

# スティーブン・フォスターに関する比較文化的考察序論

宮下 和子\*

## An Exploratory Cross-Cultural Approach to Stephen Collins Foster

Kazuko MIYASHITA\*

Foreign Language Center

### Abstract

スティーブン・フォスターは、世界中で、また日本でも最も良く知られたアメリカの音楽家である。たとえ、フォスターの名前は知らなくても、誰もが、どこかでその旋律を耳にしたり、自ら口ずさんだ覚えがあろう。さらに、その歌曲の数々が、ナンセンスなコミカル・ソングや黒人訛りのプランテーション・メロディ（農園歌）、またセンチメンタルなホームシック・ソングなど、多彩な主題を扱っていることに気づくとき戸惑いも覚えるであろう。

しかし、正式な音楽教育を受けることなく、独学で音楽に献身し、約200曲もの作品を残し、孤独のうちに37年の短い一生を終えたフォスターの生涯については一般的に認識されていない。また、南北戦争以前の19世紀アメリカ社会に大衆娯楽として君臨した minstrel show が、フォスターの人生を運命づける重要な役割を担ったことも余り知られていない。

実に、フォスターの黒人訛りの歌が、“黒塗り”の芸人による minstrel というバラエティー・ショーの舞台用に書かれ、minstrel なき今日まで世界中で歌い続けられていることの意義は大きい。「恋人よ、窓を開けよ」でデビューし、その死後発表された「夢路より」に象徴されるようなフォスターの薄幸の生涯と音楽作品を minstrel との関わりで考察することは、アメリカ文化の代表的普遍性といえるアメリカン・ポップスを理解する上でも有意義である。

日本人がフォスターの「故郷の人々」を好むのは、「ふるさと」や「赤とんぼ」などの童謡にひたひたと息づく郷愁に通じる、ある普遍的な心象風景に、それが訴えかけてくるからかもしれない。この様にアメリカの歴史的な文脈においてフォスターを理解することは、日米の相互交流を助け、また異文化コミュニケーションに果たす音楽の有意義性を認識することにもなる。

**KEY WORDS:** *Stephen Foster, American minstrel show, Black music, Black dialect, cross-cultural communication*

## 1 Introduction

Stephen Collins Foster (1826-1864) is one of the best-known American musicians in Japan, primarily for his simple, familiar tunes, which Japanese people associate with pastoral scenery or nostalgia for their native place. Most Japanese people learn several of his songs in their middle school music class. Their image of Foster is of a happy man and

\*鹿屋体育大学 National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya, Kagoshima, Japan.

composer, but his life itself has hardly caught any attention in an American historical context.

I remember myself, as a middle schooler, singing his songs such as *Oh! Susanna*, *The Old Folks at Home*, *Massa's in de Cold Ground*, *Old Black Joe*, and *Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair*. Those melodies were so simple that I would often sing along with my own piano accompaniment. Occasionally, however, I got confused and mixed one melody with another. In addition, I was eager to learn their English lyrics, for it was the very time I'd started learning the English language. Gradually I came to notice that some English words were different from what I had learned, so I asked our music teacher about this—why. I remember his answering that they may be a Southern American dialect. Since a portrait of Foster in the textbook showed that he was not a Black, I believed he had written such dialect songs so that black people would enjoy themselves. Thus, my image of Foster was of a gentle and happy song-writer rather than a great artist.

In high school, however, my encounter with one song changed that image. That song was *Beautiful Dreamer*, which impressed me, appearing totally different from his other music I knew. First, I was both touched by its beautiful melody and intrigued by its words which were too difficult for me to understand even in Japanese translation. I could hardly comprehend that the music was written by the Foster I had pictured so far. Later I was trying to translate its English lyrics into Japanese for myself when I learned that it was published after Foster died alone at the age of 37.

While taking a course in American Music at Pennsylvania State University, I studied not only about Foster, but also about the American minstrel show about which I had previously heard. Eventually, I became interested in the fact that Foster wrote those Black dialect songs not for black people themselves but for the sake of the minstrel show.

The knowledge of the American minstrel show reminded me of a Japanese popular singing group, named "Chanel," who first appeared in the late 1970's and soon became popular among the young generation. When I first saw them on television, I was stunned by their appearance; they all wore neat white suits with their faces blackened. I felt uneasy while watching them perform seriously with black faces. In fact, I had seen a number of entertainers from abroad appear on television, but I had seldom seen black people. Admitting that I did enjoy their harmonious chorus, I wondered whether or not they would have gained such a high popularity without the aid of their unique appearance.

I was and am still uncertain whether or not the "Chanel" knew anything about the American minstrel show, but it seems that they chose as their hallmark one of the two stereotypes of the minstrel show—the urban dandy, Zip Coon. It is doubtful whether or not they would have succeeded if they had selected the other type—the plantation hand, Jim Crow. This is how I came to be interested in the American minstrel show in terms of its relationship with Stephen Foster, one of its song-writers.

