

WEBSITE REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE SITES INTERNETS

Trax on the Trail. 2015 - ongoing. Ed. Dana Gorzelany-Mostak and James Deaville. <http://www.traxonthetrail.com>.

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In the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, those of us residing in the United States of America were inundated with campaign news as candidates attempted to convince voters to cast ballots in their favour. This presidential electoral cycle, which began in Spring 2015, is a sometimes confusing process that begins with candidates announcing their candidacies, then vying for their party's nomination in often contentious primaries before going on to the general election.¹ Following the election and subsequent inauguration of President Donald Trump, the US news cycle continues to be dominated by political stories. An important yet often under-emphasized aspect of these long and gruelling presidential campaigns and their aftermath, and certainly one that is of particular interest for music scholars, is their use of music. What exactly is the role that music plays on the campaign trail, and in electoral politics more generally? *Trax on the Trail* is a multi-faceted project that offers resources for exploring this question.

As stated on its homepage, *Trax on the Trail* is "a website where scholars, educators, journalists, students, and the general public can learn about American presidential campaign music and gain insight into how sound participates

in forming candidate identity." Initially focusing on the 2016 electoral cycle, the site was created by musicologist Dana Gorzelany-Mostak and is co-edited with fellow musicologist James Deaville. Contributors to the interdisciplinary site include musicologists, journalists, political scientists, and others. Gorzelany-Mostak's home institution, Georgia College, hosts and sponsors the website, and the project's staff includes undergraduate students from that school. Indeed, student researchers play an active and important role in this project as evidenced in the promotional video found on the website's homepage, where they emphasize the value of this scholar-student-public collaboration.

A very helpful "FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions) section explains what the project's designers consider campaign music, which they define as "any type of music (vocal or instrumental, pre-existing or newly composed) that is used in association with a presidential campaign." Here, campaign music is broken down into eight separate categories: candidate campaign theme songs; playlists posted online or used for live events in support of a candidate; parody songs; underscoring used in videos made by a campaign; candidate performances on the campaign trail; artist performances that benefit candidates; dubs (remixes of candidate speeches set to other music); and newly composed music created by the public. The "FAQ" section also explains how the content is collected, and provides helpful tips on navigating the website's database.

Trax on the Trail makes use of different media to document the use and impact of music on presidential campaigns. In addition to the aforementioned promotional video, the project includes blog posts and podcasts. Blog posts (and some podcasts) are found in the “Sound Trax” section of the website. These are primarily pieces written by scholars – some senior, some junior, and some students (contributor biographies, which are not directly linked from the blog posts, appear in the “Staff and Contributor” section of the site). Topics of these posts range from presidential candidates’ playlists (David R. Dewberry and Jonathan Millen’s “Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Presidential Campaign Spotify Playlist,” for example) to the use of music in 19th-century elections (see Caroline Gleason-Mercier’s “An Unknown Legacy: The 1840 Election and Political Campaign Songs”). In “The President Takes the Stage: On Theatre and Safe Spaces for Politicians,” for example, Naomi Graber explores the post-election incident in which the cast of *Hamilton* addressed then Vice President-elect Mike Pence from the stage. Graber offers historical examples to suggest that American musical theatre has always commented on contemporary presidential and national politics, contrary to what President Trump’s tweeted response demanding an apology from the cast might suggest. The post takes headline news and positions it within a musical-historical context. While the blog post format allows authors to embed links to musical and video examples directly within their posts, some examples are no longer accessible due to link rot or copyright issues. For instance, Reba Wissner’s essay “Not Another Term: Music as Persuasion in

the Campaign Against the Re-Election of George W. Bush” includes a link to a YouTube video of Stevie Wonder’s “You Haven’t Done Nothin’” that is no longer available. Fortunately, Wissner describes the musical characteristics of the songs she mentions, so one is able to follow along without listening examples (and the rest of the links embedded in the post are still active).

