in Port Jackson is evidence of such ceremonial occasions. See 16008, Lesueur Collection, Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre (Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith 1988, 79). It has been suggested by Rhys Jones (1988, 58) that the depictions of the 'kangaroo dance' in the Lesueur Collection (Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith 1988, 75–76) may well have been adapted from the images in David Collins' *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (Collins 1798–1802), to which Péron made several references in his own narrative (Péron and Freycinet 2006).

immediately established, and from then on they followed the naturalist wherever he went. Sometimes they talked amongst themselves, sometimes they sang. One of them was wearing a necklace of fairly well-polished shells which he gave to him.

(Baudin 1974, 304)

Such informal and harmonious encounters were not therefore uncommon; Péron mentions on two occasions the singing of Dr Bellefin and the spontaneous emotional reaction that this appeared to elicit in the people who listened attentively to his performance, the children jumping for joy, the men seeming both amused and perplexed, the women responding by dancing, face-painting and, of course, singing (Péron and Freycinet 2006, 181, 182, 200).

In contrast, as duly anointed ‘observers of man’, the expeditioners were clearly self-conscious performers when they themselves burst into song. When Dr Bellefin sang the highly ceremonial *Marseillaise* at one of these encounters, he certainly positioned himself, intentionally or unintentionally, as a representative of his culture. However, the overt intention that dictated this choice was not ceremonial, nor did it constitute an act of ‘mischief’ (Clendinnen 2003, 292): according to Péron, the song was chosen for the emotional charge that it was deemed to convey and hence for the possibility that it offered of understanding something of the psychology of the ‘good Vandiemerites’. Péron states this quite explicitly when he reveals that the musical offering was designed ‘less to entertain them than to discover what effect our songs would have upon them’. In this he was consciously conforming to Degérando’s instructions to evaluate the concentration, the cultural practices and the capacity for emotion of his subjects. And he was not disappointed, in that the subjects of his musical experiment gave every appearance of responding to the performance of ‘this strong, war-like music’. Whether or not the *Marseillaise* awakened the admiration that Péron attributed to the listeners is a moot point, but the indigeneous audience did become animated, which encouraged the French to pursue the experiment. After the first song, a contrast was offered in the form of ‘light, tender little airs’. Here again Péron draws conclusions that his limited grasp of his subjects’ musical culture and mores did not permit, since he assumes that the tender emotions did not affect them to the same degree as the war-like anthem, but he does credit them with a depth of rational understanding, for he is convinced that ‘the natives certainly grasped their

actual meaning' (Péron and Freycinet 2006, 181). This interesting comment shows his belief that emotional and intellectual communication had actually occurred between the two groups in the course of the musical encounter. As loaded with preconceptions as some of Péron's comments are—a detail which commentators regularly point out (e.g. Plomley 1983, 17)—, they do highlight the value which the French placed on music as a means of fostering shared emotion and removing cultural barriers to communication. The fact that musical exchanges and notations continued to be part of their experience in Sydney and in Timor is proof enough of their belief in the value of musical conversation.

As the French participated in more and more encounters, both ceremonial and informal, when music was performed for them by their hosts in Sydney or where the inhabitants of King George Sound burst into song (Péron and Freycinet 2003, 123), they could not have failed to appreciate that music, and art, were as central to the indigenous cultures they encountered as they were to their own. This in turn would explain the care for detail that characterises their notations and representations of Aboriginal art and their decision to feature them so prominently among the expedition's achievements. Despite the incomplete mastery of Degérando's methods, and despite the conflicting discourse that appears in Péron's official account of the voyage and that places 'Péron along with Cuvier in the theoretical vanguard of biological, anthropometric, and racist tendencies in the science of man' (Douglas 2008, 113), the influence of Degérando cannot therefore be dismissed nor his programme be deemed an abject failure. In the fragments of his original project that persist in the collective account of the voyage as narrated in the different journals of its officers and scientists, including Péron himself in his writing on music, we find evidence of a genuine attempt to engage with the cultural practices of the men and women who sang to the French two hundred years ago on the contact zone of the Australian littoral, as well as telling insights into their own idea of themselves and of their primary mission as scientific travellers. As such, these documents and artefacts unquestionably merit further scrutiny from musicologists, historians and anthropologists, not simply as testimony from a time before all was irretrievably lost, but as the living record of an artistic exchange that may enlighten us still.

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