This paper aims to discuss why Foster's music has favorably been appreciated by Japanese people despite their ignorance of his tragic life in the United States and to interpret his music as a means of cross-cultural communication.

## 2 Foster's Life and the American Minstrel Show

Stephen Foster was born on July 4, 1826 into a middle-class family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and grew up listening to Scottish and Irish piano songs played by his sisters. Also he was exposed to Black music while attending church services accompanied by a colored maid, Olivia. As a child he formed a company with neighborhood youngsters and enjoyed performing plantation melodies, the popular blackface songs of 1830's.

Foster's musical talent was recognized at an early stage of his life, but not encouraged by his parents; music was a profession respected neither by Americans nor his family. Though he received some music lessons from German-born Henry Kleber, the owner of a music store, that was all the musicology he acquired. At the age of 17, he wrote his first published song, *Open Thy Lattice, Love* (1844).

Foster's life ran parallel to the heyday of the minstrel show, which swept 19th century America as the most popular form of entertainment. In *The American Musical Landscape*, Richard Crawford notes that Blackface minstrelsy was the first musical genre to reverse the east-to-west transatlantic flow of professional performers that had existed throughout this country's organized musical life.<sup>1)</sup> In 1843, the Virginia Minstrels presented the first show in this new style in Boston on March 7. Foster was then working in a Pittsburgh warehouse, hearing Black roustabouts sing work songs.

In 1846, he moved to Cincinnati and worked as a bookkeeper for his brother. It was then that he met William Roarke, a member of a minstrel troupe. Roarke introduced one of Foster's songs, titled *Old Uncle Ned*, into one of their programs. This is how Foster came in contact with the minstrel stage on a professional basis. In 1847, he submitted a song, *Away Down South*, to a musical contest for the best Ethiopian melody. Within a year, these two plantation melodies were being featured by minstrel troupes throughout the country.

Despite such success, however, Foster felt he should compose music in a "genteel tradition." Ashamed of such music as *Nelly Was a Lady* and *My Brudder Gum*, he gave away all the publishing rights of his works. In so doing, Foster seemed to ensure that he could earn a living as a professional song-writer.

In 1850, Foster married Jane McDowell and gradually entered into an agreement with E. P. Christy (1815-1862), successful minstrel troupe leader, allowing Christy's Minstrels exclusive first-performance rights to any of his future songs. In 1851, one year before Harriet Beecher Stowe published her sensational book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Foster published *Old Folks at Home*, which immediately became a great success. Nevertheless, he agreed to let Christy's name appear as the composer on the title page of its music sheet; he was afraid there would be a public prejudice against Black songs. While another prominent minstrel song composer, Daniel Emmett, never hesitated about writing for show business, Foster seemed to have inner conflict because of his middle-class family background.

In 1852, however, he wrote a significant letter to E. P. Christy, expressing his determination to change his negative attitude toward Black songs:

E. P. Christy

Dear Sir:

As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name on my Ethiopian songs, owing to a prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as a writer of another style of music, but I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order. Therefore I have concluded to reinstate my name on my songs and to pursue that Ethiopian business without fear or shame and lend all my energies to making the business live, at the same time that I will wish to establish my name as the best Ethiopian song-writer. But I am not encouraged in undertaking this so long as *The Old Folks at Home* stares me in the face with another's name on it. As it was at my own solicitation that you allowed your name to be placed on the song, I hope that the above reasons will be sufficient explanation for my desire to place my name on it as author and composer, while at the same time wish to leave the name of your band on the title page. This is a little matter of pride in myself which it will certainly be to your interest to encourage. On the receipt of your free consent to this proposition, I will, if you wish, willingly refund you the money which you paid me on that song, though it may have been sent me for other considerations than the one in question, and I promise in addition to write you an opening chorus in my best style, free of charge, and in any other way in my power to advance your interests hereafter. I feel I cannot write at all unless I write for public approbation and get credit for what I write. As we may probably have a good deal of business with each other in our lives, it is best to proceed on a sure basis of confidence and good understanding, therefore I hope you will appreciate an author's feelings in the case and deal with me with your usual fairness. Please answer immediately.

Very respectfully yours,

Stephen C. Foster<sup>2)</sup>

However, Foster's thoughtful letter failed to persuade Christy; it was not until 15 years after his death, when the first term of copyright expired, that his name appeared as the composer of *Old Folks at Home*.

In 1852, Foster published *Massa's in de Cold Ground and My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night*: the former was in Black dialect; the latter in standard English as he dropped the dialect from the first draft in the revised version. In 1853, Foster left his wife and daughter behind for New York, where he lived alone until he died in 1864. *Old Black Joe*, which was written in standard English in 1864, turned out to be his last plantation melody. In his *America's Music*, Gilbert Chase writes: "In Pittsburgh's Highland Park a statue was erected to his memory. There are two figures in the sculptured group: one is that of the composer, seated and writing down a song; the other is that of a Negro strumming a banjo.<sup>3)</sup> The statue seems to represent Foster's life including his music, his internal world and his dream.