Podcasts allow contributors to play musical examples while discussing them as well as play them in the background, which can be both illustrative and, at times, distracting. The structure of most of the podcasts, however, seems to retain much of the format one would find at an academic conference. For example, the first 24 minutes of the podcast episode, “The Soundtrack of Political Populism,” is essentially a paper read by Justin Patch, while the second half of the episode includes a roundtable discussion between him, Matthew Jordan, Gorzelany-Mostak, Deaville, and Cannon McClain. I believe the contributors could have taken better advantage of the audio podcast format and focused only on the roundtable, allowing the discussion between the knowledgeable and enthusiastic participants to develop more organically and create an environment that really drew listeners into the conversation. Nevertheless, all of the blog posts and podcasts are accessible yet informative, providing useful analysis for both scholars and a general public.

The searchable database, which is perhaps the central aspect of the *Trax on the Trail* project, is found under the “Trail Trax” section of the site. It lists campaign music by title, candidate, and type according to the above-mentioned

categories. Each entry page further specifies the piece's genre, title, and type of event at which it was used, the place and the date, and includes additional notes. Hyperlinks allow users to quickly look up other instances of a particular artist or band's work in use without conducting their own separate search. A button labeled "Music Links" at the bottom of entries links to external sites that host videos (where possible) or audio examples. Frequently linked sites include YouTube and Spotify, but can also refer to online articles and other webpages. The links are embedded in such a way that the URL is only visible in a tiny box in the lower-left corner of the browser when the user holds the cursor over the link, and depending on one's browser settings, might not be visible at all. This makes it difficult to know in advance what kind of media example is available and to which site the user will be taken. The link is convenient and quickly takes users to musical examples, but not knowing whether one will be getting a video or audio track can be frustrating. According to the "FAQ" section, as of November 10, 2016 the database included 8000 entries, with new entries still being added.

The "For Scholars" section of the site includes two bibliographies: "Scholarly Sources on American Presidential Campaign Music" and "Campaign 2016 Bibliography." The latter includes articles published online primarily in 2015 and 2016 (with a few dating back to 2014 and 2012), while the former includes sources dating back to 1971. Filtering options for searching the database include genre, candidate, political party, state, type of music, and date (or range of dates), in addition to a blank filter where users can

type in their own search term(s). For sources that are available online, links are provided. There is also a Database Key that explains terms and types of musical activities included. These bibliographies are particularly helpful for scholars looking for information on a particular topic related to campaign music. They are also an excellent resource for teachers who want assign research projects to their students.

While *Trax on the Trail* seems generally well suited for pedagogical applications, its "For Teachers" section provides only two lesson plans so far (including lecture notes and slides) on "The History of Presidential Campaign Music" and "Popular Music in U.S. Presidential Commercials," as well as links to the six episodes of the *Trax on the Trail* Podcast Series. Multiple references on the site demonstrate the developers' intentions to expand this section, and hopefully additional material will be added in the future.

The project also employs social media, maintaining active Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts. I have been following *Trax on the Trail* on Facebook and Twitter for well over a year, and have enjoyed reading the occasional articles related to music on the campaign trail shared by the *Trax on the Trail* page that have appeared in my newsfeed. Maintaining this kind of social media presence not only helps to engage scholars who might prefer one platform over another, but also allows the site to reach an interested public. It also demonstrates ways in which this project connects to ongoing public discourse by highlighting news items that appear in popular or news media, and even through "live-tweeting"

important events, such as the inauguration on January 20, 2017. At the same time, *Trax on the Trail* contributors also regularly share aspects of the project in more traditional academic arenas, including a recent presentation entitled “Campaign Music 101 in the Music History Classroom” at the Teaching Music History Conference in June 2017, and an upcoming panel called “Electoral Echoes and Musical Reverberations” at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society in November 2017.

Indeed, *Trax on the Trail* offers an excellent example of how public musicology can engage scholars, students, and a wider public alike. As evident from the website’s “Press” page, the project and its contributors have been featured in multiple news outlets. The project’s content is accessible yet thoughtful and analytical, the site is easy to navigate, and the interdisciplinary approach offers various lenses through which users can consider the relationship between music and presidential campaigns. *Trax on the Trail* is a useful model for the ways in which scholars can use digital tools to engage across disciplines, and present our work to a broad public. Even though the 2016 election cycle is now over, the project continues to draw connections between music and political campaigns for various offices. I look forward to seeing what the project will offer in 2020. 🍁

NOTES

1. “Presidential Election Process,” *usa.gov*, <https://www.usa.gov/election#item-211441> accessed July 5, 2016.