### 3 Foster's Music

During 20 years, Foster produced approximately 200 songs of two main types: 135 sentimental or household songs and 28 songs for the minstrel show. The former are rooted in the Irish and British song tradition, represented by *Beautiful Dreamer* (1864), *Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair* (1854), and *My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night* (1853). The latter are different both in subject matter and musical style; their texts are mostly in Black dialect, and many of the accompaniments evoke banjo-picking.

Foster also published 21 hymns and Sunday school songs for children, and a small amount of instrumental music, notably *The Social Orchestra* (1854), an extensive anthology of popular melodies (both European and American, some of them his own) set as instrumental solos, duets, trios and quartets.<sup>4)</sup>

The association of Foster with the minstrel show seems to be extremely significant, because it provided him with a place where he could cultivate his musical talent. It goes without saying that he played an important role in maintaining its popularity. At the same time, one of Foster's characteristics was his humane attitude toward black people.

Foster wrote his plantation melodies for the first part of the minstrel show to describe Blacks as comical characters, that is for solo performance usually with a banjo accompaniment. This is in contrast with Danniell Emmett who composed humorous walk-arounds for the "plantation festival" at the end of the show for performance by the entire company. *Oh! Susanna* (1848) is a typical example of the comic or nonsense minstrel song, and others, such as *Old Folks at Home* (1851) and *Old Black Joe* (1860), are associated with his other sentimental melodies.

Though American minstrelsy no longer exists today, Foster's plantation melodies, as well as his other tunes, are still enjoyed worldwide. For instance, one Japanese song collection titled *Sekai Dai Ongaku Zenshu* (Great World Music Collection) includes as many as six pieces of his music among its 67 selected songs.<sup>5)</sup>

Having grown out of its diverse traditions, current American musical theater has increasingly featured Black music, which seem to have developed beyond the "blackface" image. Foster's soul-searching music seems to have helped to establish the "American Dream."

### 4 Foster's Inner Life

It seems to me that, in keeping with my first image of him, Foster wrote his minstrel songs for black people as well as for the show. If he had composed only for entertainment he would not have died so young and in poverty. Considering the fact that he took his first trip to the South in 1852, one may wonder how he grasped such marvelous images of the South as were depicted in his Black dialect lyrics. It can be said that his childhood experience of colored church services and hearing a variety of Black work songs helped to make him virtually a self-taught musician. I assume he had a strong affection for black

people, or at least he hardly discriminated against them in his inner life.

Compared with the simplicity of his melodies, his texts carry deep emotions and sympathy as if he were a Black himself. In Japan, quite a few of Foster's songs have been translated into Japanese, mostly in a literary style, by Shuichi Tsugawa who has also arranged their music. His Japanese translations seem to fit the feelings of Japanese people, since he seems to have used delicate phrases. This may be one of the reasons why a number of Foster's songs have been taken for granted by the Japanese like their own music.

Japanese people particularly favor "*Old Folks at Home*" and "*Beautiful Dreamer*." It seems that the former incorporates nature into Foster's internal life and that the latter, which appeared after his death, depicts the Utopia he had sought for. In a way, they seem to correspond to Japanese songs, "*Furusato*" (Hometown) and "*Akatombo*" (Red Dragonfly), in terms of their melodic simplicity and their theme.

The theme of *The Old Folks at Home*, for example, is paralleled by the sensitive emotions that have often been depicted in Japanese literature. Generally, Japanese people tend to express sadness or loneliness more often than happiness or joyfulness. Also they have an inclination toward their native place or childhood. It is surprising to me that Foster wrote this song at the age of 25. He must have devoted his energy and imagination to its production without thinking that it would sharply change his view as a musician. On the other hand, he was too sensitive or romantic to deal with music as business; he would rather have remained a "beautiful dreamer" himself.

Foster's music seems to be less popular among Japanese youths of today, who incline toward current popular music, including Black music. Nevertheless, learning Foster's commitment to the American minstrel show and its influence on U. S. musical theater can lead them not only to realize that his works reflect 19th-century America but also help them to understand current U. S. culture, society, and people.

Moreover, the knowledge of the minstrel show and its relationship with Foster will help Japanese people to further appreciate his music and also to communicate with American people. Japanese people tend to regard American popular music as a superficial and youth-oriented form of entertainment, like its Japanese counterpart. Therefore, such a cross-cultural approach to Foster's music will enable them to realize and appreciate American popular music as one of the indigenous products of American soil.

## NOTES

- 1) Richard Crawford: *The American Musical Landscape*. University of California Press, 1989, p. 76.
- 2) Gilbert Chase: *America's Music*. McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1955, pp. 293-294.
- 3) Chase. p. 296.
- 4) Macmillans: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980, p. 730.
- 5) ONGAKU NO TOMO SHA Corp. ed.: *Sekai Dai Ongaku Zenshu* (Great World Music Collection), 1967.